

Paolo Mottana

Imaginal Vision

**Transmutation and Reeducation
of the Gaze**

Translation by Giovanni R. D'Agostino



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IPOC

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Tel.: +39-0236550461

Fax.: +39-0236550461

ipoc@ipocpress.com

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*Free-thinking man! Do you really believe that
In this world where life pours out in all directions,
You think alone?
Of powers you own your freedom disposes,
But the Universe pays no heed to your counsel.*

*Respect in the beast an active mind:
Each flower is a soul that blossoms to Nature;
A mystery of love in metal resides;
'Everything is sensitive!' And everything has power over your being!*

*Beware! In the blind wall a gaze spies on you:
Even to matter itself is a verb fastened...
Do not destine it for some impious use
Often in an obscure being dwells a hidden God;
And like a nascent eye, covered by eyelids,
A pure spirit strengthens beneath siliceous shell!*

(G. De Nerval, Golden Verses)

Imaginal Pedagogy

The term *imaginal* identifies a realm of images, which *are not* for the most part a product of the human mind, but visions, figures, symbols, and archetypes coming from an *elsewhere* that transcends rational cognition. They are, as stated by Henry Corbin, *angels* placed between the visible and the invisible. Put in those terms, “imaginal pedagogy” is conducive to an authentic subversion of the subject’s position toward the world.

Such upheaval aims at a recomposition between the subject and the object, in which the former may attain *recognition* of participation and fundamental *belonging* to the latter. A recognition lost under the dominant position that man’s diurnal, analytic and separative conscience has imposed on things, while forgetting to be part of them and detaching itself from them.

“Imaginal pedagogy” recalls torsion, a reversion toward a place long deserted by the rational subject, where a different outlook may arise and whose operativity is already implicit in the way it places itself with regard to things. No longer from the outside and “in front”, but in Rilke’s words, from a *distant intimacy*, in which strictly owing to the surrender of a perspective that orders and arranges, the “interior space of the world” will accept to manifest itself. As a consequence, we can ideally reapproach the interconnection and reticular

analogic correspondence of all things that hermetic knowledge has always deemed life's primary condition in the cosmos.

Alchemical doctrine is the essential guide and model for any operativity of the gaze steered in such direction, and it can be rightly defined as *hermetic* or "hermesian", since it is inspired by the teaching of the god of communication and tensional connection between the superior and the inferior, between the diurnal and the nocturnal, between life and death. This doctrine regards specifically the profound interweaving between the act on matter – the transmutation of base metals into gold, of prime matter into "quintessence" through the complete elaboration of its *elemental* nature – and the interior and spiritual act – one of transmutation of the psyche, limited to the literal comprehension of phenomena of the psyche capable of symbolic comprehension – as its essential nucleus.

In alchemy we rediscover that extremely ramified chain (*Aurea catena*) of tracks and seals that makes any spiritual operativity immediately equivalent – according to latent but not inscrutable relationships, and rather distinguishable symbolic affinities – to any concrete operativity. Therefore, we can interpret every concrete endeavor in its spiritual and symbolic code, and vice versa. This much needed bond, which contains but equally limits human activity within a discipline of connection and analogy, is what has been lost. And it leaves in its place the anguished loneliness of an uprooted conscience that no longer recognizes any profound relationship, any affinity, and ultimately any responsibility from oneself toward *the other*.

So we need to return to where there are traces of a gaze that has completed its imaginative work, a work led by a tireless search for the quintessence of every matter on which one has exerted its *poiesi*, its strain of reconnection with the *Anima Mundi*, the vital lymph, the subtle *Sophia* that crosses and kindles the relationship between things. We need to relearn, to some extent, how to inhabit – in compliance with a renewed itinerary – those areas of philosophy, of art and mysticism where we have accomplished the *Opus*, the transmutative work of perfection of nature, in order to attain, after prolonged contemplation and meditation, a re-vision of the gaze.

We need to focus on a resolute visual effort, a vision that may draw out from face value what is the actual background and invisible lining of objects, that is, a network of underlying relationships that take root in them and steer them. By doing so, our vision brings about an act of retrieval, a discovery that unearths the consciousness of one's belonging and dependency, and in turn, makes us responsible, carries out an immediate re-composition, offers a way of *healing*; the latter term is intended especially as the acknowledgment that there is no individual regeneration that does not go through the regeneration of the world.

The repetition or iteration, as in the alchemical *opus*, of such concentration, and thus the intense activity of contemplation, meditation and reflection of *imaginational* works, as aptly outlined by Corbin – works that, therefore, by imaginative practice, have already been able to accomplish expressively such task – becomes the origin and core of imaginal formation; a formation that restores the full perception of those relationships of interdependency that went undetected by a disengaged, lost and exiled gaze.

The slow and patient task of a re-look, of prolonged and deep vision – directed toward works by painters like Cezanne or Klee, toward unfashionable images by movie directors like Tarkovsky or Zdravic, toward weighty and impetuous metaphors by poets as Keats or De Nerval, visionary writers as Bousquet or Guimarães Rosa, toward complex sonorous blends by such diverse composers as Wagner or Varése – can become a clue for slowly reviving or strenuously attaining that ability to give things back to the invisible, that is to say, to make them once again fiery of sym-bolic power (as poet Rainer Maria Rilke would demand of his very own transmutative faculty).

An operation that is profoundly anti-mainstream, unfashionable, guided by a principle of subtraction, reversion, and reduction, since it asks us to downgrade action in favor of meditation, which appears as the inevitable condition for the safeguard of the World, physical and imaginal, and therefore, of that elemental substratum whose absence would not allow any operativity.

Today the very own nature of any existence is threatened by the effects of a gaze that has forgotten every sense of the *inhabiting*. “Faithfulness to the Earth” (Bonardel, 1993) – and the network of affinities that weave it to other elements

– is the first necessary shift of the conversion of a desertified and *deserting* (Corbin, 1986b) gaze, in the sense proposed by Corbin; that is, toward an “Orient of the gaze”, toward a pole in whose undefinable luminosity the world stands out in a background of sym-bolic ties, toward a “*visio smaragdina*”, because according to Iranian neoplatonic mysticism, emerald is the color in which things appear in the imaginal world.

To relearn how to see the world through its archetypal personifications, according to Hillman’s (1983) advice, or through angels that are “figures of light”, identical things but mirrored in a superhuman background that inspires them, is possible today especially through the meditation of works charged with a particular symbolic *imprint*. It is possible to recognize in them the transcendental connection that is unrelentingly present in the world, and the “imaginal vision” whose forms and ways we will attempt to describe in this book, is the course for such renewed knowledge.

It is no accident that the *medium* of such operativity is the imaginative one, because it functions as a channel capable of modulating the encounter between the literalness of the thing, stripped of any symbolic value and merely factual, and the defining, analytical, and abstract willpower that predicates it.

The image, when elaborated by a sym-bolic gaze, maintains in a well-balanced suspension the materic dimension of every being with its impalpable texture of meanings, with its horizons of significance. This is the way that the creative work is able to assemble that which the pragmatic and the theoretical have separated, by diluting it in a form that no longer has the mute quality of a one-dimensional materiality or the reductive evanescence of a conceptual categorization, but instead preserves the typical meaningfulness – typical of any *spiritual body* (Corbin 1986) – of making perceptible the inherent ulteriority of every being; that is to say, its symbolically unsaturated (and insaturable) nature, its relation to the “Soul of the world”.

But not every image is suitable for this task, because many images do not come from an authentic “work of the gaze” (Mottana, 2002); they have lost their very own rootedness, have become flattened, have fallen silent (idols, simulacra, images that do non sym-bolize, that return incessantly to the surface, without

producing any resonance, any reconnection), or have reduced themselves to abstract and conventional signs, to mere verbal signifiers that are constantly entrapped in closed and faulty chains. It is in this infrequently investigated space, amid images exceedingly dull and signs exceedingly accurate, that we need to rediscover the syncretic, metaphoric, mythical, and symbolic language of imaginal forms; it is in this space that we can convey the generosity of a transformational gaze as search and as enriching encounter with images rooted in a symbolic texture that guides them, and toward which we try – through them – to set out on a hermeneutic journey.

Imaginal pedagogy expresses itself through its effort of research and meditation of these images, which it defines significantly – still relying closely on Corbin’s deep thought – as “icons” or *angels* (Corbin, 1979) that are placed precisely between the visible and the invisible. For instance, the mountain in Cezanne’s *Saint-Victoire* (1902-1906) is there, and yet it disappears swept away by its own intrinsic matter that the painter reveals in his work while disclosing, simultaneously, the matrix of the mountain’s *ek-sistence*, that is, the resurfaced evidence of another – primary, pristine, elemental, or unbroken – landscape. Just like water from a river in the movie *Riverglass* (1997), filmed by Slovenian director Andrej Zdravic; water that is pursued and infinitely distilled until it becomes itself an alembic in whose inner space, and in a repetitive cycle, the four elements – while secreting an *imaginal world* in constant iridescent renewal – are reflected and distilled. Or like the *magical* manipulations of music in the work *Arcana* (1925-27) by Edgar Varése, in which, following Paracelso’s inspiration of the Hermetic Astrology, the attractions and repulsions of sonorous material go as far as to produce a prismatic deformation, a broadening of the musical spectrum similar to crystalline proliferation, a sort of fourth dimension of sound.

In imaginal pedagogy the search for works of creative imagination containing images that have *already* experienced the toil of alchemic reshuffling between the subject and the world, between matter and spirit, and between surface and profundity, is the first essential, although not easy, starting point. But formation occurs when we achieve a concentrated, in-depth, protracted contemplation and

symbolic elaboration of these works, by repeating and, to a certain extent, renewing this passage in order to incorporate – progressively and at least partially – its subtle dynamics, its transmutative *perspective*.

We are proposing, therefore, a meditative-hermeneutic exercise organized around strict rules: of patience, delay and especially of faithfulness to the image, in a major attempt to not flood the symbolic world we enter with projections from our own inner patterns or biographical precomprehensions. In other words, decentralization, a hemorrhage from oneself toward that lost world, to which, however, we belong more deeply and attempt to recognize. We can call it an exercise of feeling, rather than a spiritual one, since it requires, especially at the beginning, more descent than elevation, abandonment, spoliation; deferment of completion rather than production, increase or seizing, as we come into contact with the fluid, humid, mercurial and feminine part of cognition, that is, the imaginative one.

Only a further phase will allow for an interpretative disposition, an igneous elaboration of the accepted and fermented matter. Thus, we will head toward the signifieds, the horizons, and the relationships, whose inner core, nonetheless, can only remain inaccessible or insaturable. But the development does not involve a true completion. The constant wavering between moments of fluctuation-meditation and moments of nomination-coagulation (*solve et coagula*) is the essential alchemical rule of this process, which aims at a progressive improvement, although conscious of its inevitable, presumably incessant, straying state as is the norm in any authentic hermeneutical activity.

An exercise of this sort – in which you feel summoned by the image, you sense its deliberateness, you welcome it, and make it a subject of in-depth analysis and elaboration, of grilling and grinding, of circulation and filtration – already produces a transformation of the position we adopt in our visual grasp; it triggers an *imaginal praxis*, a symbolic reactivation of things and, accordingly, an adjustment of one's own placement next to them, in the middle of them, and together with them.

One achieves a work of “con-descendance”, that is, one verifies the *symbolization*, the recognition of one's own sym-bolic participation to the world,

and the awareness that naming implies being named; when I re-cognize I am re-cognized. The name reaches me imprinted in the image, a necessary angel, and I recapture an intimacy with a world from which I had been severed. It is a work of striking *gnosi*, of rewedding, in which we grow richer of newer and unthinkable ties; we recapture a feeling of co-belonging and of newly-found affinity.

The operativity that derives from this apprenticeship is *respectful*, capable of a re-look of the other-to-which-I-belong. We lay down every predatory intention, set aside the pre-judgmental way of observing the world to leave room for a “vision according to nature” that grounds alchemy, through which we perceive the intrinsic finality that is placed on every object, its *telos*, its *daimon*; in this way we have the benefit of intercepting in advance its aspiration to manifest itself, the mold of its form, which makes possible a cure for its yielding fruit, just like work in a vineyard – a prototype for any partnership between man and nature.

Only under such conditions, and with all consequences that result from the standpoint of a renewed pedagogic pragmatics, can one imagine an authentic subversion of the relationship with the world. The world requires a careful and healing gaze, and the vision that follows becomes similarly an instrument of self-recovery. It is time to surrender all facets of the imaginary that rest on the axis of separation and categorization in order to rediscover the forms of complex imaginal interlacing that leave things in their place, charged with symbolic and multiplicative potential, of which we attempt – patiently and persistently – to recover and reveal its *figures*.

The instructions that follow – distilled from the metaphoric influence of the *elements*, set on blazing fire by the dry torch of the imaginal world, dissolved in the aerial charts of the gaze, immersed in the mercurial flow of hermetic operativity or in the inexhaustible alternation of concretions and volatilizations of an imaginative infancy, and ultimately embodied in a mass of procedures, in an operative melting pot – are only suggestions, invitations, and approximations.

The remainder, as always, is entrusted to experience, to its nebulous

surroundings, to its invisible connections, to the supportive inspiration of deceptive and unexpected divinities, as Eros and Hermes, and to the unpredictable synchronies that will generate encounters.

Part I
Vision and Transmutation

Ignis
(Image)

Love is the unfamiliar Name Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.
(T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*)

The imaginal

Images are neither innocuous nor innocent. They can burn with cold or hot fire depending on the process that generated them. They can upset and excite, penetrate and swallow up. Yet they can also be false images, copies, concretions, *idols*, and contribute seriously to the deterioration of the imaginary.

To indicate the area of images with the term “*imaginal*” is a strict choice, an invitation to perceive the world of images not as an undifferentiated universe or a field of equivalences, but rather as an overcrowded and manifold territory, in which one must know how to orient himself and distinguish the degree of

significativity, the difference, the symbolic quality of every image. In that sense, its designation as imaginal somehow carves out and defines – within the broadest confines of the imaginary – a peculiar, distinct, and in a certain sense, detached “area”.

To suggest a classification of this sort of universe, as experience shows, is a difficult and perhaps illusive task, in particular during times of generalized and at times gratified suppression of any value-related hierarchization. Yet the operativity that is in play here demands that we look at the images armed, to a certain extent, with a selection criterion.

The structures of the imaginary fall into many classifications; there are rigid and clear-cut ones that mark separations between the imaginary and the symbolical equal to those between reason and unreason, as in Lacan; there are softer ones that assimilate in a single large “catalogue” or “museum” all forms of symbolic expression, regarding that region in general terms as *signifier*.

An appreciable definition within such framework that may help draw some useful, although perhaps not absolute, distinctions seems the one suggested by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger in his recent book *La vie des images* (1995). Wunenburger distinguishes three large categories of images: first of all, that of *imagerie*, intended as a sum of mental and material images that appear as “reproductions of reality”, even though marked by differences more or less substantial with respect to their referent. Secondly, imaginary in the strict sense, intended as the sum of images that appear as substitutes of an absent, vanished or inexistent reality, that is, similar to the realm of representation of the unreal (this meaning may include both the imaginary as “phantasm”, “denegation” of the real, as in Lacan for instance, and also *reverie* or *fiction*). This meaning seems to identify the imaginary even with what is defined elsewhere as the “fantastic”.

At last, the “imaginal”: strictly speaking, it is construed as the sphere of ultra-real images, charged with an autonomous signifying power. It envelops icons, patterns, archetypal images, parables and myths that are suitable for providing sensible content to ideas, which can appear as *faces* and speak as revelations. Visionary images, in the sense that they are apperceptive in a context of transcendent “vision”, carry unique symbolic weight, and lend themselves to a

disclosure of indeterminate meanings that cannot be connected with reproduction or fiction. They are images, in which reality proves to be enhanced as if permeated with a multitude of symbolic correspondences. From this standpoint, “imaginal” images are also those that pertain to art, to the extent that they sufficiently retain their inherent signifying potentiality.

The advantage of such definition is that it identifies the “imaginal world” with a world of images that are not actually formed by a subject who emulates reality or invests it with his phantasms. Nor are these images construed as the result of mere fantasies. More accurately, the subject that “sees” them, to some extent receives them or is made participant by virtue of a progressive exercise of concentration and total commitment. According to this viewpoint, imaginal images are strictly related to what French philosopher Henry Corbin has inferred in fact from the teachings of Iranian Neoplatonism, namely as the inner encounter – accessible only through specific participative adherence – between sensible forms and ideal transcendental content. It is like the concretion of archetypal models or the spiritualization of material phenomena.

For Corbin each thing has its spiritual compensation in the “imaginal world” where it appears under the subtle guise of an “angel”, of a hybrid form, just like the fruits of a marriage between the corporeal and the transcendental. The imaginal, therefore, according to this rigorous interpretation, is the world of images as “autonomous”, evocative “presences”; however, they are not entrapped within a single definition or meaning, but carry a train of analogies and multiple correspondences. In the imaginal world we find the same items – a house, a jug, a pot – but they are objects cloaked with *symbolic* aura, that is, with a meaning that makes them participate to a transcendental universe of sense. The jug is always and also a concrete jug, since it is perceivable in inner vision, but at the same time its “veil of light” reveals its participation to archetypal forms capable of evoking conviviality, containment, repletion, communion between clay and water, fluidity and stability, empty and full. Every object, in the *Emerald Land* of the imaginal world, becomes the angelic body of a universe of sense to which it participates, and it ensures participation to anyone who gains access to its vision.

It is the jug-vision, the jug-angel, and no longer the jug right in front of me that I can feel with the prehension of my hand, or from which I can pour a liquid, but the jug that has been “transmuted” due to its participation to a parallel, metaphoric world, although provided with its distinct concreteness, the concreteness of spiritual bodies that no longer are objects, nor ideas yet, but strictly images. The jug, therefore, stands before me as a “vision”, allowing its potential meanings to reverberate more than its functions; in a way it reveals its grounding in a universe or horizon of sense; it reveals itself, although only to the extent of my ability to access its “figure”. It summons to its side, through a reticulum of subtle relationships, the entire cosmos it shares and enables me to participate. Through it, in some respects, I am received in this “non-place” that is the “imaginal”; I take part in an experience of re-discovery and undergo a reconjunction with the invisible lining that envelops me and any other object. Through it I attain a specific cognition, an imaginative cognition that is at the same empirical experience and revelation, sensible vision and spiritual transformation.

Therefore, the imaginal is a symbolic and, so to speak, “esoteric” counterpart – since in order to fully grasp it, it is essential to unfurl a special inner “vision” that requires “initiation” – of concrete, tangible and emerging forms in experience. Another example that somehow clarifies this transition can be the difference between the physical image of the hermaphrodite, which can be construed as a physiological oddness and a psychosexual mystery – the empirical fact that literal reality offers us – and the archetypal image of the androgynous, whose symbolic implication exalts the bisexual component by gathering in it mythological, cosmological and cosmogonic resonances of a figure that transmits *totality*. In this case the emphasis is on the separation, even nominal, between literalness of the element and symbolic representation rooted in archetypal imagery, which in this particular case, also exhibits the principle of the coincidence of contraries that is typical of imaginal figures.

From this perspective, the androgynous is not so much and not only the symbol of the sym-bol, a notion stated by Jean Libis in his book *Le mythe de l'androgyné* (1980), and in some respects irrefutable, but the symbol – and one

could say more precisely the archetype – of imaginal life.

The images that belong in general to this “region” “produce a sign”, in a Heraclitean sense; they indicate, through their peculiar “angelic” nature as messengers and mediators, the relationship between all things and urge us to sense such re-relationship, to take part in it and relive it. This is what characterizes their transformative and regenerative power.

The organ that is capable of secreting as well as reading these imaginal forms is the “active Imagination”, defined elsewhere by Corbin as *Imaginational*, which means the capacity to transmute sensible information into sym-bol. Here the implied caesura is written intentionally with a hyphen to indicate that the universe manifesting itself through “imaginational” vision is a universe where things sym-bolize among themselves, recover their pristine complicity, and in which, at the same time, takes place a coincidence of the sensible and the intelligible.

This visibility, obviously, is not immediate; it requires an effort of understanding, a hermeneutics. Imaginal hermeneutics is, therefore, the work that the active Imagination of the receptor carries out in order to resonate with these close-knit meanings, which are redirected by things and beings to this land of *No-where*, known as the imaginal world; a No-where, because imaginal forms take root in a non-empirical context, are not traceable on any map, and quite unusually – whenever one gathers their brilliance – they alone “situate” who will enjoy their vision. The reading of these figures requires a special penetrativity and a special receptivity, which in large part means patiently restitching a relationship torn by a divisive and analytical gaze. It is patience that, etymologically, means “com-passion” and whose sensitive organ is the *heart* (according to traditional mystical physiology) or, if one prefers, a sort of inner *vision*, acting as a sensor of subtle connections that occur between things.

To this effect imaginal figures seem to reside in imaginative manifestations of the archetype – rites, myths, dreams, or visions – as well as in the imaginative productions of individuals who are particularly endowed with visionary capacity, that is to say, capable of transmuting experience into symbol through their own creative operativity. It is especially on this last type of *works* that

imaginal pedagogy asks us to focus in order to reactivate – through their interpretation and through hermeneutic devotion to the wealth deposited in them – a restored and restorative gaze in the hermetic sense, or rather, in the sense of a *recomposition*.

From this perspective, reference to the imaginal is also – and to some extent especially today – reference to the creations of craftsmen that, by virtue of a passionate and extended effort to visualize the world in-depth, have re-discovered its rootedness in a universe of mutually corresponding meanings. It is the hermeneutic meditation of the imaginative operativity of such craftsmen that can transmute our vision and, consequently, our way of behaving in relation to what we “see”.

For Corbin the imaginal identifies an exact space in our vast region of the imaginary, and also too defined at times, if taken too literally, but it has the merit of supplying an orientation, even in the sense of a rediscovery of the Orient, of an imaginative and symbolic pole that may compensate our state of being exiled and crushed on an Occidental, logical and literal pole.

Yet to follow such trail does not mean in turn to fetishize it. The imaginal that Corbin describes, which originates from its exemplary con-discendence in the symbolic and mystical world of Iranian Neoplatonic gnosis, is itself the symbol of a way of “marking” the imaginative space where the creative operativity at play needs to be rich of sense, grounded in a feasible system of connections, and where we may recover the measure of man’s presence profoundly blended with the cosmos. From this perspective, it is more natural for us to refer to the po(i)etic operativity of art – and in particular to that of certain craftsmen who, as mentioned earlier, are gifted with “imaginal gaze” – rather than to visionary meditation, to mystical or mythical narration in the strict sense.

On the other hand, Jung and Hillman – authors whose thought in my estimation is of a hermetic and imaginal nature, and the latter’s is surely indebted to Corbin’s teachings, particularly for his thorough analysis of the psychagogic value of images – have stressed too that the images one draws upon may also fall short of complete perfection, or be simply impure. Actually, as *organic matter* – the starting point of a downhill process, of psychic depth – certain disturbing,

lacerated, and shapeless images can be, more than others, the lever for a transmutation of the gaze. And on the other hand, is it not perhaps in the “superb carcass that blossoms as a flower” of Baudelaire’s poem *The Carcass*, according to a typical hermetic, oxymoronic, and paradoxal procedure, that modern poetry begins to conjugate the dissolution of matter and the harmony of *correspondances* in an accomplished imaginal depiction?

In that sense, the imaginal proves to be essentially a reference and a tendential criterion, which, on the one hand, intends to remove from the indeterminate and from the equivocal the sphere of images that “transmutative” pedagogy – as we attempt to propose here – wants to feed on; on the other hand, the imaginal wants to draw attention to a sym-bolic processuality that ascribes itself to a theoretical tradition of a hermetic nature, and poses the problem of a re-orientation of the gaze – and the problem of the relationship between man and the world that this re-orientation prescribes.

Imaginative cognition, poetic reason

Perhaps the imagination today has been rescued, to some degree, from the bad name it earned for a very long time. Perhaps it is no longer the “*folle du logis*” as it appeared in the eyes of Malebranche and most of the Enlightenment, nor a purely illusionistic phenomenon that is misleading and strays away from the quest for truth or from reason, as the greater part of modern philosophy believed, including rationalism and empiricism.

And yet the imagination continues to be barred from knowledge: the residual, contaminated, and aporetic faculty. From this point of view, there is a real need for a radical revision of the Apollinean gaze of understanding, for a *Critique of Impure Reason* as argued by Carlo Suares (1955). There is a need to annihilate the primacy of the self as organizer of the cosmos in order to reobtain our intermediate and intermediary space – one of acceptance and specific realaboration of the experience of the world – or rather, that transmutative receptacle that is the imagination as knowledge.

Imagination, if not repelled to the margins of a dualism between sense and reason, is the place of fertile dissolution of such rigid contrast. In it and through it, the world's apprehension becomes qualitative, singular, and intimate. If knowledge depresses its peculiarity by fading away in the abstraction of the concept, which is rooted in distinction, or clamps to the literal rigidity of sensitive data, the imagination instead establishes a third place, which is constantly expelled from a puritanical and dichotomous logic – that *tertium* in which data is permeated with meanings and the categorical is rekindled with moods.

Without images no knowledge would be organically metabolized. It is true that the ontological vehemence of the “metaphor”, in following Ricoeur's expression about the “tensional truth” of poetry, cuts out the possibility of a clear distinction, but its virtue is exactly that of keeping intact and rich the subtle and irreducible ambivalence of the experience. In the imagination the object takes root in the universe of figures – glimmers of the invisible – and the intelligible, or the vast numerable universe of ideas, acquires weight and color; it becomes concrete.

The “Imaginational” is cognition of the individual and, at the same time, of the universal. It never falls back on the literal; it is always multisense, hierogamy of shadow and of the luminous, power in action and actuality in power. It is, therefore, precluded by any positive logic, unless it is the triple one theorized by Stephane Lupasco (1960; 1962) and rooted perhaps in the distant hermetic hierarchies of Agrippa (1972) and Paracelso (1993). According to Corbin, it is the path by which the authentic “symbolic comprehension” takes place and there is no other option.

Imaginal cognition does not lie at the base of a philosophy that regulates every particular within the general, because the “imaginary”, as stated in Durand (1975; 1992), is governed by a logic that is “contradictorial” and systemic, and in which every object is “dilemmatic” and amphibolic. In other words, it is not fully distinguishable from its opposite, and its associative links are strengthened more by networks of “redundancy” than by causal sequences. That is to say, figures of the imaginary are not generated by linear or hierarchal orders but

deviate and become different in the multiple levels of symbolic narration. Therefore, a series of mythical stories is what identifies the presence of the Hermes archetype in the figures of exchange, mediation, commerce, ambiguity, straying, and so on.

The androgynous standard for such knowledge is more appropriately depicted in two figures that contemporary thought – at the least the strand that insists on Hermes’ inspiration – has been able to rediscover: the poet and the mystic, that is, wanderers of extreme beginnings or mediators between the simplicity of materials and the heights of the unspeakable; the poet and mystic, who combine by opposition and analogy the intimate and the immense: the two extremities that one attempts to gather in any alchemic *consideration*, by leading them back to the cyclic nature of their becoming.

The poet, who is absorbed in intimacy, in close proximity, dilutes it in figures of vision, making it infinite; who disfigures the chair and the lamp before making them icons that border on visibility. The mystic, who ceaselessly breathes the firmament, makes it diurnal and accessible in prayer and meditation, without violating its secret core. Both are aware of the shadow that resists any attempt to overpass the last threshold, to rule the horizon with a frontal and exterminatory gaze. Both are dwellers of oblique lights and, therefore, capable of pushing onward in a remote proximity and approaching transcendence. That is to say, in the exact realm of imagination, in its heart with a mediatory faculty that does not resolve (if anything it dissolves) what the prescriptive arrogance of veri-fying or analyzing would like to make available as subdued or tamed.

Imaginative cognition is knowledge of the threshold; knowledge of chiaroscuro that requests a hermetic “chora” where to manifest itself, as in the forgotten metaphysics of Plato’s *Timaeus* or in Plotinian gnosis; or put in simpler terms, it may be summed up in that “*ratio poetica*” that Maria Zambrano – the contemporary daughter of every “learned ignorance” and “occult philosophy” – has better than anybody else superbly evinced. Her assessment is perhaps similar to a philosopher’s hermeneutics, according to a definition by Françoise Bonardel about modern understanding of alchemy, which makes the demon of analogy and sym-bolic operativity its center and circumference.

Ethics of the images

“Imaginal” pedagogy rather than pedagogy of the image, of the imagination, or the imaginary is obviously a desire to postulate – starting with its term – a “difference”, that is, a difference of field, intent, and perspective when dealing with the world of images and imaginative faculty. It means also, and above all, perceiving in a sensible way the condition of anomy and disruption in which particularly today – with its pervasive and detailed spread, with its *eutrophia* – the “imaginary” world manifests itself. Therefore, it means to be persuaded by the necessity of a *rigorization*, by the tendentious individuation of modalities that are, so to speak, selective, qualitative, regenerative, in the sense or in the many senses (so we do not excessively reduce our horizon of possibilities) that such term refers to; the individuation of a relationship with the images, with their “world”, and their practices.

From this perspective, perhaps it is possible to speak on behalf of imaginal pedagogy, although with extreme caution, as an approach that presses on as it anxiously calls attention to a sort of “ethics” of the images. This is, of course, a delicate and risky expression to handle, especially in certain contexts like that of postmodern thought, which always gets quite alarmed whenever the term comes up; as if an appeal to normativity were per se an attack to cultural democracy, to the need (however indisputable) of witnessing a complete openness to the varied and *plural* deployment of ideas and forms of expression.

However, even by recognizing the accuracy of an attitude that is cognitively open to variedness and not prejudicially hostile to any of its manifestations, and acknowledging, so to say, equal dignity of existence to all forms of imaginative expression, this approach cannot fail to choose, distinguish, and even appeal to a rigor with regard to the density of meaning and, therefore, to the symbolic validity of the images.

I do not believe it is misleading to notice, amid the ecumenical explosion of visual media, a proliferation of images whose capacity for hermeneutic stimulus,

but especially whose expressive genesis, very often betrays a cultural superficialness and a truly alarming subalternity to needs completely foreign to symbolic-imaginative research. It is alarming since the conditioning of the gaze, which this proliferation of images implies – and I am thinking in particular about advertising and TV creation, but even areas in the field of widely recognized art (despite subtle distinctions that modern criticism has introduced, often legitimately upsetting traditional subdivisions and categorizations) or a specific production in filmmaking or photography – produces a substantial impoverishment of the relationship between man and the world he belongs to.

Even not wanting, of course, to retrace the outdated separation between art and non-art, as well as, by analogy, between image and non – or counter – image, one cannot equally lose sight of the fact that the merely reproductive, affected, oleographic, and sketchy tone of many visual productions, but particularly the subservience of the operativity of the gaze to the enticements of commercial promotions, or the serialized, brutal, and repetitive association of image and product, inevitably produces a loss. One could even say it produces erosion, a sort of devastating entropization against what can be defined, I would deem legitimately, the *ecosystem* of the images.

The degree of authentic defilement or pollution – to remain faithful to the language of this metaphor – which our visual atmosphere has to undergo, and on whose substantial inflation in past decades from a quantitative point of view many have voiced their opinion, as they have on the effects of attrition that the massive increase of exposure to the images causes, is in my estimation unquestionable. Gilbert Durand, among others, has pointed out in his time how the apparent euphoria of the image conceals a disturbing new “iconoclasm” (1999).

Many sources have sharply criticized, and I am in agreement, a “hypertrophy of the visible”, or an *obscenity* of the visible. And right in front of this flooding of a “visual” that swallows up every difference and flattens out every ridge that applies to bodies and things, substances and horizons of meaning, I believe there is a need – as a first, even drastic, measure of moralization of the relationship with vision – for some sort of “abstinence”, of authentic restraint from the act of

seeing; a sort of self-regulated censorship against the profusion of images that are degrading, and above all, degrade our perception of the world.

The first principle of an “ethics of images” is, in that sense, *seeing less*, fasting from the state of seeing, concentrating on what is less and better, according to imaginal standards that we will attempt to outline afterwards. It is a sort of hygienic measure, of *diet*, of effort that is probably titanic and vain, keeping in mind the hypnotic and subliminal invasion of contemporary imagery, in order to recover “gaze”, to recapture the depth of this sense, to perceive again the threshold that separates vision as an act of re-junction in the world from a seeing that estranges and mortifies always more the experience of things.

The second principle is *toning down the light*. In order to compensate the prometheism of the luminous, symbolic and literal intrusiveness, in the streets, within bodies, in the sidereal atmosphere, in the psyche or in knowledge, there is a need to relearn the fascination of semi-darkness, to reaccustom our gaze to obscurity, to give up phosphorizing euphoria. Against the massive spread of sensors, microfilm viewers, video cameras, magnetic resonance, micro video cameras, probes, equipment in virtual prospecting, there is a need to discover again darkness, shut the curtains, renounce knowledge, reduce our aspirations to get to the bottom of things, or rather immerse ourselves in the opaque patina of works that slip into thin air even by virtue of their sinking in time.

The acceptance of not seeing, of not being able to go further, or even of not being able to see at all, by allowing the images to dissolve, and by letting go. A paradoxal endeavour of retreat in the shadow, of absorption in a few dark images, the acceptance of a knowledge that makes familiarity with the unknown – and not of the latter’s defeat – one’s personal goal, seems to me a path towards which an imaginal hermeneutics should gravitate, despite the paradoxality of this task, which the more attractive it becomes the faster everything seems to move in the opposite direction.

And even more. There are “idle” images – for the sake of using a distinction formulated once again by Henry Corbin – and “icon” images. The former do not resonate; they are not rooted in any given location except in the empty area of their own self-referentiality, in the brutal association with a commodity that

transforms them too into commodities. Depleted and abused images, *simulacra*, authentic *fake*, that is, “deceit” or an actual “scam”, the slick coating that masks the emptiness (Adorno in his “less severe moral admonitions” already sensed that behind the smile of a TV anchorwoman – an *imago* that truly symbolized an era of simulacra – “shined” a suffering). Images that do not even act as fetishes anymore, because they no longer maintain any link with desire; they only keep it in check and let it go around in circles indefinitely, as foam that builds up upon foam, as billboards that cover billboards. They block our gaze, as Corbin argued, and they do not allow you to go “further”.

The “icon” images, on the other hand, inherit from their charismatic source – the byzantine “icons” – their role as *mediators*. They stand on a cusp, manifest their origin of the invisible, signal to it, constitute its exclusive channel, and yet maintain its secrecy and intangibility while urging to imagine and to sym-bolize. As with icons, their golden backgrounds are sources from which the light flares, but they also fulfill the task of maintaining an opaque screen between the visible and the invisible; they summon us to a limit, to a hesitation, and to a measure that cannot be crossed. The images of the creators of an imaginal operativity are always hermetic, suspended, sym-bolic, and in that sense are “icons”. Let us consider the huge suspension that Mark Rothko’s unfathomable, luminous, and tingeing threshold produces in the gaze of whoever lets himself be enveloped. By reaching an immediate transmutation, it expedites dislocations in a “no-where” that is infinitely, but also obscurely, open.

Imaginal pedagogy makes a distinction between outcomes stemming from an operativity of the gaze that has dealt at length and patiently with the object of its visual pursuit – the gaze lets itself be permeated by the object, dissolves any slightest projection, allows the development of a vision that grows out of that very dissolution, and although the result perhaps is not always complete, yet it records the great deal of commitment, elaboration, and thorough analysis employed in such operativity – and the attainment of products that are often only imitated or decontextualized. They are often the result of brilliant insights that yet lack depth, of images whose only intent is to astonish thanks to the provocative and intentionally paradoxical matching of heterogeneous and

conflicting fragments of objects or people, of efforts that waver between exhibitionism and provocation.

Extreme and paradoxical crucifixions, the radicality of the flesh, meditated and distilled according to a process with distinctly alchemical features, through an endless search deep down in the night, as with Francis Bacon for example, cannot in any way be associated with certain “sacrificial” poses or certain extreme *performances* that rather seem the result of crude self-pleasure. Even in the second case, of course, we require a careful examination in order to make a distinction: Marina Abramovich’s rigor or the impassioned dionysism of Viennese Actionism is quite different from more inconclusive and worn out imitators.

It is the same law of market efficiency that imprisons and distorts the sense of an imaginative quest capable of producing meanings through which it regenerates the vision of things. An imagery that is explicitly sales oriented or focused on sales promotion is like an inverse alchemy: instead of turning lead into gold, it causes the opposite effect and contaminates everything it touches. For that reason any valuable image that goes through advertising or television imagery becomes useless and irreparably contaminated. To the attrition already implicit in any serialization, one may add the abrasion – much more infernal and scorching – that association with the merchandise produces in every image-idea.

The images are delicate, and even if the commercial ones apparently produce money (gold), we are dealing with counterfeit gold (an *inverse gold*, as the alchemists would state) that does not come from the dissolution of habitual vision or of distracted and hasty gaze – by giving rise to an additional, profound look that restores symbolic traces from the invisible – but rather follows, retraces, and averts the habitual gaze, in order to seduce it, captivate it, and entice it.

Perhaps, as stated by those who look at the iconosphere with a social-semiological slant, everything really has symbolic meaning, in the sense that it can be read *as* a symbol, as a carrier of meaning. But the sense, and even the ludic-symbolic fracture are quite different (its origin, its intention, its result) in the case of a Mona Lisa shown with Duchamp’s moustache or a Mona Lisa

shown with three hair arrangements, serialized by wise and, of course, astute advertisers of a well-known brand of mineral water. The latter succeeds in imitating Duchamp's distant transgression, but does not produce any authentic innovation in terms of gaze: it only takes advantage, strategically, of the example and ultimately disqualifies even that initial provocative action. It takes advantage of that distant and by now digested scandal, even because it cannot afford to challenge uncertainty, or rather, can only do it reasonably within the margins allowed by efficient market research.

Imaginal pedagogy relies on works that are intense, inflexible, often solitary, and defy convention, in which the quality of visual depth is understood in the alchemical genesis of the vision; is understood for having completely cut ties with a frontal, conspicuous, and schematic gaze; for having dissolved the *ego* that projects onto the world the spectres of a literal, *concretistic* vision; for having awaited, in a process for the most time extremely long, slow and pained, the emergence of images that would give back the buried plot of things, or even of feelings, or of carnal, organic flow that foster an expressive gesture (whether it be figurative, auditory or verbal); for having reached at times, thanks to perseverance and dedication, a visual *transmutation* that is able to give back the spiritual flesh of things – to give back their *soul* – and engulfs whoever draws near to them with feelings of marvel, profound discovery, identification or recognition, belonging, reconciliation, even at times of *healing*.

These works are anything but widespread. Actually they are rare, scant precious gems in a universe scattered with premature parts, with suspended work, with pretentious and opaque achievements. Few are the creators of an imaginal vision, because it is extremely strenuous and sacrificial – marked by the depth of the *wound*, often by that of loss or immersion in the shadow and emptiness of suffering. It is the required operativity to generate a quintessential, iridescent, and generous creation. In fact, it is this very obscure source, this subterranean light drawn with torment that often allows these works to reach a depth of vision capable of arousing a vital astonishment, which generates endless meditation and extraordinary learning.

For this same reason imaginal pedagogy is not aimed at stimulating

imaginative productivity; it does not urge you to create. Its goal is not to promote the artistic generativity of whoever experiences it. On the contrary, well-aware of the problematic nature of the imaginative gesture and startled by the inflation of a creativity that impoverishes our imaginary, it directs us to the meditation of works outside of its sphere, to mitigation of the pro-ductive gesture, or rather, to dedication and discovery; to the vision of creations authored by who has already completed, sometimes at great cost, an itinerary in the depths of the gaze and has left of it a brilliant and multiplicative testimony.

Nocturnal ponderation on pedagogy

The background against which this proposal of re-orientation of the imaginary stands out, however, identifies a broader realm of reasons, already explored at least partially in a previous book, *Miti d'oggi nell'educazione* (2000), and then in more detail in *L'opera dello sguardo* (2002). According to this view, it is the entire structure of this contemporary reorientation – as training experience or life experience – that seems to call for a conversion or, more precisely, a “reflection”, if we want to use, according to Françoise Bonardel’s interpretation, a term that reveals a fair balancing of elements, materials, and substances in alchemical operativity.

The present state of any operativity clashes, in fact, as Gilbert Durand has shown in his book about *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* (2000),¹ with a universe dominated by several forms of “vision” of the world that severely restrict even the sphere of the educational experience. Control over rationality that turns to brightening, to “light”, or control over a subject with heroic and Promethean traits that drive it to action and self-assertion in a process made of challenges and conquests, which direct it to an always more radical transgression of the limits of experience – a subject always freer from any norm that is not self-determined – requires immediate compensation. Not only because

¹ Mottana refers to the Italian title. The English translation was published in 2000 [translator’s note].

we need to cover and cultivate the various facets of a complex universe; not only for want of cultural democracy in a world that is always more *intercultural* and pluridirectional, but because the undisputed control of an imaginary and operational regime entails great risks related to disruption and outbreak of experiential components, which have been neglected and banished to obscurity.

The latter, like any psychic or physical element that is left abandoned in depth and obscurity, as shown by Jung, take on a negative boost and acquire primitive and explosive features. We have already determined, oftentimes previously, how dangerous it is to overstep any limit pertaining to any one thing that cannot find other means of expression or representation, whether we are dealing with manifestations related to nature or the human psyche. In a world unflinchingly devoted to recovery from any trace of evil, pain, obscurity, and animality, these essential life components, stranded on their own, so to speak, become rebellious, fierce, and are brazenly ruthless to people and the world itself. Obscurity becomes extremely dense and materiality becomes sordid; pain becomes unfathomable and cannot be processed. Hotbeds of terror and profound depression ignite, where instead a less dramatic coexistence with fear, sadness, anxiety and feelings of emptiness – as a measure for more adequately comparing oneself to the uncertainty and finiteness of existence – could promote an improved communion among things.

It is, therefore, a matter of acting in order to regenerate a cultural landscape that is linked more to the imaginary condition of the night, or of its cyclical, synthetic, feminine, and telluric forms. There is a need for reparation in shadows, which means reacting to the constant injection of adrenalin and violent luminosity that the feverish context of contemporary operativity seems to demand incessantly. There is a need to relearn how to pause, stop, and reacquire the meaning of non-acting, of welcoming wounds and pain as an invitation to fertile silence, moderation, and meditation. There is, in fact, a need to learn to not see, to accept a certain degree of mystery and limitation in terms of approach to things, to learn not to eradicate problems by resorting to a rationality obsessed by good intentions or fanatic pragmatism.

There are feminine, puerile, vulnerable, and delicate aspects of life that need

to be protected, such as rest, contemplation, *rêverie*, solitude, and silence. Even failing, erring, and dying must be allowed to seek a place, time, and meaning where they can be received, understood, and elaborated. Ethics of the image moves from this standpoint in the same direction of a larger *pedagogical ethics* in which one attempts to *diminish*, escape, and reward abstinence and surrender, withdrawal and *descent*.

In that sense even self-referentiality supported by much pedagogical and psychological projectuality seems in need of being contained and toned down, no less than any reifying technophilia. Exercises of “service” to which Hillman, among others, has drawn our attention in recent years, as a countermeasure necessary to an inflation of the human in the life of the world, must be taken seriously. There is a need to become more decentralized, to turn oneself outward, and diminish. The imaginal exercise in that sense gives shape to an upheaval and a conversion; to a lesser weighing of the egoic component and one’s personal project; a transfer of energy and attention towards the exterior, an exterior toward which one appears more devout and welcoming.

A correct pedagogy of the other, therefore, does not mean at all being more human-centered, since man is the only recognized otherness, as many beliefs and ideologies seem to propose, but rather an attention to the alterity of things and other beings, to their universe dried up of any right, of any interiority and *soul*. It is in this direction indeed that we can actually carry out a “counter-education” – starting from objects, nature, and cities, as Hillman himself proposes in a striking essay he wrote on the *Politics of Beauty* (1999). Only by lessening human centrality does one really come into contact with weak and wounded parts of our experience. If there is greater coalescence with things – with their capacity of not asserting themselves, of not invading, of remaining self-absorbed, or by simply *being* – then we can perhaps begin to repair the damage caused by having overstepped all limits and boundaries.

It might be advisable to suggest *ponderation* to this man, who is always more unconscious and overconfident. I feel that an important step would be this offering of an imaginal pedagogy. I would hope for it to be received as a summons to shun personal achievement, a summons to seek devotion toward

that other lost world we belong to – another world filled with sense but deserted, a world we can focus on, take charge of, and where we try to redeem its potential for redemption and reconnection – a summons to a more measured and receptive behavior, sensitive to the refinement of thresholds, of nocturnal and wounded parts of every experience.

Having said this, we are certainly not expecting to solve all universal woes or impose an all-encompassing project. Quite the contrary. In fact, our effort is intentionally a partial undertaking or perhaps just a signal, weak but not random, since the insistence to take care of the world – in pursuit of an *ecosophy* as supported by several sources, like Raimon Panikkar for instance, or of a “loyalty to the land” as defined by Françoise Bonardel – is always more pressing.

Imaginal pedagogy, as with other attempts to reawaken the *Shadow*, the shadow that heals solipsistic dejection of the enlightening subject, is an apprenticeship focused on recovering the other – according to a vision that, however assumed dead, is reappearing as a necessary remedy, nostalgia or *utopian* reversion – but also as a challenge that can beat the odds, a rightful and urgent countermeasure in a context that always shows less orientation.

Yet on a different although bordering level, it is worth noting how poor and empty is the imagery of pedagogy as such, its sclerotic narrow-mindedness, the weakness and overly schematic form of its controlled reasoning drawn by sheer force from the humanities, particularly from psychology and sociology. When speaking about childhood, adolescence, disability, poverty or education, both literature and pedagogical reflection appear disembodied, rhetorical and dependent, stark and dull, unable to reformulate on an imaginative plane the profound rootedness of the objects they are constantly dealing with.

Instead of dealing with adolescence, for example, through the exhausting categorizations of sociology, by means of customary and abused concepts of autonomy, identity and transition, why not seek in the weighty and plurisignifying depictions of the archetype of a youth or adolescent in art, features and inclinations that question and arouse a profound gaze? Why not attempt its re-cognition through plentiful *Pueri aeterni* that are present in myths, by drawing on sources that may amplify and multiply its profile, from Actaeon

to Hippolytus, from Electra to Orestes?

There is a need to enrich our imagery and to know how to see the subjects of pedagogical research in the imaginative light shed upon them by the great multi-colored compendium of our artistic, mythical, and literary tradition; to rediscover the mystery of symbolic childhood in numerous gazes as captured by medieval painting or conversely by neorealist cinema; to find it again in the archetypes of the child-divinities – Eros, Hermes, Dionysus and Apollo himself – as in the musical infancy of the latest Arvo Pärt or in Pierre Bonnard's auroral and iridescent gaze.

Pedagogy desperately needs to drink at the *tingeing* fountains of creative imagination and of its archetypes, so it can comprehend unexpected aspects of the matter it feeds upon, subvert its predictable explanatory automatisms, and defeat the argumentative monotheism that troubles it and the representational desert of its *theory*.

Aer

(Image)

...be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,
Like wither'd leaves, to quicken a new birth;
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?
(Percy B. Shelley, Ode to the West Wind)

The green line

In the Christian Kabbalah that spread in Europe during the age of Renaissance Humanism, in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola or Arcangelo da Borgonovo, there appears a suggestive and meaningful expression to point out what we know as the Soul of the World (*Anima Mundi*), a notion of Platonic origin. In their commentaries it is described as the “green line” that surrounds the universe: it deals with the manifestation of God that contains the world, and brings it to life by injecting its influence on all things. Green is the color of vegetation, but for cabalists, it is also the dye from which every color is born. At last, in the symbolism of the earth, which carries the seed and nourishes the living, the green line is also a sign of the “mother”.

From our point of view, it is interesting to notice that in this peculiar notion they gather images that come from the transcendental, from nature, and from the feminine: something that undoubtedly assembles many of the complex and hyperstratified meanings that pertain to this fundamental concept, and to its close connection with the imaginal.

As pointed out earlier, imaginal pedagogy is inscribed in a tradition, a hermetic one, whose cosmology is based on a profound and structured relationship of all things and identifies in the originally Platonic conception of the Soul of the World one of its key elements. Recently, especially in Jungian circles, and particularly on behalf of James Hillman, this notion has been favorably reassessed (Hillman, 1993). It was Hillman, with explicit reference to

the Florentine Neoplatonic tradition, particularly to Marsilio Ficino, who has critically drawn attention to human monopsychism – produced by obsolescence of a unitary concept of the world and by interiorizing subjectivity, mediated at first by Christianity and then by rationalist philosophy from Descartes to Kant – and to the therapy of “soul-making” as an act of re-immersion of the human into the “cosmos”.

It is the psychic mortification of the world that produces its destruction, in his opinion, and this psychic extinction causes a dramatic self-centering of man, of a man who became Christ and that in this desolate solitude progressively sharpens his fall and desperation; a man who is no longer able to see himself in his surroundings, who feels them as something foreign and without life, significance, feeling, and who is abandoned to himself, to his hallucinations and anguish.

So it is necessary to turn ourselves outward, regain our lost contact with the intimacy of things that are dispirited and depleted because of abandonment, carelessness, and abuse. It is necessary to put one’s trust again in what he defines an “animal sense”, an instinct for the life of nature and the interiority of objects. *Anima mundi* is a cosmos infused with life, sensitive, provided with a multiform and specific subjective expressivity that we can no longer perceive. Things, animated things, want instead to be recognized, contemplated, re-seen through elaborate observation that does not graze them only to quickly catalogue and get rid of them, or treat them as an excuse for quick abstraction and dismissal, but harvests their presence, intention, and original appearance.

The world is not a container, a vehicle or a background; it is the fabric from which we lean out and where we are destined to return. All along we have been immersed in its soul and – to apply an expression with hermetic resonance used by Merleau-Ponty – in its “flesh”, where he identifies precisely the horizon of co-belonging between sentient and sensitive. We believe unconsciously that what surrounds us is at our disposal, that it is a screen on which to project our ineffable deeds and on which to stamp our seal. But this happens precisely because we have lost the hermetic cognition of things, a cognition that is able instead to recognize the “pressmarks” that give a placement to each object in a

superordinate, superhuman, and hierarchically organized fabric, in whose weave each entity is imbued with life and sense.

Subjectivity is not our exclusive right, because all kinds of subjectivity, in fact, belong to a larger, more widespread, more complex subject, and this subject is the very foundation of any existence. For this reason we owe it *re-spect*, we must take care of it, know how to give back what Hillman calls an “esthetic response”, that is to say, a recognition saturated with sensibility and imagination, with intense psychological attention, made of curiosity and devotion, of feeling and comprehension. Things, the world, or human beings ask for our sensibility, and we can meet them especially through imaginative perception. It is there that they make their intimacy reverberate. They signify in our imagination, fully reveal themselves in images – complex images whose essence, figure, and detail we attempt to explore.

The forms of such “esthetic response” define the limits in that case, as I have already pointed out in *L'anima e il selvatico*, of a detailed “counter-education” focused on a renewal of the act of seeing. In it an appeal to accurate observation of the world becomes inevitably an urging to “slow down”, stop for a while, scour with zeal the *manifestation* of what surrounds us and practice that specific *exercise of the soul*, which is even a model for imaginal hermeneutics, acknowledged as *notitia* (Hillman, 1993, 1979); a careful exploration of all things that surround us without flooding them with our projections; an urging to look at them, notice them, and re-learn how to utter them. Besides, this also requires special attention to the language, metaphors, and images one adopts in order to indicate or name them.

To say that a smile is “charming” or that a musical composition is “touching” means losing once again the specific quality of things in order to let *our* reaction stand out; it means letting the *Anima mundi* disappear and replacing it with the individual soul, with subjective emotions, and putting back the self in the spotlight. The world demands to be witnessed, to be known, to be admired, as Bachelard would recommend, with nouns and adjectives that restore its very own “subjectivity”. It is necessary to have images in order to voice with precision its flavor, its color, its scent, in order to follow firmly the creases, ridges, cavities,

and prominences of its face; a face we need to find again in any existing thing, because each thing owns a face possessing life and it is our duty to “see it”, feel it and restore it, according to a suitable and rich language, as is the practice of poets, great writers, and great creators.

To accomplish this means getting in touch again with the *Anima Mundi*, the divine that permeates things, the “Sophia” as *feminine* link between the creator and its creature; that diffused vitality that bathes the universe and in whose absence there is nothing left but lifeless matter, only capable of transmitting a sense of vacuity and separateness.

The perception of a life of matter and cosmos – from Plato to Lovelockian theories of Gaia, from Paracelsus and Boehme to the recent ecosophic sensibility that refers to the latest Heidegger and his poets until Guattary, from Bruno’s and More’s Hermeticism, passing through Gottfried Arnold’s pietism, through Franz Von Baader’s philosophy of nature, and Sophiology in Russian orthodoxy by Florensky, Soloviev and Berdjajev, or even the resumption of Hermeticism in the philosophy of contemporary alchemy – is an essential point around which is rooted the idea of an imaginal pedagogy.

This notion, this “*omphalos* (navel) of a submerged Atlantis” as Jean Brun describes it in a striking essay (1989), in which “everything is kept, life is one, universal, atmospheric (...), ‘everything conspires’ and partakes in an encompassing unity full of resemblances, influences, and harmonics of every sort”, allows the imaginal effort to take root and to be directed in the prospect of a transmutation whose normative goal is the retrieval of man’s measure right inside this participatory universe – in an animate and inhabited cosmos.

The alternative seems always more that of an unstoppable entropy, of a world handed over to exploitation and abuse, and of a human subject that is always more desperate as long as whatever surrounds him becomes more mute and disfigured.

The gaze

At the center of imaginal pedagogy there is the “gaze”. Under scrutiny, and in some ways under observation, is exactly the way we should look, we should see. The deep relationship between image and seeing, the topics of external and internal visibility, the problem of orientation and close analysis of vision at the moment of the visible’s utmost dilation, of greatest *brightening*, appear as crucial.

Moving forward, by means of multiple sensors and instruments of optical survey, by means of fact-finding procedures, through broadening of additional visibility, both ultra-celestial and intrasomatic, through radiation or resonance, lamps or probes, makes it possible for us to master the world in the visibility of every one of its recesses. The most typical ambition of the “age of enlightenment” has almost entirely come true and few mysteries remain concealed and unfathomable.

Conversely, one would be able to notice that the vast increase of blinding luminosity produces always more menacing and deep shadows where objective visibility is unable to penetrate, or in those who remain excluded by self-styled privileges that the progress of Luminaries, both cognitive and material, confers on whoever is a recipient; and as well, at times, precisely where an always more violent light casts very dark shadows right where it collects. Profound obscurity – as a growing depression in he who lives dazzled by the solar targets of our times, as well as in those who remain victims of the systematic withdrawal of every glimmer of light in economic, cultural, and psychological terms – grows constantly, as in many areas of the third world. At any rate, even in enlightened civilizations, the feeling that an increase of seeing does not necessarily correspond to the improvement of the conditions of he who is seeing and what is being seen is, I contend, a perception that is always more widespread.

The dominant modes and objectives of vision in our Western culture seem to be directed at control and diagnosis, at domination and manipulation. The gaze that looks is predominantly a voracious and calculating gaze, which conceives the potential of exploitation of what comes within the range of its sight.

The “diurnal”, heroic, and Promethean gaze that prevails unchallenged during our times is a masterly gaze, wedded to facts and numbers, focused on

plundering, profit, and consumption; a “clear-cut” gaze, which doesn’t split hairs, unless it is about rationalizing the technologies of withdrawal; a gaze that proclaims to be, no matter what, always on the side of moral righteousness, of he who restores, builds, and clarifies.

Such gaze, more or less a direct child of the advent of a profit-making rationality, faithful ally of a pragmatic, positive, and quantitative thought, has steadily alienated the shadowy depths from which it itself originated. It has curtailed the method of doubt and extirpated from its visual field the complexity of symbolic interlacing, of deep relationships, and of genetic rootedness.

This lapse of memory carries, however, a price; primarily a psychological price, symptomatically highlighted by the rise of a generalized feeling of anomy, removal, and depression. But also an economic and environmental price, related to a degeneration of things, along with the disintegration of our bond with them, our abandonment of nature, the desertification and stripping of our areas. They are perceptible, actually, in a wide-ranging psychic, social, and political pathology; at last, in an always more discernible form, as a proliferation of constantly growing gratuitous and insignificant images, which, as Gilbert Durand maintains, generate an escalating exhaustion of the act of seeing or produce a “dead eye” (1996).

The triumph of the visible corresponds to its definitive standardization, to its *monotheism*. The only surviving principle for differentiation resides in the exchange value that each image is committed to. The images confront each other only on a goods market and within this context they obtain their official seal of signification. The principle that sanctions the value of an image is its saleability and it is on this plane that one verifies its expressive capacity.

The *symbolic*, the language as rule and frontier of the psychic, has collapsed for a long time, since every standard of intrinsic or transcendent value has been demolished. The imaginary, feared by Freudian psychoanalysis as unconscious deviation and representational confusion, has flooded the world, and what remains is the chaotic and oppressive landscape of a monotonous jungle of signs.

On this matter we have seen different kinds of reactions: there are those who predict catastrophes and those who confidently plunge into the dispersion of

forms and, while playing things by ear, try to read fragments of meaning everywhere, convinced that the end of every hypostatization of meaning is also a relief. Yet others, a handful, through removal and surrender, seek the “directed” option, of preserving those hard-fought (and now pained, like never before) modes of elaboration of a gaze that is still capable of offering a torsion and perhaps a *redemption* of vision.

In contrast to a way of seeing that is flattened, degraded, commodified, drowned in the “desert of reality” (Zizek, 2002), we can still (perhaps) oppose an integrated, participative, and sym-bolic vision; an imaginal, nocturnal, and conciliatory vision versus a literal, diurnal, and separatory gaze; a “diffused”, “emerald” vision, which is able to lay a faithful, affectionate, and sympathetic gaze on things, versus a “clear-cut” vision.

In this horizon, the imaginal gaze needs to be grasped as the metaphor of a larger *experience* of the world in which sense, heeding, and reception converge: here seeing is the metaphor of a multisensory perception that is hypersensitive, nurtured with soul, and directed at objects, turned inside out as the inside of a glove on the world so that it can be inhaled, felt, and ingested, even viscerally, as well as dreamt, or weaved in the subtle garment of spiritual flesh.

It is this difficult, harsh, and perhaps desperate path that imaginal pedagogy sets out to cover, drawing from the fiery results of imaginative creation, and committed to an impassionate hermeneutics of these objects. Nowadays it is not an easy task to track down images that have a transmutative quality, that are the outcome of an operativity so absorbing and tenacious as to return an object with imaginal qualities. At any rate, there are works and creators, even contemporary, which bear witness to this effort; in every imaginative field, from music to body art, from writing to visual arts.

At a closer look, our heritage of images produced by a symbolically oriented gaze is sufficiently substantial, although at times removed and remote. It is not always easy to detect it because on most occasions, in fact, the interpreters of the imaginal have been able to breathe life into subject matter only at the cost of prolonged exile, of oblivion generated by their own inevitable withdrawal, and really determined by unlimited concentration or by passing through thresholds

that verge on imaginative translatability (and I am thinking for instance about Bousquet or Bonnard, who I have expounded with devotion in *L'opera dello sguardo*, 2002). This does not necessarily mean that these works are traceable only peripherally or even while being downplayed.

Sometimes creators who have achieved success are fully entitled to imaginal operativity; not always for every area of their work, and at times for aspects of it that – in order to be re-cognized – require or await a hermeneutics that is more mindful about the alchemic transmutation of the matter performed by them (and I am thinking about artists like Vermeer, Rouault, Tarkovsky or Messiaen).

The opportunity they offer, drawing our attention to an arduous and equally necessary selection, is actually that of recapturing a world – and a posture in close proximity to it that may help us see this world again, inhabit it, and regenerate it – first and foremost in our gaze. This is what profound and tireless thinkers like Rilke and Heidegger have handed down to us. We need to dissolve the “frontal” gaze that projects the world beyond itself; that splits or dissects it so as to better dispose of it. We need to lower ourselves, and recover a more intimate or intimately distant vision, as Rilke suggests, which comes only after slow apprenticeship, as well as patient deconstruction of an influenced, stereotyped, and superficial eye. We need to shrink the distance that automatic use of analytic schematization or rationalising disposition introduces in an object of vision – intended as a beyond, comparable only obliquely, only through a change of location or perhaps a *genuflection*.

To reconnect with the world we need to place ourselves on the side of the invisible; we need a poetic homeland, but construed not as a retreat or a *thiasus* protected and isolated from the exterior, but rather as a *melting pot* or, if one prefers, as an *expanse* suitable for perfecting a vision steeped in feeling and a *praxis*.

Symbolic praxis, transmutation of the gaze, recovery of the world in its multiple and iridescent connections, restoration of the relationship between man and things: this is the necessary and salvific subversion, we believe, that an imaginal pedagogy can generate.

Of course nothing is taken for granted when giving support, when attempting to endorse the operativity of those who are absorbed in the depths of vision, of those who have reached the dawning of the visible to the point of exposing its dyes, or the seal marks that remain impressed upon it and bring back its deep integrity. The gaze that pauses in thought before such works has an opportunity and rare chance of *knowing* (in the Latin meaning of *sapĕre*, to taste, to savor) parts of the world, but every encounter is a bet, a leaning out on a threshold and occasionally on a crevasse; each time we are certain to extract something, but we also wander and descend following a path that is also endless.

The imaginal course is always an approximation, a generous, tenacious, hard-fought attempt, and at times a prodigious adventure of vision or a progressive discovery. However, it is also a tremendous effort that because of a wealth of spiritual matter, of lymph, of meaning that the work radiates, requires commitment and also the awareness that we can acquire a lot, but also lose a lot; that we can wander indefinitely, especially in that long phase of darkening that descent in imaginal depths prescribes, before you begin to sense the beginning of a transmutation, the headway of a mutation in one's own delaying of things or in one's own de-picting them.

In this sense imaginal training is an *exercise of the soul* that is more than spiritual; it is a descent to the underworld, a leaping into subject matter, in search of its "*astrum*", the fiery principle that reunites it to the celestial pole and makes it bear fruit, as Paracelsus sustained (1993), in which man can recognize himself on the basis of a correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. Contemporary man, who has raised himself so much or moved away from objects and their care, needs to come down, as Hillman states (1986), to lay down his arrogance as master, to feel again the *humus*, the "*limus terrae*", in keeping with the language of Paracelsus, who often leaves his mark on the paintings or the vibrant sounds of some particularly receptive, faithful, and impassioned artist.

Aqua

(Image)

...Though an enduring storm scorches my shores, far out
my wave is deep, complex and prodigious. I expect nothing
finite, I submit to sculling between two unequal dimensions.

But even so. My guiding buoys are of lead, not cork,
my trail is salt, not smoke...

(René Char, The rampart of twigs)

Cosmic infancy

The *infant* gaze is probably the most suitable guide to the imaginal world. Childhood – the age when memory inscribes approximate and vague clues in the map of time, the age credited with the ability to endure in that Openness from which the act of elevating oneself to a thinker rips open, and cuts loose from believing in primitive and dissonant notions as the animation of the world, or the discrete interlife of angels and other intermediary figures – seems to be the epicentre of any imaginative faith. In some ways it is the narrow door that discloses the “ulterior” sight that we have all gradually unlearned. It was Bachelard in the company of a few other mentors, now forgotten, to postulate a poetics and ungraspable metaphysics of the image, and it was he who magnified infancy as the epicenter of such metaphysics, as the imaginative “season” par excellence (Bachelard, 1972). Following Bachelard and his imaginal

metaphysics, in fact, you could almost feel like a “fundamentalist” of this mistreated and underrated approach to experience; fundamentalists of infancy, so to speak.

If we follow Bachelard’s words and poetic *rêverie*, we will find ourselves cloaked in a faith that is still responsive, as part of a myth of infancy and its poetic incarnations. We remain gladly entangled by the imaginary of a symbolic infancy, as vexillaries, therefore, of a fundamentalism not too fundamental if observed through the transparency of an archetypal cross-reference. The infancy we draw upon is like a lens that distorts or, perhaps more correctly, *reforms* reality, reconnects it with its vegetable, animal, elementary roots, and sinks it back into the cosmos. And after all, what is more archetypal and *fundamental* than infancy? It is certain. Supervised studies, sewn into the intangible fabric of philosophical, religious, and anthropological discourse, confirm that infancy, as an archetype and in its varied manifestations, is constantly intertwined with the imagination.

Infancy, in reality, is the state of existence suitable for an imaginal world; the mythical, angelic, and demonic infancy: infancy itself, as removed, unfathomable, and “elemental”.

An immersed soul and body in nature, and this soul is torn out by nature with torment, thanks to prolonged and unindulgent manoeuvres, known as bad-educational² or educastrating³ in circles subdued by a particular passion for transgression and the cursed. Infancy is an angelic body, androgyny in action and figure, a hermetic rocking between the animal and the sage, a sinful confidence in the irreligious powers of a perception that imagines.

There are many minstrels – poets, fabulators, aesthetes, and mystics – of this distant infancy whose nostalgia is all together a gnostic elegy for the loss of a

² In the original version it is a pun involving the Italian adjective “educative” (plural feminine of “educational”). Mottana doubles the consonant “t” in order to form the Italian adjective “cattive” (plural feminine for “bad”). His newly formed word is “e-du-cattive”, which incorporates the notion of “bad education” [translator’s note].

³ A pun in the original by blending the words “education” and “castration” in order to form the adjective “educastrating”. The idea comes from the book “Journal d’un educastreur” by French author Jules Celma [translator’s note].

unity that has withered, before its time, in the invisible and in the unintelligible. Some of them sway us, more than others, toward an imaginal pedagogy. They convey its ways and garments. By feeling their works and tunes, we earn knowledge, a healing knowledge; a knowledge that we can describe as wisdom of infancy, an oxymoron that reveals a betweenness of the imaginal gaze that comes from the universe of the child archetype. A “pedosophy” (Mottana, 2002).

Some po(i)ets of pedosophy, more adequately than others, are able to tune their voice. I am still thinking essentially about Gaston Bachelard, the guru of a memorable work who placed the child, not by mere chance, at the center of his most pedosophic book – a book perfectly inscribed in the lustrous society of the imaginals and of any symbolic alchemy. In that book, whose rather fragrant and spirited title, *Poetics of Reverie*, is in itself a declaration of imaginative religiosity, the main chapter treats infancy as the leading inspiration of the *opus*. But a word of caution: he is not treating the real, literal child, whose skilled disciplining can census his neural regulation or psychosexual evolution, but the *cosmic child*, or rather, infancy as archetype and symbol of a magical circle, of a precategory rootedness – an antecedence of being, as the enlightened author calls it.

We are restoring the entire philosophical significance of infancy, when it is understood as founding archetype of a knowledge that, unshaken by the imposing progressive goals of humankind, lovingly falls back on an intimacy-integrity-generosity (Bonardel, 1993) that is completely and irreparably lost, but yet needs to be reinstated at any cost. And *rêverie* itself accomplishes this, that is, the imagination that transmutes the wealth of infancy, elsewhere mistaken, in a vessel of transmutation, in *àthanor* – the alchemical vessel that cooks the *elixir* and, therefore, takes the name from what is *athànatos*, immortal.

The child, or rather the *rêverie* of infancy, the imagination of infancy, is healing and transmutable. If we follow its aquatic, leafy, tepid, and magmatic ontology, its physiology focused on thankfulness and astonishment, in which the world is still apperceived as a never-ending music or carnal emanation, then “we inhabit the world in a more authentic way”, suggests our white-bearded native of Champagne. An “anonymous”, “vegetal”, “motionless” infancy engenders a

potential for *oneirism* that is able to transmute our momentary pause before objects, pressing for a “philosophy of rest” that allows us to relearn an authentic “being for the world”.

The pact with human beings, the Earth and its elements is amply stimulated by the attainment of this archetype, by its inspiration, which is audible in every authentic activity visited by the angel of the imaginal. This infancy is “metaphysical”, according to the author, and guides us to a “total season” in which we are not *in front* of things but *inside* again; we are immersed – as an artist who digs into the subject matter he feeds on in order to paint, or a musician who breathes the very own inherent sonority of things – in the imaginative space between man and nature, in that diaphragm that mends the rift and cures it. The age of infancy is indeed a “restored age” and its season is one in which things may experience an “orphic diffusion”; a diffusion that is perceivable in Debussy’s amazing intervals, but also in the orphanity faithful to Piavoli’s terrestrial, as in Zanzotto’s sonnets, so saturated with *humour* and unfurled onto the dancing body of the world.

Thus infancy is possibly the basis of a renewed instructive symbolics. The latter will no longer run wild while it breaks away from infancy or trains unruly Pinocchio to follow rules, but will allow itself to slip into an erotizing aura that spreads from the corolla of its archetype, from which it derives inspiration; an inspiration that will enable it to rethink itself as knowledge that radically changes any adultification or “adulteration” of the world, and whose interpreters can be recognized well beyond any feigned disciplinary adherence.

Paul Ricoeur’s recommendation, when he expounds the Gospel passage in which the child is shown as the authentic image of the *end* – as the final step before attaining the Kingdom, in this image that envelops a thick plethora of *Puer* figures like Hermes, and as a coincidence and resolution of any alluvium – needs to be reacquired and internalized, like any solemn warning, in a conscious instructive hermeneutics. The child is what lies “in front of us”, not behind, says Ricoeur; *he* is our *duty*. A difficult task indeed, for in order to be carried out, it requires yielding, dissolution and, at the same time, a patient intransigence that does not fall back on familiar paths of the hyperconscious administration of

reality, but is capable of understanding how healthy it is to confide in the disquieting fluctuation of the amphibious and otherworldly condition of the *absolute* child.

Of this infancy, which superimposes itself in a kaleidoscopic play of reflections with the imaginal world here recalled, few have been its authentic envoys; few have fulfilled its golden threshold inspiration. Of this infancy we keep losing, in the irreparable pollution of its own symbolic field, its imaginal memory. Therefore, it is even more necessary to safeguard the scattered fragments of he who has drunk there, as if at the *Grail* of a vocation that – while perhaps isolating him from the circle of those who gain immediate echo – will certainly dispose of an enhanced radiance in the “Great Task” of resuscitation of the world.

Alchemic opus and hermetic firmament

It is not preposterous to fall back on alchemy or to feel nostalgic for hermetic knowledge, for a tradition of thought that has made the perception of a deep correspondence (*correspondence*, according to Baudelaire) of all objects its very own foundation. There is a need to re-search – in the repressed behavior of a gaze that was accustomed to read the invisible intimacy that links man and objects, by means of subtle yet tenacious relationships organized in an endless chain – the secret of an integrated, plural, and animated world.

The constant mention that this tradition makes to a psyche of the world, to an *Anima Mundi*, which, as we said earlier, pervades and injects life into all forms of the universe – from the most expendable to the most towering, in a feasible weave of analogies and correspondences arranged hierarchically, from Plato to Hermes and Paracelsus, from Cornelius Agrippa to Jacob Boehme to Giordano Bruno – is for imaginal pedagogy a fundamental reference.

The same applies to transmutative practice correlated to hermetic philosophy; to alchemy as a doctrine that interprets the recomposition of spiritual and corporeal, of masculine and feminine, in every creative practice that is directed to the world of objects or the world of the spirit. It is an operational discipline

that strictly identifies in the imaginative dimension, in what enthusiasts would often call the “sidereal body”, *tertium datur* between concept and fact, its sphere of operation.

Imagination is the transmutative place par excellence, because in it overly fixed concretions fluidify, whereas overly volatile forms coagulate. In it ideas are embodied without becoming literalized, whereas the substances become sublimated without dissolving. Images belong to an intermediate realm of experience; they are not body or soul, but a marriage or a compenetration (not a juxtaposition, however) of traces of the sensible in an intelligible substance, visible in an interior vision, in the “imaginal world” (Corbin, 1986).

Alchemy is a discipline that teaches how to welcome and undergo the experience and, to some extent, any experience, in a processuality that is never fully accomplished, in which moments of material fixation, of concretization, ceaselessly alternate with moments of melting or fluidification – similarly to the role played by liquid element and solid element, by feminine and masculine, mercurial and sulphureous – in a blending of transformations. This takes place, however, primarily because of the impulse and cure of a *fire* that burns the immediate aspect of perceptions so it can slowly extract forms that become always more refined with “sense”.

A processuality that symbolizes – out of necessity for darkening, loss, “wound”, *descent*, *nigredo*, and then as *sublimation* and first emergence of spiritual images, of a *whitened* matter – the hermetic passage from death to rebirth, or rather, the necessary link for any authentic transmutation and initiation. It symbolizes the death of conventional vision and the birth of a spiritual vision, the death of stereotypes and the openness to an ability that proves to be visionary and in charge of symbolic comprehension; the death of spiritless matter, the symbolic weight tied to Saturn’s melancholic configuration and birth of perfected matter, as well as the gold of the philosophers, which is a symbol of the Sun.

Such process, however, does not end in an upward movement, directed toward the spiritual, that is, toward what is known as *albedo*. This requires an ulterior phase, known as *rubedo*, in which purified matter, made luminous, must

still be fixed in a renewed concreteness. It must comply with what alchemists used to call in different ways the “glorious body”, the “Rebis”, the “Lapis Philosophorum”, which is a coincidence of opposites, the double or androgynous figure that has reconstructed Totality, the complete *Opus* and, at the same time, the healing of man and the world, of subject and object that are finally reunited. This is the moment when the Work of the Architect gains access to an ageless time, and when the very own author reaches an absolute control that allows him to secrete, at any moment, innovative and salvific images. This represents an arduous and rarely accomplished stage even in artistic operativity and mystical allegiance, yet is the tensional end point of every effort of transmutation of the world, which in turn becomes generative, and multiplicative: a healing *elixir* for an individual or beings that reflect themselves in it.

Works that entirely pass through this processuality acquire a power of cosmic iridescence (in the shining figure of the “*cauda pavonis*”); they reveal, to those capable of looking inside them, their own inherent totality, and are recognized thanks to a successful combination – not juxtapositional but organic – of qualities generally separated in real-life experience, in particular for the successful symbolization of *transcendent immanence*, for the constant manifestation of an ever-present *charged generativity*. From the inexhaustible Russian icons so wisely expounded by Father Florensky to Hughes’s latest poems, in which we perceive a successful composition of elements and the pressure to give back what we received – the pacification of angularities and an overflowing, yet also *withheld*, metaphorical vehemence – the seal of completion is perceptible in the fiery balance and quality of a matter so refined that it remains stable although reduced to a very subtle foil, in the iridescence of only one syllable, one color reflection, note, or gesture.

Alchemists were poets and mystics of matter. As clearly pointed out in studies most receptive to this arduous and often misunderstood doctrine, the chemico-material base of alchemic language is not only a symbolic language to transpose initiatory knowledge into analogic form, but also the sign of a concrete proximity to the intimacy of the elements and the earth. For this reason Jung, in his deep reflection on alchemical writings, and also contemporary thinkers like French

philosopher Françoise Bonardel or our Michela Pereira (2001), have noticed how this knowledge recovers a fundamental aporia both in the spirituality of the Christian West and in the leading philosophy of the Western world. That is, on one hand, the role of matter and the feminine, and on the other, according to a symbolic correspondence and amplification, that of nature and the imagination.

Alchemy is a model of operativity firmly established in the large body of the earth, and recovers – right from the far depths of natural religiosity, from its rites and symbolism – the necessity of a responsabilization toward the earth and the cosmos. In fact, its final outcome, which has salvific, regenerative qualities and a body of light produced by transmutation, a *Philius Philosophorum*, is not only a *salvator microcosmi*, but a *salvator macrocosmi*: the *well-being* it generates with nature, and not separately from it, is for man. We should actually state that by fulfilling, as well as being faithful to, the operativity of nature, even just by sensing its hidden sense, an alchemist will attain his own salvation.

Furthermore, all symbolism related to alchemy is rich in sexual implications and its initiatory and transmutative achievement is praised in the spirit of a regained hierogamic symbol. As Bachelard emblematically states, alchemy is a displacement, owing to the strenuous effort of the Opus, “from androgyny to hierogamy”; from an original mixture of feminine and masculine, still at the unrefined stage of *first matter*, to the glory of a spiritual body: a mystical body, feminine and masculine, of transmuted matter (so aptly depicted in the tables of the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, but also in the poetic, musical, and pictorial synopsis of Michael Maer’s *Atalanta Fugiens*).

The alchemist, as Bachelard goes on to notice, is an “educator of matter”: in fact, his struggle, in some ways, is that of fostering – in compliance with an education that does not abuse its authority or project its own *particular* intentions on the matter, but on the contrary protects and keeps an eye on the progression of an endogenous process of *formation* – the vocation of the substances. Matter is the connective and elementary tissue, the binding by means of which everything is generated and takes form. But it must be shaped by “fire”, a “philosophical fire”, as Dom Pernety explains in his *Mytho-Hermetic Dictionary*, which “putrefies and then allows new and different objects to spring

up (...) (Pernety, 1983-85), which cleanses the impurities of water and eliminates superfluous humidity from matter”; the fire that for Paracelsus is the active agent, the symbolic operator, the quintessence present in every object, the *astrum*, which we attempt to awaken and bring to completion.

In fact, the task of individuals who cooperate in realizing a full revelation of nature is for this extraordinary and underrated thinker, “to promote all terrestrial objects to the dignity of heavenly bodies”. Due to this highly imaginative way of thinking, man and the world are strictly integrated, and man’s goal is to ensure that nature reaches its fulfilment.

Alchemical work is always steeped in imaginative or symbolic quality. Its mode of manifestation, just as it is described with equal imagination and at times cryptically in treatises on such doctrine, is that of a heat that cooks objects, slowly, patiently, without forcing it (even though sometimes it is necessary to have a Fire, contrary to nature, which destroys, dissolves, and calcines matter, in order to purify it) (Evola, 2002), which makes substances mature and at last transmutes them (where the accent on mutation shows that it involves a profound transformation, an awakening of new qualities prior to their advent, of invisible and unknown virtues). This fire is an analogy that Jung interprets as Active Imagination (1989), and Corbin as Creative Imagination (1958). For Paracelsus it brims with desire, a desire to unlock the mysteries absorbed by the transcendent within objects, their archetypal nucleus.

Nature sparks good feelings, as well as subtle and invisible correspondences; in the same way man’s inner being reflects the structure of the cosmos. But all things partake of each other. The subtle stem of plants is reflected in the stars, whereas human organs symbolize the seasons, substances, and animals.

The stone, the *lapis*, considered in alchemy the beginning and end of a work, has a composite nature: Ripley (1649), in his accounts, says it is not hard, but rather soft as wax, flexible, and alterable; a stone that has freed itself from rigidity and dogmaticity, so to speak. In it the sidereal body and material body blend. Toward it, which on the imaginative plane metaphorizes every operative goal – namely vision, figure, and hermetic comprehension – converge a set of surprising analogies that enliven the cosmos. Alchemical work, as artistic work

– which is carried out using the former as a model – is meant to re-establish these subtle connections, and through decipherment of their alphabet, to free the potential contained in nature and spirit, making them both reciprocally productive. This is the “*text*” of alchemic operativity.

Then what is an alchemist? Is he perhaps an unknown forger of metals who works in some cellar, basement, or storage room? As Françoise Bonardel states, arguably, true alchemists especially today are poets, authentic and residual dwellers of a more symbolic inner world. The true actor of a Transmutative Imagination is he who, by virtue of being immersed in a long process of imaginative work, unveils objects and beings, and gives them back to the *invisible*, which is their symbolic homeland, as Rilke (1978) suggested; a poet reconnects matter and its *astrum*, recovers their profound solidarity, their *inner flesh*. Who else other than poets – broadly taken as all operators of a transmutative gaze, of an alchemic meditation of matter and of its reassignment to the cosmos, or of an order capable of integrating every class of elements and beings in a network of likes and correspondences – can be called alchemists?

Thus, we need to turn to poets in order to learn and drink from them; we need to turn to their discrete yet incandescent operativity, to the diuturnal and tenacious elaboration of the secreta matrix of objects, experienced through the “cruelty of blackness” – descent, spoliation, the dissolution of the self, of one’s own cognitive blindness, of one’s own naïve and obtuse judgment, of the putrefaction of the self.

To poets who eased, through patient and gentle brewing, through time, the birth of primitive figures – intangible, faint, and aerial – of light, and the first whitening of scorched and tortured matter. To them who achieved – in a deep pot dug up by suffering and exhaustion, by the fire of flesh and blood that is the alembic of the invisible, of its endurance to reveal itself – dazzling beauty, mystical, androgynous, and iridescent conjunction of authentic manifestations of being, flashes stolen out in the “Open”, where we can ultimately find each other, reunite, draw the spark of what may be rightfully described, because of its multiplicative effects, as a “symbolic praxis”.

Imaginal Works and Pots⁴

Many sustain, perhaps with good reason, that everything is inherently a horizon that opens up, a symbolic universe that we need to question and explore. And this is undoubtedly true. From the cathedral of Chartres to a Coca-Cola bottle – the latter has risen in every respect as an object of art after its glorification in *pop-art* – every object reveals a symbolic potential. There is no doubt that in the presence of a gaze nurtured by a radically hermeneutic inclination, the entire world presents itself as a “text”, at any time it unfolds or conceals itself. Every object questions us, if for no other reason than to *visit* our seeing and define how we orient ourselves.

It would not be completely wrong after all if someone maintained, merely on the basis of an alchemical reference interpreted literally, that today we need to begin an act of transmutation from what is more vile, more rejected, and more despised; and therefore, from so-called *trash*, which is unusually widespread in the real and imaginary universe of our times. A true transmutation should be able to sink to the lowest degree of matter, and there, accept a mute request of elaboration and assistance.

After all both Jung and Hillman have stressed on several occasions the need to take on the shadowy areas, the most disconcerting and obscene images, the most primitive and annoying fantasies, in order to begin a work of psychic analysis, in order to begin the soul’s *descent to the underworld*. And often the doorway that leads to cognition is actually placed in the shallows, below the earth; it is there that prime matter can trigger a transmutative course.

Personally I believe, however, that this has to do primarily with each person’s individual story: in fact, it is undeniable that to sense, even if just the necessity to transform one’s way of inhabiting the world, one must reach extreme thresholds; it is essential to scour the blackness of the experience or go deep into the rubble. Yet what is at stake in an imaginal *education* is the necessity of

⁴ The author informs us that the term is used here to recall the alchemical pot or the athanor [translator’s note].

nourishment, of a *conversion* of the gaze, of a cure for one's seeing, of a sort of *rehabilitation*.

The degree of corruption of our eye is such that a further immersion in mystified and vacuous images, however deconstructive, critical, and backed up by the best of intentions, runs the risk of not promoting a renewed gaze, but only a slightly more informed posture, yet also more easily distanced and analytical.

In our path through imaginal pedagogy, the focus is not on keeping a distance from objects or images, but rather on restoring our complicity with them, which has been lost because of excessive seeing. For this purpose we need dissuasion, torsion, some sort of *denial* from images that have been devaluated by cultural and advertising industry. Exploring a stream of sense, while being equipped with tools of selection and nomination, of analysis and evaluation, is a necessary task, which also promotes at times a more responsible mind; however, I doubt that it can deeply modify the way we partake of the world and recover it. We are already too immersed in the litter of signs, already too drowned, plunged, and overwhelmed, to continue drawing any valuable lessons.

For this very reason we need to be extremely careful of a possible deviation of the hermeneutical exercise committed to the dregs of the imaginary: to a semiotics of advertising, of TV fiction, or of design and fashion. Of course, for a comprehension of the world, all of these universes unveil important meanings, from a sociological, semiological or even anthropological point of view. But an excessive cultivation of their symbolic importance ends up aesthetizing them, for the sake of producing a sort of inverse alchemy; consequently, what is the result of a mystifying, serial, and mortified operativity, gives way to a sort of gold plating that turns them into an aesthetic attraction.

A nourishment of our gaze, in my opinion, requires a distancing from the entropy of the image that we, willingly or not, are constantly exposed to. We need *subtraction* from degraded images and a turning to authentic images that are the result of alchemical operativity of the transmutation of matter; even if the images are always more rare, due to the fact that they are barely acknowledged and excessively expensive (on the personal, cultural and institutional plane) in order to be carried out.

Such works need to be thought out within thematic paths, within the passing of horizons of sense, of symbolic pockets, and imaginal *Pots*. There are many areas to explore or revisit, in order to reconstruct the “unified fabric of things”, and along such confines, we have carried out and can still trace copious evidence of symbolic operativity. Among such areas I should like to mention experiential pockets related to metaphors of a *wound*, *fall*, or *elevation*, which characterize an imaginative and existential topography or geography of the soul, as with metaphors of *rebirth*, *cure*, and *initiation*, of a flavor predominantly ritual. Imaginal pots are also the great symbolic horizons of matter, especially the elements: *earth*, *water*, *air*, and *fire*, the hormones of imagination, as poetically described by Bachelard; figures of nature capable of sensing deeper levels of metaphorization: the *seasons*, that is, symbolic organisms as the *sky*, *sea*, *mountain*, *forest*, *tree*, *sun* and *moon*; mythemes that are rooted in religious traditions, from *Graal* to the *cross*, from the *ladder* to the *pyramid*; animal symbols as well as mystical symbols, as the *She-bear* and the *Serpent*, the *Rock* and the *Cupola*, the *Numbers* and the *Colors*, and then the archetypes of great mythological divinities: symbolism associated with *Hermes*, *Dionysus*, *Aphrodite*, and *Artemis*, but also with divinities and numinous figures from other hemispheres, from *Fatima* to *Shiva*; and at last, the great symbols of transformation as the *androgynous* and the *ouroboros*.

The entire archetypology of the imaginary so aptly explored and reconstructed by Gilbert Durand (1972) or similarly by André Virel (1965), leading up to the acclaimed *Atlas* by Aby Warburg (2002), can induce a suggestion in order to strengthen – in defined and feasible developments even if indefinitely open on the hermeneutical plane – an “imaginal praxis”. Our task is to go back to these profound, mystical, and poetic roots, which predate any literalization, in order to carry out an *ulterior* gaze.

Crossing symbolically the regions of the imaginary does not imply an aristocratic rejection of reality, but a retreat or a descent in its geology, in its archeology, from which can ensue a renewed, or rather, revitalized possibility of cognition and interpretation. As Bachelard has stated convincingly, our coming into contact again with elemental nature is a way to recapture a deep bond with

the sensitive. And the elemental, which has been restored to things, is per se invisible, and becomes visible only thanks to the symbolization that an obstinate and devout craftsman commits to it. Monet, therefore, according to the description that Bachelard himself provides in *The Right to Dream* (2008), dissolves Rouen's cathedral in the element of the aquatic haze and the terrestrial stillness of a sunset, thereby transmuting the former into the elements that follow.

For Durand "mythical figures" (1992) can only reveal themselves, even if through deformations and variations, by means of the "portrayal of works": for example, the emergence of the myth of Dionysus in the 19th century is, in his opinion, tied to Zola's narrative, whereas the rebirth of the myth of Hermes at the beginning of the 20th century to Baudelaire's poetic forms or Proust's novels. Archetypes, myths, and the great symbols that animate forms of life can be attained again only through an encounter with their receptive manifestations, or the works embodied in a culture.

It is by immersing ourselves in these large *Pots* of the imaginal, in their places of manifestation, in their concentrations of symbols, and by finding them through several texts of exemplary visionary texture – texts that may be po(i)etic, musical, pictorial, literary, cinematographic, or expressive-corporeal – that we can accomplish a compensation of the gaze, its reconversion and *therapy*. The hermeneutics of a myth, its specific code of signification, as Wunenburger expounds again in detail, following the lead of eminent studies by Otto, Kerényi, and Eliade, can be gained only by means of symbolic, narrative, and imaginative expression, which does not propel numinous manifestation towards clarity of a conceptual type, but re-binds it in an incessant and repeatable scurry of representation of the symbol (and, therefore, of the infinite possible metaphoric recharacterizations of such approach).

This is the mode of expression for a cognition of the world, which does not claim a right to dominate it, but rather feels as its guardian and mediator, a knowledge marked by *Cogitor* more than by *Cogito* (by being thought more than by thinking), or even by that *Cogito ergo es* of mystical flavor that sees knowledge as possible only on condition of reverberating through an external and transcendent gaze of which the image is its medium (Durand, 1975).

Imaginal pedagogy, which does not expect in any way to totalize educational and cultural practices pertaining to the imaginary and the visual, but only to carry out a form of *cure* for them, insists upon this path, places itself along this course, that is, one of hermeticism as a source of *philosophical gnosis*, of a hermeneutics faithful to the Earth and to the Soul of the world. Somebody might interpret such proposal as prescriptive or even dogmatic, but to me on the contrary it seems to be part of a vast and well-structured territory of cultural proposals, perhaps “outdated” in a Nietzschean sense, but capable of going beyond a categorization of such kind; a territory that is perhaps poorly cultivated in Italy but fertile and populated by exemplary, significant, and masterly presences, committed to an *orient* of seeing whose growing desertion, in my estimation anyway, can only give rise to discomfort and degeneration.

Terra

(Image)

“... Let us find one another, let us take
By the handful our pure naked presence
On the bed of morning and the bed of evening,
Wherever time digs its ruts,
Wherever precious water evaporates,
Let us move toward one another, as if at last
We each had become every animal and every thing,
Every deserted road, every stone,
Every stream, every metal. Look,
Here nothingness blooms; and its corollas,
Its colors at dawn and sunset, its gifts
Of mysterious beauty to the earthly spot
And its somber greenness too, and wind in its branches,

This is gold that resides within us: gold without matter,
Gold to not last, to not have,
Gold to have agreed, the only flame
On alembic's transfigured side".
(Yves Bonnefoy, The Earth)

Preconditions of an imaginal praxis:

Inhabiting the glade

In order to approach works saturated with imaginal force we need to establish ourselves in an ideal place; a delimited, regulated, and recognizable space intended as transitional, initiatory, and duplicitous place. We can select "*glade*" as its metaphorical term, seizing the implication, which Heidegger has attached to the metaphor, that it is a topological *medium* capable of favoring the attainment of the quintessential quality of objects. If objects "come into being" in the glade, then the glade, in which the imaginal activity is taking place, has the quality to grasp the transmutative power of symbolic operativity, in order to restore objects to their principles of connection, to their archetypal roots, and to grant participants a similar re-cognition. Therefore, it becomes a matter of delineating a "field of experience", of regulating it, of ritualizing its admittance and withdrawal, so that the threshold of inhabitability and the unmistakable as well as highly specific character of the experience occurring in it become apparent.

To imagine it as a glade means awakening its propensity to welcome a pleasant pause; it means emphasizing its character of intermittency and exceptionality. The glade is the pacification point of an itinerary, but we are dealing with a temporary pacification, protected by a thick forest around it. On

the other hand, the glade is also a symbol of a necessary and dynamic distancing from the impenetrable and hazy forest of the hypertrophic present-day imaginary, so we can re-see it and distinguish its traits, nature, and differences. Thinning-light and thickening-obscurity appear well inscribed in the ambivalence forest-glade, and the measured activity of binding and undoing (*solve-coagula*) that characterizes imaginal praxis conforms to their feverish alternation.

The glade is not obvious; it is not handed over automatically. It needs to be thought out, brought into being, and at last manifested. It calls for an entrance rite (for example, a little concentration, a moment of vision, or lending an ear to some music), just like a viaticum already charged with allusions that symbolize with practices on the point of occurring. At the same time one's parting from the glade must be sealed by a pause, a caesura, in which you can suspend the hermeneutical task and leave by surrendering it to one of its areas of sheltered and shielded sedimentation.

We "open up" works. They *come out on the Open* in the glade, and the executor of the imaginative activity is the guardian of this chosen space, the guide and interpreter of its "geosophy", of its symbolic earth, the officiant of its transmutative rite, and the mentor of its invisible connections.

Loyalty to the image

Imaginal practice is based on the idea that the universe we draw near to, the "imaginal world" represented by the selected symbolic object, is a "united cosmos" that we attempt to penetrate hermeneutically from within. Such operation suggests a sort of methodological *epochè* construed as a suspension, even if normative and tendentious (since it is impossible to exclude entirely any psychic past experiences from one's own field of perception under penalty of the disappearance of the same cognitive schematism that permits apprehension of the object) of one's own "ego", in order to carry out the maximum effort to view or listen to the work that we have approached.

A similar suspension affecting the flow of one's projective past experiences, of one's impressions, of tracings to one's biography and experiences inasmuch as they transpire from observation and comprehension, must be perceived as an outright act of "loyalty", that is, one of devotional and extended attention (for the entire time of the "meditative apprehension" that represents the cornerstone of imaginal perception) to the signifying intentions of the work considered in its intimate expressivity.

What Rilke means with the expression "making the visible always more invisible" (in part similar to Klee's "making visible") and that is fully realized in any authentic work of symbolic imagination, is accomplished in its entirety by the recipient only through an equally radical act of consent to the regenerative potential inscribed in the imaginal work, by renouncing the immediate incorporation of images within one's own interior world, as well as the outflow, or rather, the internal inflection of the signifying universe represented by the work. This is how he who strives for an imaginal approach to a work gains access to an unprecedented condition, can directly participate in the alchemical reaction between sensitive forms and the archetypal meanings that the work offers, and experience a transmutation that the gaze sustains when it come into contact with this *other*, although not foreign, "world"; he is, at this juncture, the operative pillar of this world. In so doing we bring about a sort of "unknowledge", as Bousquet indicates (1983), in which the subject fulfills his very own existence by realizing "the existence of what he is contemplating".

Making the visible always more visible; this elegiac act, this confining to secret intimacy the harsh imposition of things to their assumed objectivity stems, in any case, from a simple gesture of tenderness and cosmic compassion. Or rather we are certain of a dispossession, a derailment of our habit of dominating and im-posing in order to dissolve a presence in the elsewhere, but even more importantly, perhaps it is a radical calling into question of the statute and accepted belief of things. If the visible is the way we offer things – not because of personal virtue, for sure, but rather because we place them within our reach – then perhaps the entourage of the invisible is the first movement that returns them to their constitutive concealment; to their being without form, before and

after the form. Much more than a work of revision and reposition of form, the artistic deed would expose what it should be and – in the blinding gleam of its “burning” – most frequently is: a withdrawal of form that reveals the unseizability of reality.

Any act of the creative imagination, therefore, would mean rewedding an object with that “plane of consistency” that returns things to their pre-formal immanence. But beware, this does not mean a simple drowning, a rushing to indistinctness, as much as a proliferation of expressions that are still nameless. Do we not witness this, after all, in the dissipation of Cezanne’s *Sainte Victoire*, in the collapse of the faces of Rembrandt, Bonnard, and Music in their latest self-portraits, or in the deflagration of Rothko’s monochromes at the end of his voyage? Does the *durée* of a work, which slowly reaches its fate of depleting the accustomed focus of a gaze that captivates and subdues, as the one involving a human subject, not lie perhaps precisely in its ability to restore an object, like a bottle by Morandi, or a “cracked” painting by Burri, to its status of manifold to perennial metamorphosis? Is it not indeed by virtue of what we are able to attain – in the course of dazzling moments, via the earthquake of our circumstances, through which we ensure our stability as well as neutralize the unobjectifiable dynamism of becoming – that lies the changeable and astounding physiognomy in whose web we finally “abolish” ourselves? A work of art comes to our aid while arousing unfathomable fear; it comes to our aid because it prevents us from succumbing to our very own deception, to the illusion that objects are where we believe they are, ever-present and manifest in their available form. However, it produces the same shiver experienced by any person who knows he is uncertain and manifold or tossed in the flux of the invisible; thus, he is hindered from causing harm to that metamorphic tissue in which he always partakes even through the maze of his awkward attempts to master it.

A work of art, this salvific effort of the invisible, lessens the naïve belief that we are at the centre, and makes us again marginal and smaller, slow and uncertain, but also ecstatic in the constellation of the “events”.

In fact, the act of faithfulness to the image itself – and this mostly means perseverance in the endless elaboration of the symbolic interweaving of what

turns up in the infinite and reticulated dispersal of its resonances and ligatures, without bringing it back, at least in the first instance, to the pre-seen or the already-known (a reduction of the non-familiar to the familiar, which is typical of analytical thought) – allows access to “imaginal cognition” as simultaneous transmutation of subject and object, as a re-comprehension of one into the other, and thus, as a taking root in the “beyondness-otherness” that the image, provided it really is a hermetic image, always provides.

Faithfulness to the image still means motivation to follow it with *re-spect*, in the etymological sense of *ri-guardo*,⁵ to look and then look again tirelessly, and go back to our initial sightings so we can verify them, expand on them, deconstruct and reconstruct them, in a recursive effort that seeks the *face* of the object, *its* signifying intentionality, and its imponderable re-velation. If the innermost part of the signifier escapes indefinitely to muteness, approximation to its margins – as *weak* hermeneutics but still mindful of its most subtle resonances, of its sym-bolic manifestations, since they are hugely steered precisely from the concealment of an origin – remains the most adequate form of comprehension of the expression “faithfulness to the image”.

Extroversion

The attitude that characterizes observation and meditation of the visual “text” in imaginal pedagogy’s approach, since it is geared toward a “faithfulness to the image” as described earlier, can only be strictly “rooted” in the object. In keeping with a more general principle that believes it is absolutely necessary today to direct one’s efforts in pursuit of a renewed cultivation of the “soul of the world”, and that such effort may be deemed a true “psycho-iatry” of the symbolic economy of our times, the devotion to the *Opus* becomes its emblematic manifestation, perhaps the one with greater transformative potential.

⁵ The word “ri-guardo” blends two meanings here: the Italian “regard” or “respect”, written without a caesura (*ri-guardo*) and “to look again”. “Guardo” is the first person singular of the Italian verb “to look”, whereas “ri-” is a prefix that means “again” just like its English equivalent “re-” [translator’s note].

In this sense, the operativity of the gaze that we intend to activate in a journey of imaginal pedagogy offers a clear-cut interpretation of the imaginative and hermeneutic task; namely, one that is totally countertrend with the dominant autophilous or autobiographical introspection that prevails today in various aspects of formative and cultural pragmatics.

An outflow from oneself toward the object, an authentic *cosmos* from which we learn to be *thought* – according to the main idea that the “no-where-ness” is not at all inherent to a subjective dimension, and it is rather the *present otherness* that situates the observer and contains him – is a fundamental condition of imaginal operativity, although it is also tensional and normative.

What we consider priority – in the imaginal operativity that we intend to promote and that we consider salvific primarily for the world out there, even with precedence over the human subject (but since the latter is inevitably part of that totality, then for human subjects as well) – is our attention to objects, to objects in their “presence” and signifying radiance. Those objects, after being traced back to an invisible *sym-bolics* by the creator’s operativity, are capable of ensuring that the receptor too reaches a *whereness* ultimately incorporated into the “interior space of the world” (Rilke, 1995, II).

Imaginal pedagogy, therefore, offers itself as an authentic “estrofilia”, as an effort of deconcentration from oneself and from *concern* for oneself, from the arid autoreferential insistence of research paths that abandon the external world to the extinction of sense and to physical degradation. In fact, we can easily notice the progressive as well as disquieting proportional growth of devotion that man holds for everything that pertains to him subjectively, and the degradation experienced by the world of nature and objects (even artificial).

An imaginal approach claims what we can define as a “humiliation” of the human and its self-centeredness in all forms, and one of the most effective ways to obtain this result seems to be that of an outflow of the gaze from oneself toward the exterior, a particular exterior, a work of art, in which the depiction of the world derives from a dissolution of the creative self, of its legislating *ego*, and in favor of an everted and transmutative identity; that is, one that returns objects to the place of their “vision”. In this way, we recover an important

recommendation offered by Hillman, that of “soul-making in the world” (according to the inspiration of a renewed Shamanism or “psychotherapy of objects”) (cf. Mottana-Lucatelli, 1998).

Every work is not in perfect agreement with this implication: there are authors who have been unable to contain the outflow of their own personal projections, thus flooding the world with biographical excretions, at times even stimulating and significant, but not transmutative in the sense that we are trying here to “pinpoint”, or in the alchemical sense of the term. At any rate, the history of gazing and listening operativity comes to our aid with various examples of gentle and isolated research, of the acclaimed, painful, and constant acquisition of a “thing-like” or “widespread” gaze, capable of becoming the repository of a healing exteriority, whenever taken as the seat of deep belonging of whoever is looking; and where, therefore, the contraction of the self is a condition of reconjunction, re-turn, or reintroduction in a vital circulation from which only arrogance and the systematic disjunction of the dominating thought has been able to carry away man.

The term “extroversion” then needs to be understood as a return to objects, but not in a phenomenological sense, not according to a strictly cognitive aspiration, but rather according to a hermetic inspiration, or hermeneutic in a gnostic sense, as attainment of an “integral knowledge” whose mediators today can, nonetheless, only belong to individuals who – thanks to the constant practice of a “philosophical ponderation”, of a “spiritual materialism”, and of an imaginative operativity nourished by “poetic reason” – have been able to grasp, collect, and especially return things to their source, and turn their “luminous heart” into a potential remedy against a *nothingness* (at times disguised as *nowness*) that is rampant today.

Receptivity and anamorphosis

An inclination toward a work of art, therefore, is characterized by a progressive immersion in it. In this way, it is intended as an autonomous yet communicating world, a “mundus immaginalis” (Corbin, 2002), equipped with a specific state

of existence whose access seems to be regulated exactly by a divestment of the frontal modality of a “clear-cut” gaze belonging to whoever subsumes the evidence internally in the system of Cartesian axes of knowledge.

Entrance into the imaginal field destabilizes, precisely because its rules – the connection between signifiers and signifieds, or between elements, the spatio-temporal coordinates, and the frequent caesurae between matter and spirit – appear modified, at times dissolved (let’s think of music, but also many instances in painting and poetry), and truly cause anxiety and a sense of confusion. From this point of view, our temptation to turn to rationalized dissociation, to interpretations that keep clinging onto what is certain and acquired, to categories that are often rigid or simplistic, is very strong; and detachment, at times camouflaged by “critical thought”, risks thwarting the transmutative capacity of vision.

Instead, there is a need for ample willingness to exalt one’s rigour, especially if it is connected to a rationalized disposition; to temper and dilute censorious devices, at least as a first step; and to try to let the work itself become an environment, a clearing, or a melting pot, and enfold us in the embrace of its apparent mystery.

This is a condition we attain through some specific procedures of access in its presence (the ones we will call, shortly after, “dynamic principles”). It also depends on former perceptive practices that pertain to whoever draws near (as on a person’s resistance and fear to passivity and silence). Any work has a margin, more or less substantial, of secrecy and impenetrability; has its own code, and especially its own intentionality, which must be received and implies the greatest activation of a receptive disposition, in the sense of an inclination to receive the otherness that is taking place.

This impenetrability is often strictly tied to the mode or position that the mind adopts vis-à-vis the work. The *frontal* position, overly steered toward unraveling dilemmas, looking for quick interpretations, often reductive and schematic – a position not much open to wandering, and especially one that does not tolerate slow ripening, mediated by a lowering of expectations, by patience, acceptance of the unexplicable, and humility before what burns with fleeting radiance –

turns out to be inadequate. It is necessary to assume a pervasive and receptive perspective that accepts to be pervaded and nourished by the work, by its protected intimacy. It is necessary to indulge its decency, to follow the initiatory itinerary that expects to pause at length in its presence before being able to gain access to it, just like an initiate who is on the brink of a mystery he needs to be introduced to.

At times we happen to sense or find, almost unexpectedly, the necessary posture that allows a meaning to be grasped and for the work to offer of itself something that could not have been perceived in any other way. Of this reversal of comprehension is solid evidence Francesco Donfrancesco's (1999) essay dedicated to the absorbed and prolonged contemplation of Beato Angelico's fresco – the Gospel episode of *Noli me tangere* – housed at the Monastery of St. Mark in Florence. In this essay the author explains how access to the captivating and revealing perspective of the painting appears influenced by the movement of the observer from a straight position to a kneeling one (cf. Didi-Huberman, 2009). I would describe this pained intuition of entrance into the imaginal world of the work – according to a mathematical and technical-artistic figure, which shows, in fact, a non-frontal point of view that allows to see what would appear invisible from other positions – as *anamorphosis*.

We need a quiet and patient dissolution of the self in favor of the contemplated object, a total inclination to greet the subjective intentionality of the work, so we can find the right position from which it unveils, through anamorphosis, its own symbolic and transmutative potential. However, anamorphosis should not be understood as a simple clue to the spatial vault, which instantly unlocks its network of connections.

By extending the metaphor, anamorphosis becomes the *modus* of access, through slow progression and slow deposition of instrumental gaze, to the “vision” of the work in the “imaginal world”, as well as the “vision” of the interiority of the world, the *Anima mundi*, contained in every object, through a hermeneutic elaboration that emerges as endless (although not arbitrary).

A suspension of the evaluation

The last precondition, the last element of definition of the field of possibility of an imaginative access to the work, is tied to the suspension of every “judging” attitude.

This means a bracketing, a determination, particularly radical and firm, to abolish possible value judgments (even pertaining to inner life, as far as possible) about a work. Without dealing with a theoresis of judgment, we are referring here mostly to an elementary act of approval or disapproval, which is often tied to quick impulses of an emotional type or to the mechanical adoption of pre-established assessment patterns. No type of judgemental comment can increase the field of observation of the work, nor supply a deeper study of its comprehension and the range of its reception.

Every comment influences, irreparably alters, generates negative effects of distortion, and triggers a dynamics that instead of opening to the presence of the object loses it, by replacing it with renewed self-centeredness and securing the familiar. And if that counts, of course, for any negative judgment, then by the same measure the issue needs to be looked at because of the apparently innocuous outbursts of consent, satisfaction, and praise. Any remark on beauty, importance, or quality of the work irreparably compromises its observation field, modifying, at any rate, the visual perspective and then forcing to carry out a long journey backwards, almost always in vain, and whose goal is to retrieve an observation point from which the work exposes itself, still intact, in the fullness of its power of acceptance and comprehension.

When I speak of an object I like, or submit my judgment to a more detailed and referential consideration, I inevitably call upon any other view to confront itself with my adhesion, my passion and my partiality: I am implicitly asking whoever is listening to me to either approve or reject my judgment. Although somewhat unconsciously, this person will feel compelled to react to my request. He will not be able to disregard it and, following his act of reflection, my judgment will burden him with its crushing load, especially in connection with my relational weight within the observation field and in the specific relationship

with him. In one way or the other, explicitly or secretly, he will be influenced by it.

In fact any reflection, obviously, influences the observation field, in the sense that it articulates it, subverts it, dilates it, enriches it and at times impoverishes it, but the activity of research and immersion in the imaginal field must remain a task of humble submission to the intentionality of the work, and asks for an unconditional openness to the symbolic expressivity that any judgment promptly compromises and reduces. That is true in a very significant way for ideological opinions, the ones that tend to contain the following statements: It does not convince me... I do not agree... I do not identify myself with this typical philosophy, ecc.

These judgments are an escape from the possible and the sym-bolic, and they pervert, to the point of annihilation, the very possibility of disclosing invisible links where our inflexible – and inevitable, to a certain extent – cultural and ideological identity only perceived distance and detachment. Imaginal praxis does not tolerate bias and is seriously invalidated by it, because its attitude is very respectful of the alterity of the image, whenever the image has been *chosen* as an example of reliable symbolic relevance; and by simply respecting this rule, it is ready for an encounter with something that shocks it and undermines it.

The act of contemplation and imaginal comprehension requires, in some ways, a profound faith in the image, and a disposition that is devoutly – but also unusually – inquisitive; a disposition that is tirelessly directed at research.

Dynamic principles

Vision

When drawing nearer to the object – *Opus* – that is the focus of the exercise we are asked to refer to during our paths of “imaginal pedagogy”, it is necessary to go through a few phases that comprise the dynamic principles of imaginative operativity. These phases, to a certain extent, repeat and retrace the imaginative

operativity of the creator, and then recover in some ways, according to a reflexive modality in the etymological sense, its procedural structure.

Thus, imaginal practice is, in a certain way, a “repetition” of the gesture of the creator. Repetition is, in fact – as a technique of analysis and approximation, as a growing desubjectivized in-flexion toward the “object” – the crux of the hermeneutic operation we are trying to propose here; just as the operativity of the gaze of a creator who is capable of offering a work rich in symbolic potential can be nothing else but the result of a sorting out of repeated and tenacious observations.

From this perspective, the first stage – similarly to that of an artist who places himself in front of a raw element, in front of a real or literal element, in front of *first matter*, whether exterior or interior – is “vision”. A vision in which we make use of the preliminary work of assumption of aforementioned preconditions; vision as extroversion in the presence of the object, as devotional and unbound *ri-guardo* facing the offer of visibility, hearability, or perceptibility, which the *Opus* impels; an approach and *admission* to the imaginal world.

Vision, as we have seen, is itself a patient effort of spoliation of the gaze so that its receptivity is strengthened to the fullest degree; it is the recovery of an in-fant gaze (cf. Mottana 2002), the dawn of seeing; it is similar perhaps to what the creator needs to achieve, at the cost of persistent repetition and ponderation, so that from organized representation according to visual stereotypes – the cultural patterns of seeing – one may turn to a gaze capable of restoring the invisible (flesh, matrix, the “inner part”), which is the basis of any visible evidence.

Vision is a sort of return to the object, in this case, by identifying the object in the representation, from which may progressively reemerge – from the noise that the sediment of all interpretations and preconceptions inevitably promotes – the disclosure of a sight that is able to astonish. It is presumably what we feel, according to Corbin, upon seeing again the same objects in the light of the angel, in the land of *Hurkalia*, in the eighth heaven or *immaginalis* (Corbin, 1986). The difficult battle is that of shunning the heavy curtain that bars access to the vision

of subtle bodies, of creatures of light that are always the same objects returned to their own profound (archetypal) interconnection.

Vision sees, therefore, thanks to the fact that the seer strips himself, fades away as a subject that judges, opens up to a gaze that is inclined to the ambivalence of images, to their paradoxal quality as amphibious bodies (that is, androgynous, mysterious, looking onto the “Open” or the “no-where” that situates). Vision is abandonment of the gaze within the work: it means becoming only gaze, becoming an object. In this sense, vision is itself a long training of approximation, an exercise of commitment to the world, prior to a full logical recognition.

And it must be sufficiently slow, concentrated, and reiterated. Because at this stage one clashes with the difficulty of bypassing habits, obstacles to seeing, and blind spots. It is like a slow *nigredo* in which what needs to be burnt, dissolved, or crushed is the effort to keep one’s balance, to safeguard the polarity of the ego, its fear of domination, and its haste. Vice versa it is necessary to go to the bottom, to let go of oneself.

The atmosphere must be protected; everything must converge so as to induce a concentration toward the object: place, temperature, brightness, and noise. Every external element may favor or obstruct this utterly precious moment of con-descendence in the imaginal world and must be strictly guarded by whoever organizes the exercise.

Meditation

A phase of meditation follows vision. The image must be able to slowly trickle within, to gather in an enclosed space, in a pot of internal meditation. Hence the image acquires initially an organic quality; it becomes flesh of the subject that participates. It is inhaled and ingested in the cavity of our memory, in contact with the imagination.

This is a cooking exercise of the image. Meditation is, first of all, an operation of kneading, grinding, fluidification, and repeated, persistent, interchangeable concretion. It silently takes place within the subject. It requires concentration,

relaxation; it demands not so much a cognitive structuring as a complete organismic integration. The image comes into contact with the fibres of the subject, with its living processes; it circulates, spreads around its muscular fibres, becomes blood, articulates and innervates. It moves down, penetrates in depth, and we must foster this descent, by descending with it, letting ourselves be inundated, and being in total harmony with it. Meditation is *con-discendence* in the fullest sense; it is integral participation.

For this reason Bonnard would withdraw so that the images attained on the outside would turn into angels, into spiritual bodies, in contact with his internal world, while being tinged by it (cf. Mottana 2002). Monet would plunge, each day deeper, for twenty years, in a mixture always more indistinguishable, always more instilled with elemental life, and in its imaginative substance weaved with flowers, leaves, water, and sky. In a certain sense this descent is like a “dye”, a dye that prepares to see in a fuller, more intense and active way.

The image penetrates and permeates. In order to promote such penetration of an animal type it is necessary to take on a contemplative attitude, but in the subtle sense in which Bachelard, in his volume on aquatic imagination, would state that there is a contemplative will inherent in nature itself; in the sense that a lake becomes the eye of nature or that one may speak of “cosmic narcissism” (Bachelard, 1942). The entire body becomes an organ of vision by accepting to be a container of the seen and the place of fertilization of the image with memory, emotions, and *dreamness*. Meditation at this stage is still not cognition in the fullest sense. It is a principle of cognition; it is a precognition, a slow elaboration of the image in the obscure cavity of the subject.

Meditation later begins to secrete a con-figuration or multiple configurations: a sketch of nomination, designations, descriptions, and first interpretative nuclei. A principle of distinction makes its way; snippets of ideas, of categories; fragments of meaning; traces of forms. Everything needs to be objectified in writing; on a white sheet of paper, where we can collect the first elements of reorganization of the introjected material, to be put afterwards into further circulation. The sheet becomes a witness of the intense inner activity of cooking and fixation of the image, and in turn, plays a part in nourishing it.

An adequate, but not excessive, period is necessary for meditation. It must be interposed with “re-visions” so that organic matter that is contemplated does not move away excessively from the *Opus*; so that it sinks back into it incessantly, depicting new material meant to be elaborated, transformed, according to the dual rhythm of liquefaction and concretization already mentioned several times.

Circulation

The “descended”, deepened vision, contemplated in the alembic of individual memory, begins at some point to manifest timid emergences of sense and primitive forms, in which prime matter has been extolled, softened, and a renewed vision, although still parceled, begins to express itself. Writing takes note of these first visions. This is the time for sharing. If the exercise takes place, as it should, in a small group, you then reach a phase of “circulation”, in which you let the first fragments of interpretation fluctuate. But above all, and through a circular (*rotation*) movement, in fact, you exchange and cultivate analogies, metaphors, and associations.

The subject of vision, which had descended into the obscurity of a corporeal, animal, emotional respiration, now trembles with more immaterial effects; ideas, intuitions and figures appear. The vision tones down and progressively becomes charged, in its spiral form movement, with a large quantity of possibility; it expresses and manifests its potential of sense through its greatest opening. Far from any censorship or any excess of orientation, everyone offers the elements of his reflexion in a still primitive, rudimentary, parceled state, without stripping them too much of their approximative character.

Hence vision becomes polycentric; it is tinged by various lines of saturation of its symbolic potential. Such operation is also slow and gradual; it requires patient listening and a sort of group *ruminatio*n, a new painful distillation that will supply with meanings, always more defined, the first volatile signs of signifying effusivity that the object has aroused. To a certain extent we are in the “albedo operativity” of alchemical elaboration of the gaze that the object requires in order to be thoroughly examined and to prompt a transmutative effect.

“Circulation” can be interspersed by new re-visions, by a return to the first image, according to a dynamics that never loses sight of the necessary variation of fluidification and fixation.

Restitution

Eventually the flow of interpretations and metaphorizations calms down, while a profoundly renewed and detailed vision of the object emerges. It is a complex, iridescent, and generative vision. The object appears as wrapped in a network of meanings and new images that circulation has generated, and calls for a “restitution”.

Restitution is, in reality, a new descent toward concreteness, which vision, by now quintessentialized, promotes. Once prime matter (ingenuous and rigid vision) has completely dissolved, and the symbolic power expressed by the image has matured and been acquired, while the transmutative capacity of the creative imagination has been roused – in the footsteps of a creative imagination drawn from the object – restitution is mostly a multiplicative act, a proliferation of meanings, and a return to a deliteralized reality.

The symbolic grid of the work, its archetypal rootedness, and the endless conjunction of its horizons, release a transformative gazing capacity. Objects, through the prism of the internalized work, turn out to be animated and deep; they radiate meaning. The “glorious body” of comprehension springs up. As in the *Opus*, the gaze that emanates has a power of blessing, of reconnection. After experiencing a long stay in the depths of seeing, it can free the energy of a new conception and push toward the invisible. So Morandi’s bottles dematerialize and become fluid matter, spiritual bodies. So Bousquet’s quintessentialized poetry becomes a praise of the world, an androgynous conjunction of earth and sky. So Tarkovsky’s lowly slime, in Andrei Rublev, becomes *astrum*, turns into a bell glass, an organ of conjunction of masculine and feminine, of cavity and convexity, of superior and inferior, of earth and wind.

This phase – an opening of meanings and symbolic horizons, a transubstantiation of matter, a hermeneutic translation – however complex, can

vary from a minimum of reobjectivization of meanings to a real transmutation of the gaze and of the position toward a re-visioned world by the cryptic perspective of the work: the degree of participation to the po(i)etic operativity unfolded by imaginative effort can stop at a first level of acquisition of meaning and symbolic interpretation, up to a maximum level of lighting of the vision in which objects are drawn – the ones reverberated by the artificer – in the imaginal world, fulfilling them completely and satisfying their transmutative allusion.

In the latter case, the imaginative exercise translates into an *imaginal incandescence* and calls for an effort of diffusion and imaginative restitution, at times for a new symbolic operativity (creative or reflective).

Here the imaginal cycle comes to an end temporarily, according to guiding paths that, constitutively, are never definitive. Every crossing is a clue within endless territories, a breach in the invisible as well as a return to it. Coming close to the symbolism of air or of *ouroboros* for works, letting oneself be permeated by a flow of images that stud the meanings of the archetype of the Shadow or of the *Phoenix*, will always be one of countless possible paths – a short stretch in an effort of recovery of the gaze, but also evidence of the necessity of becoming responsible for a reconnection, a sign of loyalty and love for the elemental substratum of any vision or any life; the Earth and *Anima Mundi* we belong to.

Part II
Contemporary Imaginal

Imaginal re-vision

In contemporary times, an attempt to explore the world of images by following the inspiration of an imaginal vision is not without controversy. On the one hand, because the statute of the image – and especially of the artistic image that the imaginal looks at with particular attention – appears profoundly lacerated and compromised; on the other hand, because the sources or bright ideas that have fueled and fed the emergence of an “imaginal pedagogy” as transformative experience mediated by immersion in the symbolic kingdoms of art, appear exiled and elusive, tied as they are to complex and inactual figures, from Henry Corbin to Gilbert Durand, from Carl Gustav Jung to James Hillman, from Gaston Bachelard to Jean Jacques Wunenburger. An *out of joint* thought, an assemblage of figures that irritates and generates suspicion, mainly in the critical and

dialectical *cotè* of contemporary culture – of a philosophical, sociological and anthropological kind – which can only see in it a nostalgic and regenerative tendency. Besides, distrust by a large sector of the radical intelligentsia of our era, especially toward thinkers like Jung or Durand who are regarded too superficially as “reactionaries” or epistemologically outdated, makes it really awkward and even embarrassing to promote such an approach within the “art establishment” or even an academic context.

There is beyond question a dimension that is explicitly outdated and counter-culture in the statements and cultural projects of several authors we refer to while outlining the foundations of this approach. But the extent of our horizons, the anthropological thrust, the complexity and articulation of a thought that refuses to cut any ties between the visible and invisible dimensions of human experience – which keeps them in contrast, as it attempts to re-establish links between inner being and outer appearance, as well as between a mythic past and a poetic present – perhaps deserves a more mindful consideration and not only hasty exorcism. Too often, in fact, the eradication of this far from laughable set of positions seems to be more the result of prevention rather than careful reading. Too often we lack treatments that really display a correct assessment of the overall thought of two clearly unwelcome giants like Jung himself or Gilbert Durand.

Their long-standing and very extensive work has given rise to the remarkable experience of the Eranos lectures (for that matter) and, as a result, to a research community among the most stimulating and dynamic of the past century. I believe they cannot be dismissed because of a few statements that always display the same bias (the epistemological weakness of the notion of archetype; the suspicion of a theological and metaphysical deviation; an overly Romantic or “traditional” culture of the symbol; the restoration, however very problematic and mindful of occurred deconstructions, of an unrecoverable “subject” following structuralist and post-structuralist decapitation).

It seems to me that the “unforgivable” works of these authors deserve more attention, and so does their tension and receptivity. A necessity, we should perhaps stress, for the reintegration of some dimensions of a symbolic, poetic culture; of a philosophy less intellectualistic and more substantial with the

material and feminine appearance of creative imagination, and of its unique and inquiring forms. These are aspects that characterize many figures of modern and contemporary culture, apparently more “reliable”, or given their “difference”, more sought after by radical sectors of contemporary philosophy (from Rilke to Artaud, from Bousquet to Bataille, from Char to Bellmer, and many others in spite of their differences).

Despite all the reluctance and exclusions sustained, we are dealing with a line of investigation that resists – as it resists, for example, within the context of contemporary artistic production – and has indeed brought into question, even quite radically, the symbolic destination of its creative attitude; and even its very own signifying autonomy: a poetizing expressivity that, however often lacerated, contaminated, and scalded, manifests an absolute meaning of urgency, or if necessary, one that is more heavily freighted with a profound, necessary apprehension, or with a “*promesse de Bonheur*” that Stendhal points out as his individual gift. Outdated expressivity, because it is not amenable to the expectations of an audience and an apparatus often conformist and ideologized – when it is not sold off for reasons of a purely commercial order – and because it is the result of a surfacing that we do not arrange in any progressive logic. Expressivity wholly contemporary, since it is steered toward a poetics of “awakening” (Benjamin), of wooded “clarities” (Zambrano), of the “clearing” (Heidegger) and of the “dawn” (Nietzsche), which does not have a spatial-temporal contextualization easily definable and circumscribable, but is entrusted to a syntonization, to a creative receptivity that is beyond the temporal; always surprising, always disorienting, always now and here.

While one side of the creative custom of contemporary society seems to have accepted the alienation of its activity to a market that perhaps has dissolved ever boundary and flattened every symbolic projection on the only profile of simulacrum and idolatry of the visible, another side – perhaps lagging behind, and yet perhaps authentically intent on embodying the suffering and desire of a world that endures extreme violence against its vital integrity – persists in shaping its subtle matter, our subtle matter; that is, imaginal matter.

Imaginal approach is not tied to a conception of art confined to the past; it is

not by far comparable to a certain aristocratic behavior that certain academic criticism and historiography has shown for contemporary art; nor does it share the death sentences that distinguished members of the same manner of art of the 19th century have manifested at different times (perhaps even to sanction in their own work the last stage of a process that is far from being linear or having reached its destination). Art and also criticism, thought, imagination, and images themselves, appear much less confined to a progredient perspective – which is perhaps even destined to come to an end, ultimately, for better or for worse – rather than to a complex dynamics, marked by rifts and returns, by vortexes and vacuums, most often by appeals than constant evolution. In that sense, the content of an imaginal ponderation about man's experience in the world does not risk to disappear; at the most, it changes form, in unpredictable ways, in which perhaps one can still find persistency, read in silhouette the emergence of symbolic redundant recursive meanings, as well as witness new conflicts and unexpted excess.

To insist on the power of re-vision that imaginative operativity – in the forms that from time to time it takes even during periods of deep exhaustion (apparent or “skilful”) of its hope for symbolic communication – continues to fuel, seems to me not only important, but necessary.

In the brief passages that follow, I will attempt to discuss the imaginal proposal in some of its inner dimensions, like the specific form of reflexivity that it is capable of expressing, or certain problematic and at times aporetic junctures (relationship between image and language, statute of the image, procedural consideration of imaginal works, etc.), and compare, at the same time, its philosophy with certain positions of contemporary thought about art and with current artistic poesis itself. I will deal with specifications, priorities, comparisons, but also clarifications and disambiguations, and my goal will also be an attempt to break away from hasty and judgmental precomprehensions that a way of thinking – one that deems itself dialectic but often appears chiefly dogmatic in marginalizing and condemning whoever fails to endorse its rigid jurisdiction – continues to spread.

Lastly, I believe it is important to emphasize the valuable task that this

approach is attempting to undertake today. The peculiar connection that we propose between imaginal thought and a specific “pedagogy” that leans toward a re-vision of collective sensibility is in every respect, in fact, a political act. I agree, for instance, with Michel Onfary’s idea that philosophy and art greatly overestimate their transformative potential and social impact and, in all honesty, I am encouraged in this discussion even by Alain Badou’s opinion when he summons philosophy to get rid of any sense of guilt (for example, that of having contributed, along with Heidegger, to the birth of Nazism) that other fields of knowledge do not contemplate at all. The truth is that philosophy and art are both distinct areas dealing with the practice of knowledge and the production of truth, and meant for a highly aristocratic and specialistic minority. In actual fact, they have hardly any influence on anything.

This is a thorny matter for those who believe, as I do, that a part of philosophical knowledge, but mainly of artistic symbolism – one I define, in fact, as imaginal – must reach out to the largest possible number of people, and in significant and fruitful ways; that it is necessary to compensate all those who were obliged by a faulty formative system to sustain forced abstinence, or the impossibility of maintaining with it an intense, protracted and, perhaps, even transformative contact. One thing at stake for an “imaginal pedagogy” is that of facilitating such contact, but not in a technicistical or intellectualistic sense. A contact with works of art – when they are, indeed, such a thing – that, in my estimation, possess in themselves an expressive and communicative potential we can always attain, even if on different levels. Our proposal of favoring an “imaginal listening” of art, with suitable approaches and locations – but beyond, as a start at least, the mortifying intervention of specialized bodies of knowledge that take an interest in it – is for an “imaginal pedagogy” a cardinal point, and perhaps an inalienable utopia.

I believe, perhaps Romantically, that art, in its symbolic operativity, can promote a different relationship with reality, a different sensibility, a deeper and broader gaze. But in order for this to happen, it is necessary to introduce reception processes that allow whoever contacts the image to experience it in a challenging, concentrated way, and not inhibited or tightened by branches of

knowledge that around art have built towering historical-conceptual barriers (in short, aesthetic knowledge). I am not saying that this knowledge must be dismissed, but its jurisdiction has to be reduced so that art becomes a source chiefly available in its naked capacity to produce, first and foremost, experience; and only later, as the basis for a hermeneutical or theoretical exercise. In brief, an approach that heavily conflicts with the tendency to yield to Hegel's verdict about the death of art and the irreversible shift to aesthetics or, as some would add today, to metaesthetics.

Imaginal pedagogy, following Bachelardian incitement, wants to help images be "de-philosophized" and "de-psychoanalyzed"; it wants to help images not be confined to places where only the chosen few can enter, or where a critical authority must forcefully mediate experience. Not because art is easy, but because art is apt to quickly transform. And it is necessary to preserve this impetus it exhibits through the multiplication of deep and thoughtful "listening" paths in ideal situations, in compliance with the imperative of a fundamental despecialization. Art speaks, communicates, expresses, transforms whoever approaches it and, therefore, it is necessary to favor the possibility it may do so as soon as possible, since it is precisely from art that may emerge a diverse comprehension and a different attitude toward reality.

Signifying inexhaustibility

As mentioned, many claim that the notion of imaginal is obscure and problematic; that the sole attempt to describe its profile and borders proves to be ambiguous and, in any case, belongs to the sphere of the esoteric and spiritualistic. But then politically, provided it is still possible today to describe in easy terms a politics of options in scientific research, the burden of having to assign to the imaginary a reactionary – or at the very least conservative – characterization would appear inevitable. It seems to me that, in all these instances, we are dealing with misunderstandings and disputes often marred by bias and insufficiently thought-out precomprehensions.

The imaginal is a significant portion of what we designate using the term

imaginary; a part of the imaginary (intended as the region of all forms to which we can attribute an imaginative dimension) made up of figures, visions, or mental, artistic, oniric images whose peculiar character is given by its placement between rationally guided intentionality and direct sensible perception; an intermediate area that we recognize because the forms that belong to it would appear to be the result of an unintentional apperception on behalf of the subject that chiefly attains them, and coalesces them, without being able to govern or recognize their origin or destination. We are dealing with “visions” in an experiential and psychological sense, with objects, figures, and landscapes provided with sensible mythical-symbolical resonance that, upon appearing concretely, upon impacting the “subjectival”, become the physical support of their arrival into the world. In other words, we are dealing with images in which sensible content emerges, intrinsically connected with a probable – although unknown, by who is achieving it – constellation of analogical correspondences that reveal a more original rootedness (not necessarily the most original or the Original). In that sense, to identify these forms or “subtle bodies” as “symbolic”, and their meanings with a distinctly complex term such as “archetypal”, means, rather than a cristalization in concepts of a metaphysical order, to place its statute of comprehensibility in an area exposed to ample semantic fluctuation. The latter, however, is ontologically different from one in which we place forms we can also unambiguously interpret as describable by a self-styled scientific concept or by a definition of a pragmatic-operational type.

These are forms that we place at the limit, on the border, or even better, on the threshold between visibility and invisibility; that is, between a given phenomenal appearance which, due to the peculiar manner of its manifestation (for example, a bottle in which we recognize perceptively a materic process of dissolution: Morandi’s bottles), seems to place itself in a different reality from that of its operability and intramundane measurability; phenomena that enjoy an obvious sensible component, the perceptible form (visually, tactilely, audibly, but even affectively), not disjoined by a dimension, but still in some ways related to its apparitional aspect, which indicates a possibility of interpretation of its very own existence as the manifestation of an order of signification, forms, places,

emotions of a mythical (transcendent) and archetypal (that is, concerning personifications or simply figurations anthropologically redundant and temporarily persistent) nature; an interpretation that in no way, however, we believe can ever exhaust its sym-bolic potentialities, that is to say, the possibility of being still, and at any moment, rethought and reinterpreted according to n+1 figurations.

Of this specific and displayable category of intermediate objects – no facts, no ideas, no concretions solely material, no figures with a markedly abstract or pneumatic composition – the most imposing and substantial variety seems to be the one attributable to the artistic horizon in a fully symbolic sense; there, the symbol must be deemed a vehicle capable of truly perceiving a nebula of potentially inexhaustible signification, as well as belong to a fluctuating universe of references in which one can identify mythical, archetypal, and symbolic redundancies. I believe we should assign to this category of forms the designation of “imaginal”.

If it is true that we owe this specific designation to Henry Corbin’s philosophy and to his exploration of forms of the creative imagination in visionary experiences related to Iranian neoplatonic mysticism, something fundamentally similar also appears again and again in ambits that are different and foreign to Persian mysticism: in Christian theology, in its angelology, in medieval theosophy and, in a different way, in Romantic and Surrealist philosophies, in psychoanalysis, especially Jungian, and also in iconological Warburghian research (even if according to an approach materially more determined) as in Durandian anthropology. Besides, in my opinion, something analogous, although many of these authors would not agree for usual reasons tied to political and epistemological disassociation, can be traced in the aesthetics of those who show a somewhat different temperament, like Nietzsche, Artaud, Benjamin, or even in the contemporary philosophies of Paul Ricoeur, Georges Didi-Huberman or Jean-Luc Nancy.

The persistence of a culture tied to the symbolic power of the image (Grassi 1989, 1990), to the transformative value of the artistic experience, and particularly, to the fruition of artistic operativity; to the unquestionable value of

art as a vehicle of authentic transformation of ideas and conduct, is – in spite of widespread differences and disaffection – still a plain fact.

We are not dealing, as detractors maintain, simply with Romantic deviation. We are focusing on something that brings together cultural climates that give credit to poetic action for its social function, and not limited to *divertissement*, nor to the role of one expressive device, among many others. Philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy or Georges Didi-Huberman, or sociologists such as Jean Baudrillard, and art critics of different backgrounds, still insist on a distinction in art between forms that are capable of revelation – forms charged with cognitive potential – and transient forms that are devoid of such powers. We are well familiar with the debates that a certain *coté* of contemporary art and its theoreticians has fueled against the symbolic power of images, since the early 1900s, opposing even soundly and understandably an academic, aristocratic, and at times, of course, even spiritualistic and idealistic idea of creation. However, such views, even if successful in complexifying the range of the theoretical debate on art, have not been able to wipe out the differences of meaning or value between the very same works. I regard as absolutely accurate the perception, even now hard to dispute, which differentiates between unexpected, signifying, transformative works and works that wear out as soon as they appear, without leaving traces, or only leaving scanty, weak or merely well-performing traces.

Necessary opus

No one, of course, prevents us from calling art any communicative or practical process, removing the difference that has separated for a long time art from arts and trades. No feeling of nostalgia for a unilateral concept of “art” or for its reconstructive idealization. And yet, even those who dispute more adamantly the differences, and preach the ephemeral value of artistic poiesis, are not able to escape the dictates of a structure (that religiously collects, for instance, the non-flammable traces – news reports, photographed images, etc. – of *performances* destined to auto-da-fé) and, eventually, end up resignifying art, redefining it as a behavior that intrinsically – and in keeping with the “conceptual” side of

contemporary criticism – brings into question languages and forms, whether as discourse or even reflection on art itself. Yet, according to many, this seems to be the fate of art today; its deprivation, basically, in a critical-reflexive and self-referential sense.

In fact, as far as I am concerned, a work, given its singularity, remains something that needs to speak or signify, to unleash signs that pose questions, and witness the persistence of irrepressible symbolic subsoil; and to do this on the basis of debatable and identifiable differences. Works continue to perturb and re-awaken – according to a term dear to Walter Benjamin – the gaze and sensibility through which we perceive and comprehend reality (whether it is internal, external, physical or metaphysical); some more, some less.

This matter, aside a few strands of radicalism that in my mind are aimed at pure propaganda, continues to resonate where reflection on artistic operativity is definitely serious and zealous. We can make a distinction between dialectical image and symbolic image, and it is legitimate to do so, since the geneology of both definitions is certainly divergent, except when we notice afterwards – so does Didi-Huberman point this out – that both share the same necessity of bringing into play a mythical reference (and therefore archetypal, I would add, no matter what the French philosopher makes of it), in contrast or at any rate in conflict with forms and figures of contemporaneity; against a backdrop that – one needs to emphasize – cannot be reduced to any form of progressive or evolutionary temporality. Thus, against a backdrop that does not make credible any theory (and how many theories will still need to waste away until we finally recognize that artistic activity is indeed contingent, but not historical in a historicist sense?) on the death of art or the death of the symbol, but rather, by focusing on the history of artistic activity that goes “against the tide”, underlines its recourses, conflicts, and lacerations.

The same applies to our present time – and more than ever, actually, we would be inclined to say – in which coexist expressive explorations directed at recapturing a symbolization that is often laden with spiritual themes as well (just think of video art production by Bill Viola or Matthew Barney, both constantly engaged in a blend of mythical traces and deeply contemporary images) and the

sheer provocations of an art that celebrates its own self-destruction in the very act of its manifestation, or praises the very cancellation of meaning [apart from proving, as Didi-Huberman points out again correctly in his work on minimalist artists like Morris or Judd (Didi-Huberman, 1992), that the meaning evacuated through the window re-enters through the door of an inescapable subterranean reference: Egyptian graves or the nymph's drapery in photographs by Alan Fleischer or Germaine Krull (Didi-Huberman, 2004), a profundity that inevitably unsettles any attempt of becoming flat on the surface of an art that only expects to display "the object which is the object"].

So again Didi-Huberman himself questions the uncertain disappearance of the so-called "aura" from present day art. The French philosopher and art historian insists on the persistence of "aura" through a careful and detailed reading of Benjamin, in which he disputes the concept of progressivity of art. On the other hand, Benjamin himself had spoken about "decline" and not disappearance of "aura". The auraticity of a work is not tied to its hieraticity, fixed in a previous time, but to its ability to keep under tension what is here with what is elsewhere, the proximate with the distant, and force us to "open our eyes" to this distance. A work reveals its aura by weaving time together, that is, time of its appearance with time of memory (unintentional), but also proving its ability to "look back at us", to "set its eyes" on us. In other words, to manifest itself as an unstable "presence", as "imminence of a revelation" – as Nancy states – something on the verge of offering itself and yet also constantly caught up in a movement of subtraction, or rather, dialectically entangled in an "anadyomene" movement – as Didi-Huberman states – between being present and disappearing, between assertion and subtraction.

Auratic (...) will be an object whose appearance discloses, beyond one's own visibility, what we are required to call *its images*, its images in constellations or clouds, which impose themselves upon us in equal measure to connected figures, which originate, draw nearer and draw away in order to poeticize, to treat, to *reveal* its aspect as well as signification, so it can create a work of the subconscious. And such memory will be to linear time as auratic visibility is to 'objective visibility': that is to say, all times will be weaved together, fixed and

disentangled, contradicted and over dimensioned (Didi-Huberman, 1992, 105).

As a result, Toni Smith's black cube proves to be auratic just as we can dub auratic any symbolic object capable of producing that *retentissement* Gaston Bachelard talks about, in his own way, in order to point out that in the visible, in the sensible, a resounding emptiness or varying background takes root, but is attributable to forms, figures, and emergencies also of an archetypal nature [here the gravelike cavity behind a work, which in itself, at least initially, only aimed at being, as Frank Stella argued, a pure object: "*what you see is what you see*" (p. 32, op. cit.)]. Some thinkers associated with the philosophy of contemporary art seem, in fact, to distance themselves (at least in part) from certain radical undertones along the lines of Joseph Kosuth (1987) or even Danto (2008) in terms of the irreversibility of a path of removal of symbolic dimension from a work of art as sanctioned by the works of Duchamp or Warhol (and, with respect to Kosuth, especially by his very own...).

The contamination of forms, the ramification of languages, and the very own coexistence of extremely variegated art interpretations, does not necessarily mean the elimination of the *imaginal* potential of the creative act. It only means that we are attributing to art a manifold identity in which – next to forms that in a more pronounced or even accepting way carry out an alchemical transmutation of reality in order to bring about a recomprehension rich in correspondences and analogies of a mythical-symbolical nature – coexist forms that, perhaps to no avail (as Didi-Huberman seems to demonstrate), attempt to evade such destiny. The symbolic, the one that is indeed rich and anthropologically, but also spiritually, connotated, seems to resurface where it is least expected.

Inactual imaginal

From this perspective, the waters get muddy for the imaginal too in a certain way, in the sense that discernibility of the symbolic tension of a work appears a lot more obscure and indecipherable in contemporary art and, therefore, its vision also needs to free itself – since at times its resistance tends to be overly firm (cf.

J. Clair, 1984, 2005) – from a vision that is still limiting in terms of the revelatory potential of a work. Contemporaneity has opened new frontiers to artistic language and, above all, has turned to disquieting objects with greater and, at times, necessary disinhibition. Yet this does not mean that in hard-labored and courageous creations, which stage the dramatic and even extreme nature of our times – in creations that seem to lean more vigorously toward the pathological or the “horrid” (cf. again the disproportionate demonization by Jean Clair, 2005) or the sacrilegious (leaning therefore toward what has been regarded for far too long as anti-aesthetic) – works of extraordinary “auratic” merit and remarkable transformative potential cannot be discovered.

The imaginal is not static, is not aestheticizing, and is not captive of an ideal concept of beauty and form. That would surely be an inclination culturally backward-looking and heuristically weak. The imaginal is dynamic; its visionary receptivity has a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree range with respect to artistic achievement, free from prejudice but without question in accordance with an *orientation*. In fact, it demands from its objects the capacity to sym-bolize, to experience resonance, to foster a network of correspondences; in artistic creation it asks for energy, even mobile, even or rather transgressive, preferably, and essential for becoming a vehicle of revelation and cognition/re-cognition (starting from its exploration of the visible and invisible) of the interiority of the world, toward which we have been directed for our salvation by guides like Rainer Maria Rilke, Marcel Proust, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Gustav Jung himself. And here the term sym-bolization, taken from Henry Corbin, points out that the task of imaginal practice and of imaginal operativity as well is, indeed, that of harmonizing our uprooted and deaf sensibility with the sym-bolizing activity of the entire cosmos. This is true, since in the *hermetic* vision that the imaginal encompasses, everything sym-bolizes, every single object sym-bolizes with any other, although not necessarily in an improved and irenic blend; if anything, it is quite often lacerated and dissonant, but in any case, in an interconnected and animated organism.

This is what the imaginal does: it disseminates the plea that comes from any singularity of the whole in order to be re-recognized in its sym-bolizing *virtus* with

any otherness, thus giving back to us the capacity to read and internalize our very own sym-bolic dwelling in the world; our participatory way of life, and therefore inextricably com-promised with any other, even infinitesimal, element of a universe or pluriverse that since its origins par-takes of the same fate. Even if it were an arbitrary or aleatory rationale to lead the fate of this whole, its indivisibility would not be in any case diminished, and yet, it is against this universal sym-bolization that Western diairetic rationality fights and has fought in past centuries. By doing so, it prevents us from perceiving the deep resonance that interconnects every fiber of being with all others, and our specific role as receivers and transmitters of such intimate, psychomaterial, and irreducible solidarity.

The imaginal, precisely because it is the expression of an intuition foreign to calculating rationality, as memory and assurance of the sym-bolic primacy of the expression of the world, recalls and also prescribes the ways of our inhabiting, our role as participants with some privileges (and some responsibilities) to the integrity of a living organism of which we can only be a reflective and transient figure; hence, such figure is all the more engaged in the safeguard and the harmonious amplification (or at times even disharmonious, provided it is woven with the present disharmony in cosmic matter) of the earth/cosmos of which we are members.

To lay blame on the imaginal for sanctioning a division between high and low is only partially understandable. And yet, if an intervention of a selective nature is carried out by the imaginal gaze, it is not determined in an aristocratic or conservative sense. It is the result of a political choice that reads in artistic operativity an extraordinary force of transformation. The necessity to recognize the quality of a work and to make it correspond with a specificity, however modulable and modulated, a specificity fed with recognizable processuality and with an “auraticity” not at all immobile or purely hieratic, if anything “dialectical” or cyclical, is a way to attribute a specific value to a form of operativity that needs to be distinguished from others. It is true that an artist today often functions on the border of forms of communication and expression marked by highly mobile and fluctuating use values; however, a certain

difference cannot be overlooked.

It is possible for a work to come into existence in an environment that is no longer traditional, to come into existence inversely: an imaginal work today can be carried out in a *happening*,⁶ in a TV production, in a scenic action or in a set multimedial production. The imaginal has no place; it has no privileged context because, as mentioned several times before, it situates on its own; and on its own it outlines a topology that has primarily a nature that is symbolic and not necessarily real. Its temporality is anachronistic, as Didi-Huberman points out, or “inactual”, if we prefer, to the extent in which its genesis is not necessarily determined by events or contingent problems, but represents instead the emergence – one could almost say the eruption – of processes that are categorized as confused psychological and anthropological layers with respect to contemporaneity. On the other hand, it can also arise in complete harmony with contemporaneity, during an event of particular transformative power, in order to confirm the latter’s rootedness in prior or later clods, or its ramified web of references and correlations.

The imaginal is, in some ways, always “inactual”, in the sense in which Friederich Nietzsche would use the term, but it also performs in contemporaneity, strictly owing to its paradoxal non-involvement. It is a form a resurgence that flows from numerous fishing spots; it is the synthesis of underground and silent trials; it is the convergence of streams and undertows.

How could we otherwise define a work like that of Joseph Beuys from such vantage point, or that of Anselm Kiefer, or even certain works by Hermann Nitsch, in the absence of a framework of reference that bears witness to the persistence of such extremely effective and transmutative “inactuality?” Not to mention music, theatre or dancing, in which entire geological eras of creation at times seem to gather together in unpredictable and fiery works as those of Arthur Schnittke, Meredith Monk, Pina Bausch or Giacinto Scelsi.

Thus the ideological gaze, critically conceited, that disqualifies the imaginal by moralistically ascribing it to a traditional and spiritualist sensibility, appears

⁶ In the Italian version the word appears in English and is italicized.

to be the result of an anchorage to interpretative patterns as well as to categories – also of a philosophical-historical nature – that in all fairness are overly “historicized”. What emerges is the paradoxical disqualification of a hermeneutic approach that is actively engaged in protecting the value of rupture and mutation, caused by the specific symbolic knowledge carried out by art in the name of a philosophy of history that still has an evolutionist and progressive slant. Oddly enough, the advocates of the postmodern themselves seem to glorify a notion completely dialectical of history (in a Hegelian and “positive” sense) where the actual and the contemporary, regardless of any differences, is regarded as the arrival point of a process – at this stage and once again – teleologically oriented.

The imaginal is clearly placed beyond any of these simplified classifications; it is definitely more connected to a plural and systemic concept of evolutionary processes and, therefore, capable of accepting the inextricable persistence of the Already been in the present, which refashions it, in strict accordance with the interpretation offered – in sharp contrast with Hegelian dialectics – by a thinker of dismissals and ruptures such as Walter Benjamin.

The artistic imaginal is perhaps not traceable in the entire collection of objects that Benjamin gathers in order to witness such “kaleidoscopic” autoreflexion of history, but only because the goals of an imaginal approach, of his “pedagogy”, are different. The imaginal is a way to share the wealth of images for the purpose of providing an education and ethics of the plural expansion of sensibility and knowledge; art as an authentic vehicle of the transformation of culture and, potentially, of civilization as well, in the measure in which it goes as far as compensating the dominance and factual effectiveness of a brutal and abusive rationality.

Because imaginal here is not only the trademark of a segment of cultural heritage (or of symbolic heritage, as a certain sphere of reflection on aesthetic contemporaneity appears to think), to state it with a gentle touch of irony, but an interest in a world that passes through the necessary attendance of alchemical containers (of art) in which culture has poured forth an understanding of its phenomena; an understanding tinged with traits associated with the feminine, the

obscure, the ambiguous, and the irreducible: all dimensions that inevitably escape a rationalizing and efficiency-laden paradigm as the one that prevails during our times (and for the longest time now).

Only the “eye without eyelids” of a creator inspired by pure receptivity toward objects that deeply move him through his instincts, well beyond the domain of the useful and the usable, can give us back, in form and matter, the poetic essence of reality (as Martin Heidegger has emphasized in great depth, and after him, Maurice Merleau-Ponty), its profound disposition for being, and for being according to the ways of his ontological inspiration (where this term points back not to a static and “ever-present” metaphysics; on the contrary, it refers instead to the hypothesis that a sort of final – and not only efficient – virtue of objects can be freed; a destination filtered in them that is not necessarily *ab origine*, but by virtue of their unfolding in a hypercomplex network of relations and correspondences).

(Image Richard Long “Sahara Line” [1988])

PART III
Studies on imaginal operativity

Giacinto Scelsi and the alchemy of sound

The Klang

François-Bernard Mache, a contemporary French composer, begins his brief tribute to Giacinto Scelsi as follows:

There lived in Persia, a very long time ago, a flute player who played nothing else but one single note. His wife, after patiently and discreetly putting up with this situation for twenty years, finally pointed out to him that his fellow musicians were using different sounds, and quite successfully.

He replied that he was aware of that, but that he had already found the right note, while the others were still looking for theirs (Mache, 2001, 29).

In fact, we can find that note, concrete and audible, right in Giacinto Scelsi's (1905-1988) music, and in the path that has generated that music: it seems to us

that in Scelsi this note, which should not be regarded as the result of a sudden intuition or grace received by accident, is rather the concentration of a tormented search, or even perhaps the gravitation point of torment itself, the nevralgic nucleus around which a Great Work of transmutation has come to fruition. It was Scelsi who returned this scintillating note, capable of multiplication and awakening, perhaps of healing, after a prolonged elaboration of the musical culture of his times, after he had explored and witnessed its harshness and resistance, and after he had unearthed its intimacy and depth. But it blossomed, first and foremost, from his *malheur*.

One single note, played over and over again, was the remedy that cured Scelsi's very own affliction, an affliction induced primarily by an asphyxial and convoluted creative condition, by intolerance that had reached the end of an arid and debilitating musical intellectualism. Yet it disclosed, during his healing, another world, a musical world supplied with a new centre, a form – the perfect form of the sphere – and with a dimension still unknown to the Western musical system trapped in a bilateral logic of height and duration: the dimension of depth.

The musician from La Spezia (Italy) whose mysterious biography still needs, to a large extent, to be pieced together, and who has constantly shied away from the exposure – and at times even objected to the publication – of his works, has introduced, in his application of the imaginal, new dimensions of sound exploration and new musical trends.

He faced and covered what can be defined as the “core of sound”, the dense and scarcely explored web of microsonorities, and this flight to the lowest areas of sound was pursued just to remain faithful to the discovery of his “note”, of the microcosm contained in that single note – a punctiform, but also an immense and multifaceted phonetic space, which from now on we will refer to as the “*klang*”.

The discovery of the *klang* took place, therefore, as for many creators of the imaginal, in a place of suffering, of psychic suffering that Scelsi claimed he had incubated when he “studied music”, when he put all his intellectual efforts into seizing the musical laws of his times:

after going to Vienna in order to study dodecaphony with Walter Klein, a student

of Schoenberg, I obviously became ill. That was normal: anybody, who is pervaded by an unusual energy and spends hours playing the piano – unaware of what he is producing, while having to concentrate on a counterpoint or the solution of a seventh – inevitably conks out. I was ill for four months... (Mallet, 2001, 19).

In a Swiss psychiatric clinic, where he was admitted for a nervous system disorder, Scelsi re-gained “his” acoustic world. In that health facility, after tracking down an old piano in the corner of a room, he experienced – just like when as a child he would manage to express himself, in an odd and furious way – and only thanks to that piano, the healing of that single note obsessively beating over and over again, non-stop. He delved into it, until he melted away and savored the dilation and infinite vibration of that slightest particle:

One day I started playing: c, c, d, d, d...While I was playing, someone said: ‘That guy is crazier than us.’ By playing over and over the same note it becomes great, so great it always sounds more in harmony and it even becomes greater within you; its sound envelops you. I can assure you that it is quite something else: the sound contains an entire universe, with harmonics that have never been heard before. The sound fills the entire space where you happen to be; it encircles you, and you can swim within it (Mallet, 2001, 25).

The sound overflows, internally and externally; it becomes a dwelling, an elementary horizon that offers shelter, and it *situates*.

This experience repeated until paroxysm – an unconscious exercise of meditation but already *oriented* – becomes a melting pot in which sound, in the course of hollowing out and deepening, multiplies and becomes a pot of transmutation, that is, one of primary substance that vaporizes in an eruptive iridescence and that – being the result of one single centre’s reverberation – disseminates all over an endless connection; it becomes a universe, while the universe, in paradoxal reversion, flows into it:

you have no idea what is sound! There are counterpoints (if one decides so), there are shifts related to different timbres, harmonics whereby each one delivers quite

different results that not only derive from the sound, but reach the centre of the sound; there are also divergent and concentric movements. Consequently, sound becomes immense; it becomes part of the cosmos, even if only the slightest part: there is everything in... (Mallet, 24).

Scelsi experienced this “crisis” during the 1940s. After this phase his works radically changed and acquired an irreducible and very original feature, the manifestation of a fundamental intuition, inspired and enriched even by a fervent mystical quest. Scelsi’s *klang*, the child of this unique but also universal juncture, is that deep and radiant sound that we all recognize in his works, the vertical materiality that floods the space, “ample resonance by the rich body of musical events that proliferate in a perennial becoming” (Maurizi, 2001, 34). His specific trait evokes, on the one hand, a primordial sound, a transcendent vibration that, while spreading around in the emptiness, has dug out, according to certain oriental cosmogonies, the being from nothingness. This sound, furthermore, a pervasive substance that keeps in reticular suspension the impenetrable chains of the manifold, persists in underlying it as an inaudible “base”. On the other hand, it seems to make perceptible, as Paolo Maurizi argues, the structure of a universe no longer governed according to a normative and formal geometry or physics, but rather to a quantitistic perspective, which sees matter pervaded by pluridirectional and indeterminable flows of an energetic type. Scelsi’s sound, in fact, by analogy, instead of regarding itself as a musical grammar of a logical-discursive, analytical and dialectical nature, largely resembles a field of forces in an unstable balance, evokes a reticular plexus of matter in perennial metamorphosis.

Thus the note, so far intended as an indivisible and *elementary block* of the musical edifice, fades into a sound subjected internally to a continuous vibration and, for this reason, to perennial transmutation, generating in such way a multiplicity as varied and complex as it is relative and apparent in reality. This is explained by the fact that – like the behavior of objects in relativistic space-time – the diversity between sounds is neither absolute nor determined by a system of objective and external reference to the particular context in which they find themselves, but derives from only one fundamental sound, chosen from time to

time as axis of the composition (Maurizi, 34).

Scelsi moved toward what has been characterized later as a spectral⁷ enhancement of sound, that is, toward a complexification of timbre, perceptible in space as “spectre” or an oscillatory graph that gives back imaginatively the coloristic and qualitative rise in sound, which opens it up to a dimension of “depth”, until then essentially unknown.

As of 1959, with the composition “Four Pieces for Orchestra, each one on a single note”, Scelsi

adopts the spectral model in the timbric perspective reformulated in terms of sound depth; the play of monotonal perspective takes place on the level of *contemporaneity* of harmonic sounds and no longer on the level of horizontal distribution of their relations (Cisternino, 2001, 73).

Thus, he achieves an effect of thickening, produced by the effervescence of parceled sounds (“partial”) that vibrate, diffracted, in microtonality (particularly quarter tones) around the dominant note; a treatment of sound material that will progressively increase and will certainly arrive at its most complete and pained achievement in the great orchestral works of recent years, like *Konx Om pax* (1969), *Pfhat* (1974) or *Aion* (1961).

⁷ According to the definition proposed by Hugues Dufourt in 1979, “Spectral music” indicates a “work of musical composition” that is applied directly to “internal dimensions of sonority”, that is, to the timbre or *spectre* of sound. «Spectralism» or «Spectral Movement» is the name generally used to set apart types of music produced by a group of composers that studied with Olivier Messiaen at the Conservatory of Music, and formed around the mid-seventies. They are the founders of *Itinéraire* (1973), an ensemble that is still active today and makes use of traditional and electronic instruments; a focus on electroacoustics was a distinctive trait of this group, which was led by a desire to compose in an innovative sense starting with the acoustic properties of sound space. Among its main protagonists, besides Grisey, we may recall Tristan Murail, Roger Teissier, Michaël Lévinas, and Dufourt himself, who was added later on. Tristan Murail, but also other composers, like Horatiu Radulescu, has identified Scelsi as the precursor of the exploration of the inner world of sound. It goes without saying that the profound motivation present in Scelsi’s work appears significantly reduced in the authors of “spectral” music. On this topic, one may refer, among others, to Manfrin (2004), Anderson (2000), and Fineberg (2000).

Scelsi's compositional research, starting with the fateful day of the turning-point – that a conscientious scholar like Reish traces back to the early '50s, in the piano compositions n. 8 (1952) and n. 9 (1953) (“*Bot-Ba*” and “*Thai*”) – on the one hand, proceeds in the “simplification of the melodic line until it becomes the multifarious projection of one single note”, and on the other, through the “gradual introduction of microtonal inflections as a primary means of such projection” (Freeman, 2001, 96). It is through *subtraction* to customary musical parameters that Scelsi can set off the expressive capabilities contained in what is infinitely small, by unleashing the potential immensity and actualizing it. In that sense, we can agree with Solange Ancona when for Scelsi's music she invokes the poetic words of Leonardo who – although already headed toward modern science – still appeared so immersed in the resonances of an era in which man lived in harmony with the cosmos: “The atom-instant of eternity; the fire-point of infinity” (Ancona, 2011, 149).

The “circle”, however, represents the symbolic figure that sums up the Scelsian poetic *code*, and the composer did not choose it by chance in order to represent himself (especially a circle containing an autographed horizontal line, the Zen symbol). The *klang* sound, archetypal, primordial, is *spherical*:

the single sound is like a circle; it is self-sufficient when it unfolds on itself; it does not belong to an architectural whole, but only falls back on its internal resonances, arranged according to natural reticular paths, which exclude any dialectic, symmetric, or geometric form. We are dealing with a sound that generates within itself constant transformations; this transmutation does not have a rectilinear temporality, but lapses into a space/time animated by a non-classifiable energy, which is neither directional nor mechanically structured.

The journey within Scelsi's sound produces

a loss of outer boundaries, a regained enchantment (...). Scelsi's prelogic mentality is capable of offering us moments of utter astonishment that produce an overwhelming *pathos*, a *pathos* that is also, simultaneously, *ethos* (Cresti, 2001, 113-114).

We could also say the *ethos* of a musical hermeneutics of being, of a renewed harmony between symbolic expression and symbolicity of the world, restitution to sound material of its essential expressive mandate: that of reconciling song with the universe, of allowing the universe to manifest its own musical form. That is precisely the task of an alchemy of sound.

The *klang* turns out to be the symbolic and concrete linchpin of a real *coincidentia oppositorum*, that of the one and the many, of centre and periphery, of superior and inferior. It appears as root and hypostasis (*zenith* and *nadir*) of a united cosmos and, therefore, as emblematic vehicle of a hermetic concept of the universe.

Anahata and Ahata

Paolo Maurizi correctly traces the origin of this approach in music to the Indian Hindu tradition, which in the *Vedas* is tied to the idea of a sacred primordial sound, of a cosmic vibration (*atman*) that resonates inside you and can be regained through the exercise of chanted meditation in the *mantras*.

In fact, the *klang* symbolizes through a “microscopic harmony of the spheres” and mirrors macroscopic harmony, unfolding as a sacred, primordial sound. For Scelsi it

is ultimately a symbol (or better, a far echo, but at the same time firmly present in terrestriality) of that supreme synthesis of all types of music and all of its contents in the entire universe, that is, of that phonic creative energy that potentially encloses all worlds and, therefore, is placed beyond any of its specific manifestations; a synthesis that may be perceived only by those who have reached a complete inner development, because otherwise, of that heavenly sound one may hear – depending on the evolutionary level attained – only portions more or less lengthy, translated, moreover, on a multifarious plane of space and temporality (Maurizi, 36).

What follows is initiatory music, ethical and mystical, which makes it possible to penetrate, through sensible intuition, the interiority of the world or its

profound texture – the unmistakable and resplendent fragment of a living and coherent universe.

Scelsi, therefore, fits into a perspective of magical-ritual interpretation of sound and music, and rereads his very own creative destiny as that of a mediator, of a messenger of sound priority inscribed in the interiority of the world, in the *Weltinnerraum*. “I am an intermediary”, Scelsi will declare in one of his interviews, and will constantly repeat that to his friends, to the interpreters of his pieces, like Michiko Hirayama, Frances-Marie Uitti, and Joelle Leandre (cf. Colangelo, 1996, *passim*). Afterwards, during the last years of his life, he will eventually claim that his compositions are directly inspired by Shiva.

Scelsi’s work is a rite, and we see this primarily in his titles, esoterically inspired by divinities of heteroclitic origin, when not the result of probable (and musical) phonosymbolic intuitions (just consider *Pfhat*, with an impracticable etymology, yet so suggestively leaning toward the Egyptian and Mesopotamian sound field). From *Anahit*, the goddess of water and fertility, the Iranian *Anahita*, to *Pwill*, the Celtic prince of the seven cantons of Wales, to *Aion*, the Egyptian god of time with heads of dog, wolf and lion, but also *aeon* as symbol of time in Gnostic tradition; a ritual aspect that is enhanced in the subtitles: in *Aion* we have *Four Episodes in One Day of the Life of Brahma*, in *Pfhat*, *A Flash and the Sky Opened*, in *Uaxuctum*, *The Legend Of The Mayan City Which They Themselves Destroyed For Religious Reasons*, in *Ko-Tha*, *Three Dances of Shiva*, etc.

The musical event, in terms of programming, is often placed in a mythical setting, but yet is the structure itself of sonority that ensures its involvement, or rather, induces its reception as a religious event that is capable on its own to generate in the listener an initiation experience leading into a transcendent, magical, and ultimately transformative place. A setting of this sort can be perceived in many aspects of his work – sonorities, titles, atmospheres – and the scores are also affected by it, as Nicola Cisternino points out:

the precincts of a magical-ritual space for the action are often encountered in a score in the introductory determination of the implied sound-interval space; from

the infinitely small of microtonal measurement to the infinitely large of the first harmonic (Cisternino, 71).

Such an achievement, not at all accidental or “ingenuous”, as someone has argued, stems rather from complex suffering, which is even the result of having exhausted the *modernist* moment of 20th century music and having, so to say, rejected it. Scelsi composes music before the 1940s and until the 1950s, following the example of the great masters that he too acknowledges in his theoretical writings, particularly in *The Evolution of Harmony* (1992) and *The Evolution of Rhythm* (1992) – also written during the forties and fifties – in which he emphasizes Wagner’s and Debussy’s conquests in the field of harmony and then those of rhythm especially by Stravinsky.

He is influenced by composers of his time; certainly by Schoenberg whose *Klangfarbenmelodie*⁸ he adapted for many of his orchestral works. But what unquestionably had a real effect on him, while he was constantly seeking out an alternative – starting right from the crisis he experienced toward a type of music dominated in any case by *logos*, by writing, and by the exhaustion of the linguistic structure of counterpoint – were Alexander Scriabin’s musical theories, his encounter with the thought of Rudolf Steiner and Helena Blavatsky, as well as the writings and particularly illuminating views of Dane Rudhyar.

Based on Gregory Nathan Reish’s interpretation in his elaborate study on the genealogy of Scelsian musical poetics,

Scriabin’s conception of harmony was intended to generate a sense of timelessness and quiescence, by which we seem to experience an eschatological revelation, a gnosis that only music can impart: the full collapse of time and space (Reish, 2001, 36).

And this became an essential element for the formation of a musical ideology in Scelsi.

⁸ A term used by the German composer Arnold Schoenberg to point out the adoption of numerous different colors for a single tone or for more tones, through sound distribution in different instruments.

However, the composer assimilated many elements from Hindu tradition – mediated primarily through the theories of Patanjali and Aurobindo. For example, the term *anahata*, in order to convey the “sound without limits” that appears in his article *Sound and Music* (actually a transcription of recorded talks and interviews), where he talks about “the doctrine that places sound at the source of all revelation that is revealed internally” (cit. in Reish, 68). *Anahata* is sound without time, quiescent, inactive, perceptible only to those who practice yoga and by enlightened musicians. It is the cosmic, sacred sound of Vedic tradition that we also encounter as an ideal in the thought of Scriabin. *Anahata* is the unlimited and potential sound that contrasts with the actual and finite sound, or mundane (*ahata*). This type of sound, almost an ultra-sound, can come to fruition, more or less – similarly to chromatic vibrations in Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*, which Scelsi knew – depending on the terrain it encounters, on its “conductivity”. It is toward the preparation of a terrain of this sort that Scelsi’s quest is heading, in his meditative and quintessential exercise of the single note.

Scelsi’s “single note” must be viewed, in what also appears as a Romantic riedition of the theory of celestial music, as

infinitesimal particle of an atemporal, infinite, sonic force, and therefore as a limitless world of sound. He conceived the timbral, dynamic, microtonal explorations of single notes in his mature works as ‘activations’: temporal, bounded projections of an atemporal, unbounded sonic reality (Reish, 76).

It is also thanks to the Rudolph Steiner’s insistence on the interiority of sound, to the philosopher’s emphasis on the wealth of minimum sonority as a “spiritual door” toward a transcendental reign that Scelsi hits upon the idea of trying out the monotonal universe. But yet it will be mostly in the words of Dane Rudhyar, in his hermetic physics of music that he will probably arrive at a total acknowledgement of those intuitions: “a tone is a living cell” – writes the French musician –

it is composed of organic matter. It has the power of assimilation, of reproduction, of making exchanges, of growing. It is a microcosmos reflecting faithfully the

macrocosmos, its laws, its cycles, its centre... A tone is a solar system. It is composed... of a central sun, of planets, and of a magnetic substance which circulates rhythmically within the limits of the system and relates itself to the magnetic substance of some vaster system. Because of this, a tone is not a mere mathematical point (as in a Western score) without dimensions or density, but it is a living reality, a sound (Rudhyar, cit. in Reish, 111).

The perception of such density, the tenacity in wanting to extract all of its effervescence and virtual immensity, designates the composer no longer as he who “puts sounds together” (Castagnoli, 2001), but as the “receiver”, the “mediator” and reflector of a cosmic signal that finds in him a channel in order to be spread. Scelsi, from this living cell, from this microcosm mirroring the macrocosm, feels that he is being called upon as the actor of a work that goes beyond the sphere of musical culture so it may become a theophanic mission.

The note, as chalice of infinity, as portion of “PleRome”, as *anahata* (*Urklang*), requires a terrain, that is, an ear and hand capable of setting it in motion and irrigating profusely the environment around it with its plurivocity and generativity. The exploration of timbre, of the depth of sound through microtonality and sonic *continuum* through endless compositional and executional rearticulations, the immersion in this teeming and elusive subject, is for Scelsi an initiatory, magical, and mystical gesture, by means of which a leap of an existential and spiritual order is generated. The *Klang*, from this perspective, becomes the crux, the melting-pot, and the main instrument of an elaborate and pained mystery initiation.

For Scelsi sound is something eternal, uncreated, the most powerful manifestation of a transcendent reality and of a multidimensional source of energy; he too considers himself an elected member capable of perceiving, extracting, and projecting an instant of this metaphysical reality of sound matter for the benefit of the world.

Four Pieces Each on a Single Note

Indications of a profound change in Giacinto Scelsi’s music are certainly

perceived from the beginning of the fifties, as Reish observes, and the search for a “Gong” sonority that is hinted at in the fourth movement of Suite n.8 for piano “Bot-Ba” of 1952, thanks to the violent and repeated percussion of low B sustained by the pedal, is already a clear demonstration of that. We can sense here an attempt to follow Rudyar’s lead in *The Rebirth of Hindu Music* (1979), which identifies right in *gong* sonority the perfect embodiment of the Hindu concept of *Nada-Brahman*, the undifferentiated “pleRome” of sound with infinite potential. Besides, a further exploration of the potential of color in sound can be grasped in Suite n. 9 “*Tai*”, from the explicit religious orientation, as evinced by the description that Scelsi offers: “a succession of episodes that express Time alternately (or more precisely Time in Motion) and Man, as symbolized by cathedrals and monasteries, and the sacred sound –Om”, followed by significant guidelines to pursue execution and a correct mindset for listening: “this suite should be listened to and played with the greatest calm. Nervous people stay away” (cit. in Reish, 2001, 194).

In the piano suite *Tai* appear the seeds of a poetics in the making: for example, the wavering and hypnotic rotation around the tonal axis of the harmonics in the uneven pieces, which convey the illusory human perception of Time, and the static, dilated, and sustained – like the sound of “bells” – sonority of even pieces in which there is a resolve to evoke the still and timeless character of the *Om*. On the score, accordingly, the instructions for execution are particularly consistent: “Rest your fingers on the keys, press deeply, and then let vibrate” (cit. in Reish, 197).

And yet the sonority of the piano, a dear instrument to the composer, which also allows him a first approximation to the sound he wants to produce, appears mutilated. Rudolf Steiner himself had argued in his essay on *The Inner Nature of Music and the Experience of Tone* that the piano is a “philistine instrument”, incapable of triggering an authentic spiritual experience. Unlike brass instruments and wind instruments, it fails to relate to the primordial and quintessential source of the human act of singing, and, unlike percussions, it is not able to reflect the cyclic and rhythmic nature of life. The piano, in the anthroposophist’s opinion, needs to be regarded as an abstract instrument, an

obstacle that stands in the way of the musical evolution of humanity. A harsh judgment, which nonetheless agreed well with the actual difficulty, for a tempered instrument, of conveying that infinite broadening of sound around tonal nuclei: in fact, it is not capable, technically, of producing partial sounds.

Perhaps this last reason in particular persuaded Scelsi to abandon almost entirely piano composition so he could devote himself, from a creative point of view, only to improvisation by means of an electric keyboard instrument, the ondiola, which allowed him to experiment with the vibrato effect, glissando, and many tonal variations. But above all, with respect to written compositions, he was able to focus on wind, string and brass instruments, besides human vocality, of course (in his late work even on large opera orchestras and on the chorus).⁹

It is during this period that the composer begins seriously to experiment with tonal microintervals, which had already been explored at the beginning of the century, among others by Charles Ives, Alois Haba, and Ivan Wishnegradsky. For him this is an inner need that corresponds to an increasingly sought after adaptation with an aesthetics that is sensitive to an orientalist and theosophical

⁹ On the relationship between the improvisations and the compositions there has been, as is well known, a posthumous dispute related to a statement by Vieri Tosatti, its main transcriber, who claimed to be the true author of Scelsi's works. William Colangelo, in his brilliant study on "The Composer-Performer Paradigm in Giacinto Scelsi's Solo Works" has basically demonstrated – drawing from a series of interviews with the most important interpreters of Scelsi's music, among which Michiko Hirayama, Frances-Marie Uitti, and Joelle Leandre, who worked side by side with him – that Tosatti only wrote the scores and, perhaps occasionally, added elements of embellishment especially to the late works for large opera orchestras (besides, Tosatti's original music was largely tonal and, according to Uitti for instance, he did not like Scelsi's music, even if professionally he would try his best to capture its complexity in the score).

On the other hand, a more interesting element that Colangelo highlights in his work is the relationship between moments of improvisation, which, according to an account by Michiko Hirayama, were chiefly nocturnal and played solely on the ondiola, and true composition. Scelsi tended to record materials that originated from improvisation, make a selection, and then recreate them in collaboration with the performers; or resorted to transcription, and then left ample space to revision, as long as it enabled the most profound and intimate element of the piece to manifest itself. Clearly, Scelsi's approach, far from being fetishistic toward the score, which was experienced as an irruption from some other dimension, logical and discursive, was essentially the result of an inspired improvisation, and, in his own words, directly transmitted by God (cf. Colangelo, 1996, *passim*).

appeal. He embraces, and to a certain extent, converts on the sensible plane a precognition by Annie Besant, a non-musician Theosophist, who states in a written account that dates back to 1910 that music

is beginning to show signs of the coming art – subtler harmonies, minuter distances between notes, tendencies to quarter-notes as well as half-notes [and notices how on the compositional scene appear] musicians who are beginning in their melodies to play with these subtler kinds of tones, making strange new music – music which the public ear is not yet accustomed to, which it challenges when it hears it, but which is the Music of the Future, when a vaster range of sound shall appeal to the ears more finely organized than ours, and when the ears of a new race shall demand from its musicians greater delicacies of musical sound than have yet been mastered amongst us (cit. in Reish, 218).

Scelsi strives to create musical textures in which, especially thanks to the flexibility and ductility of wind and string instruments, it appears possible to penetrate the “intrasonic”, as Henck de Velde’s will define it. This occurs mainly in “*Three studies*” for clarinet in E flat of 1954, and then especially in the first two pieces of the *Trilogy* for cello, “*Triphon*” and “*Dithome*” of 1956 and 1957. Particularly in this last work, Scelsi introduces a set of sound alterations that will represent the interdependent techniques of timbric metamorphosis capable of expanding beyond measure and deepening the fluctuating matter of the single note: microtonal inflections, vibrato, glissandi, the slightest orbital oscillations, dynamic manipulations, and harmonic stress; mainly the latter, to which will be added, over time, the combination with the exploration of the possibilities of timbric modification of specific instruments (scordatura, the application of a mute, etc.) and the use, according to the theory of the *Klangfarbenmelodie*, of always more complex and articulated opera orchestras.

However, it is widely acknowledged that “*Four Pieces*” for chamber orchestra, “*each one on a single note*” of 1959 fully achieves and, in a certain way, signals the advent of the “sonoristic” style, the complete growth of a music focused on the attainment of an *anahata* sound. Here converge past experiences in order to offer, even thanks to a broader and more differentiated system of

sound sources, a complete picture in support of the argument that a single note is not something limited and static, but a complex and dynamic organism, an “unlimited microcosm” that resonates with cosmic harmony: the *Klang*. According to Tosolini, in this piece Scelsi fulfils for the first time his vocational project of a “ritual and true mysteriosophic holophony aimed at a profound transformation of perceptions” (Tosolini, 2001, 62). Music, according to the Italian critic, becomes a “temple”, and its character is always more and more ritual and transmutative.

Such liveliness that flutters in the piece, through its four segments, reaching the maximum extension of the five octaves in the fourth movement, due to an alternation of moments of quasi-statis and sudden increases of volume and microtonal “texture”, is the result of a diverse set of components. In the first place, the expansion of sound sources with a considerable presence of instruments capable of low sounds: in fact, the orchestra includes twenty-six performers with a strong dominant of wind and low brass instruments: flute in G, oboe, English horn, two clarinets in B flat, bass clarinet, bassoon, four horns, contralto sax and tenor sax, three trumpets, two trombones, bass tuba, flexatone (a percussion instrument on a metal sheet that produces a trembling and whistling sound), timpani, percussion, and string instruments.

Secondly, the articulation in regards to time of entrance and exit of orchestral sections is such that it produces significant timbre mutations. For this purpose, even the use of percussions is able to activate certain sound alterations in agreement with the harmonic relief of other instruments. Instrumental density, sonic and dynamic increase, volume and the articulations of the execution, by means of tremolos, trills, vibratos, and staccatos, converge in the amplification and dilation of the spectrum that gravitates around the single tonal level. The piece is astonishing, vibrant. It slowly and constantly flutters, and alternates moments of sudden violence with nearly static phases, close to stillness, suspended, in which you are absorbed in a reflective wait, pierced by a sudden, abysmal flare of rolling percussions that bring in their own depth the roar equally otherworldly and material of the brass instruments.

Rythmic alternation, the sudden and telluric irruption of the percussions, the

evocative quality and almost metaphysical color of low winded instruments, which know how to elevate cosmic voices, as the cries of animals, which sink and elevate, the sudden piercing entrance of the raucous, hollow sound of trombones, against the background of metallic ringing and prolonged silences, will become constant traits in later works for orchestra. They will produce a powerful attraction, a magic and initiatory atmosphere, a clear and stunning perception of the reinstatement of a remote, mystical setting, and even perhaps, although in an entirely modern concept of musical technique, the successful recollection of the harmonies of a lost Pagan antiquity, so strongly coveted by Scelsi.

In this piece, which already achieves moments of authentic matteric sound transcendence, of magical transmutation and multiplication of a substance only programmatically punctiform, Scelsi demonstrates flatly for the first time, from the perspective of musical creativity, that “even in the most infinitesimal portion of the pleRome, carved out by the spiritualist artist, there exists limitless potential” (Reish, 250). It is precisely here that the composer from La Spezia captures the first mature result of a poetics in which the sensible principle of music, intended as the “voice” of matter, becomes balanced, according to a precise spiritual orientation, in an organism of sound that appears as the distillation, the “filtration” of a taxing and pained alchemical transmutation.

The Orient of Sound

If the invention unquestionably appears astonishing – supported at times by improvisation, and corroborated by the contribution of performers (just think of Michiko Hirayama’s chief role in *Canti del Capricorno*, or that of Joelle Leandre in *Maknongan*, in the double bass version), in music for soloists, in its “recovered madrigalism” (Cohen-Levinas, 2001), in the duos, and in chamber compositions – I believe, nonetheless, that we cannot neglect that the power of suggestion, or the penetration in an *Other* dimension of the universe of sound that compositions for large orchestra as well as large orchestra and chorus of the last period have in store, is what essentially makes this composer an authentic

craftsman of an imaginal operativity applied to the profound substance of music.

These later works are the concentration of a tenacious effort of immersion in the fabric of cosmic sound, in a constant tension, but perfectly balanced between the thrust of chthonic forces and that of an unrelenting asceticism. Of such tension are pervaded pieces like *Konx Om Pax e Pfhat*. In the former, the conversion achieved toward an *Orient* of sound, as a perceptible epiphany of the immaterial or a materialization of infinity is already clearly stressed in the choice of its title, with those three words meaning peace but also a broader concept of harmony in three ancient languages: Assyrian, Sanskrit, and Latin. They also have an obvious phonosymbolic component, a sort of synthesis of the fundamental elements of this music: the stroke (*konx*), meditative suspension (*Om*), and incandescence that fades (*Pax*).

Scelsi also offers a plan of the work, which in its three movements seems to represent sound as the first motion of the immutable, as creative force and sacred syllable, or spiritual concretion (*Om*). In fact, this is the picture the piece is suggesting: through the dense and serene fluctuation of the first movement, revolving around the telluricity of C, a network of timbres that articulate their growing monody in successive waves, driven by the slow sound of brass instruments in a sensible thickening that progressively attracts the entire ensemble, as if an immense creature – perhaps Rudhyar’s “living cell” – were about to emerge from an obscure and dense liquid, toward a culmination that then slowly resigns through glissandos and shocks to an almost complete stasis, in a tempo that comes to a stop. Then, in the second movement – driven by the hypnosis of two bass clarinets that play low F for eight units, with a sudden escalation in the high registers of the stringed instruments that saturate the octave and drag the entire orchestra in an ascending and whirling motion – the huge machine breaks loose and, as a true “*maelstrom of sound*” (Hallbreich, 2001, 190), bursts forth into a most violent *Klang*. A cyclonic densification, a primordial explosion bordering on unbearability, yet contained, manifests itself in all of its awe for the brief period of the movement. Then, in the third, the syllable *Om*, “creative vibration of the universe” according to Anagarik Govinda (qtd. in Castanet, 277), recited by a male choir that penetrates in waves

in the sonorous core of the orchestra, digs up an abysmal place, a vocal cave, within an extremely slow pulsation, an initiatic march, all held together in low tones and that imposes to listeners a *descent* into an immobile, endless, and mystical landscape, in which only the fluctuation of volumes and timbric increment, thanks to the insertion of new sonic sources, make us aware of a proceeding and a receding.

An experience of adhesion to the invisible, an authentic threshold of listening, which takes on an appearance of esoteric ritual, at times primordial, as well as pieces with a strong ritual flavor, *Ko-tha* (1967), or *Ritual March: The funeral of Achilles* (1962); even *Pfhat* allows access to an *other* sound space, tinged by alchemical treatment and steered toward a real “*theology of sound*” (Castanet, 277).

The first two movements follow each other very similarly to those of *Knox Om Pax*. In this way the sonic vertigo of the second segment, which makes the entire orchestra and choir kindle in a mighty, metallic and vibrant blaze, an authentic explosion of light that rips the firm fabric of opaque and closed surroundings – and that satisfies the information of the piece’s subtitle, *A Flash and the Sky Opened* – follows a first movement marked by a slow and undulating strut, led by the ritual and solemn voice of the horns and trumpets, in every way still rooted in a nocturnal universe, furrowed by profound respirations, and germinal. Then, after a new episode, the third, made of slow oscillations and gloomy choral lamentations, in a steady motion of dissolutions and new corrugations of sonic matter, we penetrate in an entirely “other” place. Authentic epiphany of an imaginary celestial abode, the last segment of the work is characterized by the whirling and immobile flowing of a lively silver sonority, generated by forty bells in simultaneous vibration. Maybe we are experiencing one of those extremely rare – in one of the composer’s latest works and, in all likelihood, not by accident – moments of restitution of the unspeakable, an instant of complete correspondence, which perhaps recalls the consummation of a long period of suffering, an infancy of sound recaptured *in extremis*, yet clothed in the glittering dye of an Oriental sonority, the successful evocation of a luminous ray that filters from the threshold of the temple.

From the deep and piercing tragic nature of *Uaxuctum* (1966) to the complex and powerful structure of a piece with a wonderfully bold architecture as *Aion* (1961), from *Anahit* (1965), with its curve displaying infinite sonic shades, to the mysterious, extended, and evocative atmospheres of *Hurqualia* (1960) (whose title takes us straight back to the Arabic name that designates the imaginal world), up to the inquisitive and meditative roaming of *Hymnos* (1963), Scelsi's most recent work, music written for large opera orchestras and choirs, embodies in the fullest way the adherence to a universe in which prime matter is finally transmuted, and where we have attained, in the imaginal cavity of the symbolic operativity of the artist, a balance of the elements, a solemn marriage between low range (night) and high range (day), an endless gravitation of an expanding microtonal iris in a hierogamy that – by virtue, moreover, of the monadic rooting of the pieces – really appears to us as the pertinent and surprisingly tangible metaphor of a recovered Hermetic cosmos.

Scelsi's profound, spherical, "spectral" sound is not, as already mentioned, the outcome of a rational deduction, or a miracle of ingenuous and sudden intuition: it is rather the painfully endured result of a vocation that has wrestled with the depths of his soul, which has been able to offer the sacrifice of the ego's centrality, substantially documented even because of Scelsi's total withdrawal from the public scene, even insofar as images (there are, in fact, no photos of Scelsi, except one of him as a youth), and has made up for a musical training perceived as inadequate by shifting toward the Orient, mainly toward a symbolic – or better still *geosophical* – rather than geographical *Orient*; the result of an inner knowledge of the world that the artist has been able to supply with an imaginative and material equivalent capable of healing the fracture that took place in the midst of music, or as the reflection of a deeper split between spirit and flesh of the world.

Scelsi gives us back a reassembled universe of sound, centered and polycentric at the same time, vibrant with ineffable tone color and as if healed, although traversed by deep clefts and violent torsions impressed on the voices and instruments, almost intent on recovering, in a religious reassessment of composition and execution, its abyssal resonance and remote echo of a lost

belonging.

The poet of sounds, who wanted to draw from the infinite virtuality of *pleRome* a portion capable of echoing back all of its potential, is at last offering us a healing incandescence. He leaves us – still rich in paths that we can explore and reflect on – his work, from which emanates the multiplicative power of *lapis*; compositions and the sparks of an invigorating fire; inexhaustible fragments that sketch out for us an initiatic and salvific listening exercise.

The great difficulty, as we have seen, of giving back through the frailty of words, and particularly through the disciplinary violence of the *logos*, the undescrivable (because there is no other way to define it) experience of listening to his works, summons us in the end to a final attempt of analogy.

Scelsi was also a poet, a French-language poet seduced by his Surrealist friends, and of course particularly by Pierre Jean Jouve; he was known as the poet of “fire” (Simon, 2001, 116). But also the poet of silence, committed, and almost subjected to a mystical discipline, whose word wanted to serve as a way “to vaccinate the world from imminent desperation” (Simon, 124).

And if through poetry, despite the validity of some achievements, he was not able perhaps to reach this goal, the definition of the “Sign”, which he himself offers us in a poem from *Archipel nocturne* (Scelsi, 1988) as the “*prendre feu sans cri*” (Simon, 121), this oxymoron of experience, this figure of the impossible, is perhaps the lyrical condensation of what his music generously gives back to us: an experience of the beyondness, of that *disoperative* beyond that yet has the irreplaceable and fundamental merit of *religere*, of reuniting, and perhaps of healing.

**Passion, death and poetic redemption:
Ted Hughes' final farewell to Sylvia Plath**

The black plunderer¹⁰

Lucas, my friend, one

¹⁰ Throughout this book the poetry of Ted Hughes, unless otherwise specified, is taken from *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), edited by Paul Keegan [translator's note].

Among those three or four who stay unchanged
Like a separate self,
A stone in the bed of the river
Under every change, became your friend.
I heard of it, alerted. I was sitting
Youth away in an office near Slough,
Morning and evening between Slough and Holborn,
Hoarding wage to fund a leap to freedom
And the other side of the earth – a free-fall
To strip my chrysalis off me in the slipstream.
Weekends I recidived
Into Alma Mater. Girlfriend
Shared a supervisor and weekly session
With your American rival and you.
She detested you. She fed snapshots
Of you and she did not know what
Inflammable celluloid into my silent
Insatiable future, my blind-man's-buff
Internal torch of search. With my friend,
After midnight, I stood in a garden
Lobbing soil-clods up at a dark window.

Drunk, he was certain it was yours.
Half as drunk, I did not know he was wrong.
Nor did I know I was being auditioned
For the male lead in your drama,
Miming through the first easy movements
As if with eyes closed, feeling for the role.
As if a puppet were being tried on its strings,
Or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes.
I jigged through those gestures – watched and judged
Only by starry darkness and a shadow.

Unknown to you and not knowing you.
Aiming to find you, and missing, and again missing.
Flinging earth at a glass that could not protect you
Because you were not there.
Ten years after your death
I meet on a page of your journal, as never before,
The shock of your joy
When your heard of that. Then the shock
Of your prayers. And under those prayers your panic
That prayers might not create the miracle,
Then, under the panic, the nightmare
That came rolling to crush you:
Your alternative – the unthinkable
Old despair and the new agony
Melting into one familiar hell.

Suddenly I read all this –
Your actual words, as they floated
Out through your throat and tongue and onto your page –
Just as when your daughter, years ago now,
Drifting in, gazing up into my face,
Mystified,
Where I worked alone
In the silent house, asked, suddenly:
'Daddy, where's Mummy?' The freezing soil
Of the garden, as I clawed it.
All round me that midnight's
Giant clock of frost. And somewhere
Inside it, wanting to feel nothing,
A pulse of fever. Somewhere
Inside that numbness of the earth
Our future trying to happen.

I look up – as if to meet your voice
With all its urgent future
That has burst in on me. Then look back
At the book of the printed words.
You are ten years dead. It is only a story.
Your story. My story. (Hughes, 1047-9)

Perhaps we could have started anywhere. Perhaps.

But here the voice of Ted Hughes, his tortured, calcined, bleached voice, distilled by his lengthy stay in the cavern of silence, brings together endless clues of that “story”, the story that inextricably con-jugated him to Sylvia Plath, his story, your story, our story.

Here, in the meticulous texture of selected, decisive words, drawn from the fibres of a painful and lasting torment, resonate the countless echoes, the collected fragments, the figures, shadows, and harbingers, of a tumultuous and relentless incident, open to the most divergent interpretations, yet unyielding to any hasty or reductive view of the relationship that took place, in exemplary fashion, between two formidable impassioned souls.

This poem, which in a certain sense represents the entrance, the threshold through which Hughes gains and allows access to his itinerary, does not correspond to the chronology intentionally followed in the ordered sequence of the eighty-eight “*Birthday Letters*”. *Visit*, which is its title, is the fourth, and comes three poems before *St. Botolph*, the composition that describes the meeting and acquaintance of the two poets, which had taken place a couple of weeks prior to that late evening appearance at Sylvia’s residence.

Clearly this poem, placed earlier in the sequence, addresses the need to provide – before even echoing the onset of passion – a setting or anticipation, perhaps a sort of symbolic framework, just like the entire collection may be interpreted, in certain respects, as a way of containing the fiery and untameable subject matter, still inhabited by ghosts as well as unresolved and destabilizing states of mind.

Ted and his friend Lucas, one night, threw soil-clods at a window they thought was that of Sylvia's room, but instead it wasn't. The first word of the poem is a name, Lucas, a friend and intermediary, "a stone in the bed of the river", the focal point around which gravitate the initial "stages" of the poem. And in the first two verses, the poet describes three numbers – one, three, and four – the first a symbol of the origin and the whole, the second a mystical number of equilibrium and spirituality, while the third a number tied to the Word, the Foundation of every creation and of the elements; or, according to the figures of the Major Arcana of the Tarot, the Wizard, the Empress and the Emperor, powerful allies and patrons of creative work.

It should not seem specious if esoteric associations of this sort are brought up, since Hughes throughout his life was a lover and great expert of hermetic traditions and symbolism, of myths and occult practices. Besides, he was always extremely careful about evoking propitious spirits in his works and life, as well as fearing and driving away malevolent ones, often hidden under the guise of animals, colors, and figures.

Lucas is a mercurial presence; he is "one", the "wizard", the guide who can yet turn out to be also a "trickster", who takes Ted of course to Sylvia's residence, at Newnham College, but to the wrong window. And the error, as reads one of the poems included later on in the collection – "What wrong fork / had we taken?" (Hughes, *Error*, 1122) – the guilty error and superficiality are some of the recurring elements of the poet's lucid examination.

Lucas is the travelling Hermes. His name will appear again – in Sylvia's autobiographical account *The Bell Jar* – and quite significantly in the protagonist's surname, as an element whose purpose is precisely to recall Ted. The protagonist of the novel is Sylvia's *alter ego*, and her name, in fact, is Victoria Lucas. Lucas' task is luminous, and the etymon of his name ties him to the Luciferian component of "research", phosphoric and mercurial, steered toward uniting the separate kingdoms of earth and heaven, of feminine and masculine. As a matter of fact, he will bring Sylvia again to Ted's home, at 18 Rugby Street, for their first Romantic encounter. He will be the one to encourage their meeting from the outset.

They had met fifteen days earlier, at a party, and had experienced right away the tension and violence of their proximity. There too “it was Lucas who manoeuvred”. Sylvia’s account of the night of February 25, 1956 is syncopated and incandescent, sussultatory and vibrant:

Then the worst thing happened, that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me, who had been hunching around over women, and whose name I had asked the minute I had come into the room, but no one told me, came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes (Plath, *Journals*, 211).¹¹

And following a few lines in her diary, in which she tells of quick remarks about their mutual poetic works, she goes on,

and I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off, my lovely red hairband scarf which has weathered the sun and much love, and whose like I shall never again find, and my favorite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face. His poem ‘I did it, I.’ Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunks of words; his poems are strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders. And I screamed in myself, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you (Plath, *Journals*, 212).

The devouring intensity of their relationship finds expression again in their respective writings of that period. Ted Hughes provides a metaphor in the poem *A Modest Proposal*, then included in the collection *The Hawk in the Rain*:

There is no better way to know us
Than as two wolves, come separately to a wood.
Now neither’s able to sleep – even at a distance
Distracted by the soft competing pulse
Of the other; nor able to hunt – at every step

¹¹ Silvia Plath. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000 [translator’s note].

Looking backwards and sideways, warying to listen
For the other's slaving rush. Neither can make die
The painful burning of the coal in its heart
Till the other's body and the whole wood is its own.
Then it might sob contentment toward the moon".
(Hughes, *A Modest Proposal*, 27)

And, conversely, Sylvia in *The Queen's Complaint*:¹²
In ruck and quibble of courtfolk
This giant hulked, I tell you, on her scene
With hands like derricks,
Looks fierce and black as rooks;
Why, all the windows broke when he stalked in.
(Plath, *Poems*, 28)

He is "*the black marauder*" Sylvia talks about in her Diary; the panther that "comes up, comes up, comes up": "Oh, he is here; my black marauder; oh hungry hungry. I am so hungry for a big smashing creative burgeoning burdened love: I am here; I wait...". (Plath, *Journals*, 233).

He throws stones at a window, Ted, that night, but at the wrong one, a dark window "that could not protect you / because you were not there". In a vortex of denials and false movements Ted feels "half-drunk", and "eyes closed", searching as if the blindfolded player in "blindman's buff", and finds himself entangled in a stage performance "feeling for the role" that Sylvia had imagined for him, as "male lead" of her play.

The feeling of being enmeshed and swallowed up in a plot written by others, and of moving within it in a sleepwalking state, is a steady metaphor of his frame of mind (not only his, of Sylvia's too at times), which Ted constantly employs in his *Letters*. But here, at the outset of everything, Ted sees himself again "as if a puppet were being tried on its strings, / or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes", observed "only by starry darkness and a shadow" (Hughes, *Visit*, 1048). The shadow, perhaps, that on several subsequent occasions will be

¹² Throughout this book the poetry of Sylvia Plath, unless otherwise specified, is taken from *The Collected Poems* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1981), edited by Ted Hughes [translator's note].

embodied in various and often spectral messengers of doom that the two poets will encounter, and that Hughes, in the poems of the collection, will unfailingly identify.

He represents himself, upon making his entrance into the story, as if induced by a set of chance events, by a “knossos of coincidence” (Hughes, *18 Rugby Street*, 1055) in whose reticulum he tries to perceive his role, but only manages to react mechanically, as a dead animal injured by electric shock; in this manner he recalls and shares Sylvia’s dramatic experience when she tried to undergo rebirth via shock treatment following her first, youthful suicide attempt. Contact between both experiences – their overlapping and contamination – is, in fact, steady. Ted feeds, poetically, in a sort of cathartic but equally healing act, on everything that belonged to Sylvia, and also, in continuous word osmosis, on her language, verses, and diaries, perhaps even for the sake of filtering and debilitating them.

In the images of *Visit* there are already many themes of his work: the sense of fatality, missed or wrong gestures, being at the mercy of shadows or moving in the dark, and an impassioned atmosphere that, at the same time, is imbued with death. Passion, obscurity, love, and loss that lead to the icy loneliness in which echoes his daughter’s question: “Daddy, where’s Mummy?”

In the final verses time seems to merge; the “ten years” gone by, perhaps, just represent a symbolic interval meant to make “that midnight’s Giant clock of frost” resound. But lifting his eyes from Sylvia’s journals, from his daughter’s image, Ted sees and feels that “pulse of fever”, where the earth became turbid and stiff; that future, their future, which was “trying to happen” and was ready to explode on him. The future where, as we know, lurked the nightmare that would crush Sylvia, and Ted with her: “the unthinkable / old despair and the new agony / melting into one familiar hell”.

Ted writes the *Birthday Letters* when thirty years have passed since Sylvia’s disappearance: an extreme gesture, a few months before his own death, an attempt, as he himself claimed, to create “a direct, private, inner contact” with his first wife. He narrates in detail – all facts in a kaleidoscopic and inexhaustible universe of extraordinary evocations – “their story”, a story that becomes, right

in its enigmatic combination of fundamental archetypal experiences, in the indissoluble bond of passion, death, and rebirth, also everybody's "story", "our story".

Of this difficult and elusive mystery, of this "familiar hell", and of the long path of beauty and torment that studded its inescapable and tragic maturation, it is time now to explore at least a few leads.

The shaman

We can consider Ted Hughes – and he tried by all means to be so in his feverish and multiform artistic operativity – a poet-shaman, a healer that operates strenuously through poetic pharmacopoeia. In all his poems, addresses, and short stories, Hughes has always emphasized the relationship between poetry, myth and shamanism, linking them to a common notion rooted in magical thought, in an "occult philosophy" whose goal, among others, is that of restoring the split between man and nature, between immanence and transcendence. Ted can legitimately be considered "a son of Hermes", according to Françoise Bonardel's important definition. He held, in fact, that "deontology of the gaze" that relates him to alchemical "creators" of vision, committed "through works of imaginative fire" to restoring the slashed and torn edges of the world and of his Soul, the divisions and abuses produced by an uprooted, exiled, and arrogant rationality.

He was familiar with the works of Giordano Bruno, Marsilio Ficino, and Pico della Mirandola, which he actually took up during the initial stages of his relationship with Sylvia; he studied Cabbala, alchemy, astrology, and resorted to mnemonics in order to practice his imagination, since he thought poetry was a magic art fully capable of affecting reality. His primary preoccupation was the world of Nature, which he considered, following his hermetic vision, every living creature's place of radication: the region in which the universe's cosmic force regulates the cycle of deaths and rebirths. Hughes was trying by means of his poetry to reach and manage the energetic potential of Nature.

In his opinion – just as myths and religions allow through rites and mysteries

to experiment and explore in a controlled manner the energy of the cosmos – poetry too, as a powerful thaumaturgical work, is a ritual in which symbolic power reconnects the poet and reader to the elementary circle of the universe, in a mutual growth. As a shaman, and as other poets before him along this path – Yeats, Blake, and even Eliot – he was particularly attentive to the call of unconscious meanings, and to the encounter or presence, whether conscious or oneiric, of totemic figures, especially of an animal nature. Especially during the first period of his poetic production he made use of the symbolic energy of animals, like the crow, the fox, or the wolf, and later, perhaps even because of tragedy that carved emptiness in his life, he became affectionate with more humble creatures – fish, insects, and then flowers.

He had faith in messages that came from their world: while working for some time on an essay about English literature, one night, he dreamt that a man with the head of a fox showed up in his room. It seemed as if this creature had just stepped out of a furnace, and its body was on fire. This fox-man crossed the room and came up to Hughes' desk where he had left the unfinished essay, and while leaving a bloodstained imprint on it, he said to him: "Stop this – you are destroying us". That was the last essay that Hughes wrote on that topic. Because of the incident, he abandoned literary studies and switched to anthropology.

He constantly had guide animals, which played a significant role in his poetry and also in his children's stories; first the crow, then the fox, the wolf, the bear, and the salmon: they acted as intermediaries; they were *nahual*, doubles of his profound Being in intimate contact with *Anima Mundi*, and through them he could nourish and push into superhuman territory his poetic and visionary inclination.

For him poetry was an imaginative way of elaboration of terrestrial suffering, of damage caused by the caesura between calculating reason and the animated world of the sensible; it was especially a form of cure, of salvation (Hughes, *Myth and Education*, 1976). It is in this direction that the collection *Birthday Letters* may be interpreted. But here the elements of the *nigredo* are profound, intimate, and intense, and his poems appear as "sulphur matches" lit one by one in order to purge that extended and degenerate infection that had been poisoning

him for far too long.

His deep bond with Sylvia he nearly assimilated to a hierogamy, in the early years of their marriage – during that time he impersonated more than ever sulphur, at times bitter and arsenical, while Sylvia was mercury, airy and changeable, and they would even set down their work on the back of each other's drafts, almost fulfilling the fortunate alchemical transmutation that Ted will later pertinently describe in his collection *Cave Birds* – slowly deteriorated; it reached a sort of “inverse gold”. Living together, and especially Sylvia's compelling and turbulent poetic experience, which steadily grew into what she herself defined as Ariel's voice – her obscure and creative side – gradually drained him.

Hughes felt he was essentially the “midwife” (Hughes, *Suttee*, 1139) of Sylvia's furious poetic delivery; a delivery in which he sensed the same shamanic imprint, a similar attempt to heal, as he wrote, his “deep and incisive inner crisis”. Even Sylvia was wrestling with her own drama of death, gestation and rebirth. He found himself acting as caretaker and ministrant of his partner's prolonged affliction: “I had no idea / how I was becoming necessary, / or what emergency surgery Fate would make / of my casual self-service” (Hughes, *18 Rugby Street*, 1056).

A difficult, distressing process that eventually burst into “a flood, a dam-burst thunder” in the shape of the poem *Elm* where the new voice, that of Ariel, would suddenly make itself heard.

Night after night, weeks, months, years
I bowed there, as if over a page,
Coaxing it to happen,
Laying my ear to our unborn and its heartbeat,
Assuaging your fears. Massaging
Your cramps into sleep with hypnosis
And whispering to the star
That would soon fall into our straw –
Till suddenly the waters
Broke and I was dissolved.
Much as I protested and resisted
I was engulfed

In a flood, a dam-burst thunder
Of new myth (Hughes, *Suttee*, 1139)

The “god” that sucked blood from Sylvia’s nipple was born, as he writes in one of his final poems of the collection, entitled of course *The God*, acknowledging that in this “blood-nutrition” remained scattered “gobbets” of him, but also and especially that the birth had delivered not the new baby, but the old one: that unhappy Self that had already dragged Sylvia into the basement of her home to pursue death, when she was twenty years old, “the old / babe of dark flames and screams / that sucked the oxygen out of both of us” (Hughes, *Suttee*, 1140).

The relationship between Sylvia and Ted was intense and deeply felt; it was slowly consumed by a feeling of restlessness that we can grasp in *Birthday Letters*, but marked by a constant overlapping and succession of events fraught with symbolic values and omens. It would not even be remotely possible to follow it in full, even if we limited ourselves to the hypercomplex interlacing of more than four hundred pages that Hughes, nearing his death, offers of that experience – macerated at length in his memory, transformed, shaped, and finally unleashed, clad with that refreshing beauty that time and inner depth, as in Proust and the great miners of past time, are capable of producing.

What he bears witness to is a complete, global, and painful story. The final two years, from 1961 to 1963, were the most troubled and controversial; they were marked by the first poetic triumphs of both poets, but also by Ted’s impatience toward Sylvia’s needs; his impatience toward captivity, jealousy, and the incredible force – the patience and perseverance – of her poetic vocation. He was undoubtedly her squire and servant, watched over her and massaged her with hypnosis and magic, in order to temper her desperation and excesses. But perhaps, as he often reveals, it seems, in the *Letters*, he failed or could not keep up with her unspoken questions; he did not see, he did not want or know how to interpret the signals, the omens, the fatal oracles, of which later he will instead recognize the dreadful meaning in the final reckoning, both lyrical and tragical, when he lays bare those eighty-eight poems. In them he will manage to convey,

but probably late, the compassion and patience he failed to show earlier.

Cave Birds

After Sylvia's death, on February 11, 1963, which many attributed to his negligence, and especially to his infidelity, Hughes basically went into isolation. He remained in absolute silence for three years and chose to never speak about Sylvia's death or what happened in the last period of her life. An easy target of rumours and arbitrary lashing out by a good deal of the press, and feminist circles that turned Sylvia into an icon and martyr of his epic season of conquests, Hughes withdrew into silence, edited the first edition of Sylvia's latest poems and then the *Ariel* collection that made her famous; then slowly, behind the scenes, he resumed his uninterrupted path, always mindful about eluding that void, which years later, in 1969, was followed by another one – that of the suicide of his new partner Assia Weville, and death of stepdaughter Shura.

The colossal Yorkshire-born poet earned himself the reputation of “talented assassin”, which encouraged people to chip away his name from Sylvia's tombstone, led groups of Plath devotees to insult him during lectures and poetry reading, to isolate and label him, but he never broke the wall of silence that he had decided to keep around the incident. His silence, at times, only added fuel to the fire of conjectures and of the imagination. Besides, in the eyes of public opinion, he was guilty of the disappearance of the journal chronicling the final months of Sylvia's life; yet he deemed his actions as necessary to protect their children, Nicolas and Frieda, from pointless misery. He defended them strenuously and fiercely from all resentful accounts that circulated about “their story”, which were written by “dogs” that “are eating your mother” as reads the title of the penultimate poem of *Birthday Letters*, in which he in fact urges his children to withdraw from her maternal body torn to pieces by a “breed of hyenas”.

... Let them
Jerk their tail-stumps, bristle and vomit
Over their symposia.

Think her better
Spread with holy care on a high grid
For vultures
To take back into the sun. Imagine
These bone-crushing mouths the mouths
That labour for the beetle
Who will role her back into the sun
(Hughes, *The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother*, 1169)

The poet will remain silent for thirty years. He will confine himself to following and commenting the editions of Sylvia's poems. He will also tirelessly pursue his own itinerary of poetic maturation, interwoven with theatre, music, children's books, and literary-philosophical theory, thus achieving the extraordinary evolution of a calling that aspires to strengthen the link between man and the world, according to a slow and strong-willed practice of transmutation of terrestrial matter, and of its creatures, into a body of light.

In 1998, a few months before his death, Hughes publishes his collection of poetry, *Birthday Letters*. The night of memory that had eagerly crushed the thickened and hardened mineral from that incurable rift, blossoms into a manifestation of extraordinary beauty, in which everything regains character, presence, and evocative power.

Of that endeavor Hughes will say afterward that he could no longer keep it repressed; it was required, it reflourished with a sense of liberation, purification, and astonishment; although, as one can imagine, many read it primarily as a clear act of self-acquittal, as a last attempt of absolution. But these preconceived interpretations do not diminish in the slightest the brilliance of this unique work, which is placed side by side with the great poetry collections, ancient and modern, and makes Sylvia an icon of love poetry not less radiant, even if at times more tragic, than other women etched in collective memory.

Hughes collects himself in a silent and absorbed dialogue with his lost companion, his *soror mystica*, and recovers all traces of her; he aligns these traces, tries to contain them in a drawing; he confides and interrogates. The

poet's unshakable trust in the redeeming power of poetry, in its therapeutical ability, has made us perceive, quite fittingly, in this great work with a solid and superb architecture, an authentic religious ritual. The sensitive task of having to take on a subject that, despite the poet's age, was still very hurtful and scorching required presumably on Hughes' behalf a thorough understanding of the work's symbolic structure – from the exterior framework to the inner embroidery of rhythm and strophes, to the timbre and voice, by draining the verses from any mannerism, clearly sculpting the words and rhetorical figures, as well as secreting the symbols within a precise and often learned and very sophisticated mythological network.

Perhaps Hughes answers a calling, perhaps modern Admetus erects a “funeral monument” for his Alceste, but it is a monument completely void of commemorative accents, since the poetry that forces death to step back does not extinguish it; if anything, it engages in a final duel with it, enlivening it, evoking it, tracking it down in the devouring skin to skin with Sylvia. We understand that Hughes has accepted a demanding challenge, a final intimidating alchemical effort in which what is at stake is to be able to transmute blood and fire into spiritual flesh, to secure for the inexplicable that sank into the abyss a body of resurrection, to save it and to save ourselves. And, without ever openly admitting it, to forgive and grant her – for having abandoned him – a difficult pardon, and grant it to himself too, for having remained.

Hughes, as any modern alchemist dealing with the symbolic medium, is probably distilling a sort of alexipharmic, and needs all of the “science of Libra” he learnt during his long journey in order to obtain the elixir of a common salvation, the medicine that would reunite him with Sylvia in immortality – in the “staggering thing / fired with rainbows, raw with cringing heat, / [that] blinks at the source” he touches on in *Cave Birds* (Hughes, *The Owl Flower*, 439) – or instead the poison that leads to destruction and oblivion.

For this reason too the structure appears so important. Anna Skea builds upon it an extraordinary hermeneutical hypothesis, in her outstanding essay *Magic and Poetry*, which sees in the selection of eighty-eight compositions an occult strategy, since a few other poems – it is not a coincidence if they are the most

literal ones, the least successful in terms of symbolism – will be published afterwards in a final miscellaneous collection, *Howls and Whispers*. Eighty-eight poems represent for the author the numeric outcome of a cabbalistic calculation, and the collection would be decipherable only within a magical pattern.

On the one hand, the eighty-eight poems seem to frame in her opinion the initiatory voyage to Wisdom, or to the birth of the Self – in Jungian terms – in the four worlds of the Cabbala according to the emanative scheme of the Sephirothic Tree of Life, and by means of the twenty-two passages that correspond to the letters of the Jewish alphabet. Hughes states, in what is perhaps his most complex study, which focuses on Shakespeare's works – here he also displays his expertise on the subject of the Cabbala – that “the Tree (of Cabbala) becomes a means of organizing the psyche by internalizing the knowable universe as a stairway of God” (Hughes, 1992, 20-21).

Therefore, the eighty-eight poems would be a progressive transformation, through the archetypal world of *Aziluth*, closer to the origin, then of *Briah*, the one of original forms but still abstract, later on that of *Yetzirah*, which synthesizes, in individual terms, the creative potentialities, and ultimately that of *Assiah*, the world of terrestrial and concrete conscience. Each poem of the four orders would correspond in sequence to each of the twenty-two passages characterized by the Jewish letter, that is, the passage from one *sephiroth* to another, and to each of the Tarot cards that represent the Major Arcana (22 cards) that Hughes knew well and that correspond to a large extent, in terms of meaning, to the cabbalistic scheme. So, for example, the initial poem we read, “*Visit*”, since it is the fourth of the volume, would be placed in the “path” of the Empress (Arcane), tied to the symbolism of the letter “*daleth*” (four) and, on the tree of Life, to the fourth passage that links *Sephiroth 2 (Chokmak)* to *Sephiroth 3 (Binah)*.

The symbolism of this “path” is rich and complex, and tied to the original and abstract world of *Aziluth*, in which everything is still possible, but the initiate is uninformed and moves naively. *Daleth* means “Door” and, therefore, symbolizes the openness of the initiate toward Illumination. So, according to this scheme, the poem presents Ted to us at the threshold of his journey, led toward his destiny by the hermetical guide Lucas, still tottering and semi-blind before the seduction

of Venus-Demeter, which hides behind the arcane of the Empress and the mystery of the Quadrature of the elements reverberated by the temporal and psychological totality experienced in the “path” number four; a mystery that resounds significantly in a poem that brings together life and death, present and past, masculine and feminine, hope and desperation.

Of course it is impossible now to elaborate on this suggestive analysis, which is a constant stimulus for looking into the matter more thoroughly, and a precious guide for understanding the semantic complexity of the work: perhaps the interpretation is at times slightly forced, but it stands out as highly credible because of Hughes’ expertise in the subject, but also, primarily, because of his awareness of what was dauntingly at stake in the work.

Hughes was familiar with the examples set out by previous poets as Milton, Donne or Dryden, who used cabalistic numerology for the structure of their own poems, but certainly may have been inclined to such choice – which he had no time to confirm (where instead he did so for the alchemical structure of *Cave Birds*) – because of his knowledge of the power and also of the risks that the evocative force of the poetic symbol may imply, since it induces to restore life to demons and negative forces trapped in the past, but also to favor their redemption. In a certain sense the poet – who, in his extreme animism had always handled with circumspection the disquieting signals of daily life and the symbolic traps of art – had perhaps adopted, before the arduous task and extreme exposure to which he was drawing near, the cabalistic scheme precisely in order to protect the work and himself, thus making possible that negotiation with events and energies of the past that he was about to evoke.

Hughes understood perfectly he had not come through that experience unscathed; he knew very well he was deeply embroiled in it and bore severe wounds inscribed on his flesh. They were, thirty years later, still open and bleeding, because he had not only been the witness, but especially the *alter ego*, the imaginal companion of Sylvia’s Great Poetic Work.

The “shot” that came from her father’s gun, when he was dead, whose bullet was Sylvia herself set in God’s direction, as Hughes states in the poem he in fact entitles *The Shot* – the metaphoric shot fired by a father often recalled as the

mortal source of Sylvia's destiny, that German father lost when she was only nine years old and never really forgotten – had actually first hit and gone through Ted:

You were gold-jacketed, solid silver,
Nickel-tipped. Trajectory perfect
As through ether. Even the cheek-scar,
Where you seemed to have side-swiped concrete,
Served as a rifling groove
To keep you true.
Till your real target
Hid behind me. Your Daddy,
The god with the smoking gun. For a long time
Vague as mist, I did not even know
I had been hit,
Or that you had gone clean through me –
To bury yourself at last in the heart of the god.
(Hughes, *The Shot*, 1053)

At that time, Hughes' shamanic capabilities proved still too weak in order to react to that blow. He was not prepared for that blow – Hughes apologizes – and was unable “to juggle and to abate” the scorching bullet that was Sylvia.

Ariel

Ariel is the name of Sylvia's most sublime and dominant poetic voice. It is the name she intended for the book she was writing during the final two years of her life, and the title Hughes chose for the collection that he compiled himself, with some changes based on clues he found in Sylvia's writings. Ariel, spirit of the air and God's lioness. The *stony*, barbed, and violent voice with which Sylvia took leave of the world.

Ariel, for Sylvia, was in real life the horse she rode during riding lessons, but in her unconscious he is Shakespeare's Ariel in *The Tempest*, the aerial and androgynous spirit imprisoned in a tree-trunk by the witch Sycorax, saved but

trapped by the magician Prospero, and released only in the end. In this play, the first she saw live in a theatre when she was twelve years old, Sylvia noticed a sort of personal myth – because of the relationship with her father who was assimilated to Prospero; because of the presence of the sea, which marked the golden age of her childhood in his company; and because in the light of that myth poetry took on the power, dear to Hughes, of a transformational magic. In Jewish Ariel means “God’s lioness”, a fact Sylvia was familiar with, and an epithet that means Jerusalem. Perhaps she also knew of another biblical meaning of the word, that is, Ariel as God’s altar where holocausts are committed. It is because of this impenetrable and suggestive semantic halo – besides the symbolism of the resurrection associated with the lion that is also a symbol of earth and fire – that Ariel became so dear to the poetess who continued discovering the complex and powerful texture of her new voice.

Hughes felt its resonance early on, since *Poem for a Birthday* of October 1959, and especially in the last of compositions included in it, *The Stones*, and he heard echoing, at least initially, a hope of renewal, of emancipation, of birth of a renewed spirit, at last authentic and original.

Sylvia had fought very hard to achieve her poetry and find herself. The diligent and orderly effort, the accuracy of rhyme, verse, and word, which demanded of her extremely long sessions of proofreading, was like the obsessive commitment of a “religious fanatic” Hughes states in the poem “The God”, but this task at some point turned out to be flat, sterile, and ineffective.

Many critics and commentators of Plath’s work tend to point to the winter of 1962, a few months before her death – at a time when she feels abandoned, humiliated and lonely – as the moment of crisis that paved the way for her poetic rebirth. In keeping with this interpretation, her lyrical outpouring would become then primarily a desperate reaction, a sort of redemption; the poetic imagination would appeal to a vindictive self-affirmation: extinguished the old poetic self, Ariel’s peremptory voice would assert itself in the debacle.

Hughes, on the contrary, feels that this voice breaks out much earlier, in a pained and frenzied gestation, necessary and ultimately explosive. In the final *Poem for a Birthday*, at whose center the theme of a new birth from the ancient

death – from her suicide attempt – is essential, he hears a new voice, more biting, austere, and tense. The recollection of the electroshock she underwent after that failed attempt, a ruthless and ambiguous experience often recalled by Plath, is announced as becoming “a still pebble” with the “importunate cricket” voice that speaks “in a quarry of silences”.

In the “after-hell” where Sylvia “suck[s] at the paps of darkness”, “catgut stitches [her] fissures”. “This is the city where men are mended”. In it she discovers that “love is the bone and sinew of my curse” and also that “there is nothing to do. I shall be good as new” (Plath, *The Stones*, 136-7).

A sigh of relief from the beyond, the mysterious double that for some time could be predicted, and that Hughes evokes in the shadows that inevitably descend to darken the endings of the poems in *Birthday Letters* – the mysterious appearances, but also the tremor of the wait, the pressure of an unsuppressible and potentially salvific inner need – blossoms nonetheless at its height in the poem *Elm* of April 1962, as Hughes himself acknowledges.

In memos written in 1998 to German translators of his *Letters* Ted explains that the elm, throughout Europe, is the tree that appears at the entrance of the underworld; it is a tree of death. It is also an Orphic tree since the myth narrates that an elm grove sprang up in response to a love song Orpheus played after he lost Eurydice in the underworld, and resurfaced alone. The Orphic and funerary component strongly connected to the elm unfolds in the poem that Sylvia writes for him and, according to Ted, this is precisely the poem where Ariel lets himself be heard entirely. On that occasion, Hughes adds, the myth of Sylvia’s father emerges in all its strength, and he frequently makes comments on it in his collection but explicitly and peremptorily in *The Table* (Hughes, 1132-4):

I wanted to make you a solid writing-table
That would last a lifetime.
I bought a broad elm plank two inches thick,
The wild bark surfing along one edge of it,
Rough-cut for coffin timber (...)
I did not
Know I had made and fitted a door

Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave. (1132)

Sylvia, according to Ted's description, would bend over her desk, to draw out the deep sound of her new voice, which for the poet belongs to her dead father summoning her; that grief never resolved, that call to be like God, that terrifying clamour that came from the Colossus at the end of the labyrinth, awaiting his meal. At a certain point, inevitably, or perhaps even because of Hughes' negligence, "with your arms locked / round him, in joy, he took you / down through the elm door" (1133).

Shortly before, Ted and Sylvia still seemed to happily share her patient and tireless effort as she braided a rug and Ted could still be "the snake-charmer" who read out loud Conrad's novels and, perhaps not by chance, *The Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*, but the "rag rug" that Sylvia kept on weaving was a balm, a tune, the anguiform symbol – and surely because of it even ambiguous – of a shared silent progress:

I was simply
Happy to watch your scissors being fearless
As you sliced your old wool dresses,
Your cast-offs, once so costly,
Into bandages.
(Hughes, *The Rag Rug*, 1130)

Of course bandages of "dark venous blood, / daffodil yellow". Therefore, still of death and resurrection, as the the two colors and two figures lead us to think. Blood and daffodils, constantly and recurringly present in the plot, in the *braid* of the *Letters*.

I remember
Those long, crimson-shadowed evenings of ours
More like the breath-held camera moments
Of reaching to touch a falcon that does not fly off.
As if I held your hand to stroke a falcon
With your hand.

Later (not much later)
Your diary confided to whoever
What furies you bled into that rug.
As if you had dragged it, like your own entrails,
Out through your navel.
(Hughes, *The Rag Rug*, 1131)

In *Elm* Sylvia feels “feathery turnings” of something within her, split between light and shadow, between the two aspects of the female Goddess that pursues her, both Venus and Hecate, as of the symbolic tree, the generative one and the mortal one. “I am terrified by this dark thing / that sleeps in me” and still

I am incapable of more knowledge. / What is this, this face / so murderous in its
strangle of branches? – / Its snaky acids hiss. / It petrifies the will. These are the
isolate, slow faults / that kill, that kill, that kill. (Plath, *Elm*, 193)

But the die is cast.

In the poem *Setebos* Hughes puts together a real dramatic performance through the division of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, probably with the clear intent of recreating the events of that period toward the end of 1962, within a protective and transformational symbolic framework. The title points to *Setebos*, the demon-husband of Sycorax, the witch that imprisons Ariel’s spirit, as the symbolic character of such containment since the latter is a sort of “Lord of the Universe” that could perhaps monitor the evolution of events. But in actual fact it is Sycorax’s violence that prevails.

The first part of the poem sees Sylvia and Ted, as Miranda and Ferdinand, still soothed, as Venus and Adonis, in a paradisiacal love in which “Ariel was our aura” and “Caliban our secret”, the one “who showed us / the sweetest, the freshest, the wildest / and loved us as we loved” (Hughes, *Setebos*, 1128). Sycorax, in the meantime, limited herself to bobbing “in the hazy surf at the horizon / offshore, in the wings / of the heavens, like a director / studying the scenes to come” (1128-9). But things capsize early on, showing Ariel’s and Caliban’s lunar and menacing side, hidden behind the appearance of “poetic

demons” tied to the Great Goddess. Caliban’s obscure and earthy aspect bursts forth and he “reverted to type”. Sycorax’s magic, pictured in the poem as the “rind” of the quince in their garden, invades the scene. And so one can assume that it was the naive tasting of the fruit of that tree – in other words, having handled without the necessary confidence the magical powers and suggestions of poetry – which flung the two protagonists out of the Garden of Eden.

Ted now hears “the bellow in your voice” and the landscape blends in with that of the labyrinth of Minos. The bellow is that which frees itself in Ariel when Sylvia describes in the *Elm* “the dark thing” that inhabits her. The elm itself in Sylvia’s poetry is a lunar creature that collects the mortal powers of Sycorax and Medusa.

The vision that Ted has of the emergence of Ariel from Sylvia is complex and at times even contradictory. Ariel is certainly an ambiguous figure; he is the birth of Sylvia’s authentic spirit of poetic individuation as well as an inescapable reference to a destructive and deadly dimension. Here, in *Setebos*, Sylvia is once again shattered; she is the designated victim of Minos, under whose guise transpires the shadow of Otto: “Your bellowing song / was a scream inside a bronze / bull being roasted” (*Setebos*, 1129).

The two in the end are separated and Ted lies “in the labyrinth of a cowslip / without a clue”: again he appears unprepared, uninformed, inexperienced. The cowslip probably is a symbol that evokes the death and resurrection of Adonis, but at the time it is only a harbinger, or an allusion to the distant future of the poet himself. In fact it is “too late to find you / and get to my ship. / The moon, off her moorings, / tossed in tempest” unleashed by Ariel himself while “the laughter / of Sycorax was thunder and lightning / and black downpour”. Ted feels “your cries / bugling through the hot bronze” and echoing the question: “Who has dismembered us?” (*Setebos*, 1129). We find here the same verse contained in a poem by Sylvia written in May of 1962, *Event*, which reads: “Who has dismembered us? / The dark is melting. / We touch like cripples” (Plath, *Event*, 195). And the dismemberment, besides being internal, is also that of Ted and Sylvia, and shortly after it will become literal, with their separation.

In this poem the rift between them becomes manifest – perhaps the “black

gap” Sylvia talks about specifically in *Event* – a rift that is shown by the progress of both poets’ inner rebirth, which seems to turn for good in opposite directions, while, at the same time, the energy fraught with death of Ariel’s dark side seems to gain the upper hand. Sylvia is now engaged in her own “psychomachia”, as Nadia Fusini describes it, carries out the biopsy of her inner self looking for the face of that double that interrogates her and squeezes her in the form of a shadow. There is an appeal to her profundity, to her extreme and mortal “soul-making”, of which suicide, perhaps as fulfillment, perhaps as tragic falsification, is a final gesture. She is inhabited by “the Other”, described in the homonymous poem as a sickly “moon-glow”, a glass or mirror that makes its way “between myself and myself”, smiling, white and statuesque, sterile. That is Ariel, with multiple faces.

But Ariel is also much more. A presence almost permanent in Hughes’ *Letters*; he is “a cowed / humanoid of raggy shadows” that suddenly appears in the poem *Portraits* (Hughes, 1110) with “the gloomy neglected chamber behind you” while their friend Howard was painting the portrait at Yaddo in the autumn of 1959, that portrait where “you deepened, / molten, luminous.../ In a flaming of oils” (1110). Ted sees them “with horrible premonition”, that “mystery smudge extra, / stalking the glaze wetness / of your new-fired idol brilliance” (1110).

But at a later time the demon becomes autonomous, distinct, and arrogant. It becomes the “Ogre lover” of *Fairy Tale*, a poem belonging to the last period, which narrates that the ogre in fact, “who recuperated all day / inside death”, at night would escape Ted’s attention who in the meantime was not able to see “his effigy there, burning in your tears / like a thing of tar” (Hughes, *Fairy Tale*, 1147). It is the Dantean figure of the poem *The Blackbird*, “a dumb creature, looping at the furnace door / on its demon's prong” (Hughes, *The Blackbird*, 1148), the “prisoner's rage, in the dungeon” that “you fed”, while Ted, unknowingly, nurtured it, pampered it, nourished it, and “you ate and drank and swallowed / sliding me sleepy looks, like a suckling babe, / from under your eyelids” (*The Blackbird*, 1148). It was, at the end of the same poem, allusively and significantly, in a definitive reversal of values, “a pen already writing / wrong is right, right wrong”. Those words like “axes”, “words dry and riderless”,

fatal, which Sylvia herself will ambiguously celebrate in one of her latest poems, bearing indeed the title *Words*.

Ariel, an ambiguous and omnipresent figure, but necessary. Ted, on the other hand, in one of his essays dealing precisely with his role in Sylvia's poetry, stresses how she had no choice. Her personal drama flowed over the top and needed to be translated into words and figures. Ted recognizes the compulsive instinct, the "clairvoyant precision" for choosing the forms through which she was able to transmit her radiant and chilling visions of death. He sees the "deep and inclusive inner crisis" that underlay her work. He senses the "magnetic process" that seemed "to engross all her attention", her preoccupation surrounding "death and rebirth" also fueled by her own concern for rituals and oracles they both constantly questioned, on the Ouija board or through other esoteric instruments, regarding their destiny. He is now conscious of the silent horror that inhabited her and of her tragic innocence. He also recognizes her courage, determination and, at the same time, he tenderly pities her disorder: "she seems almost invalid in her lack of inner protections".

But Sylvia had to descend to the underworld, detach herself from Ted, from her father, had to go all the way, tear her living flesh, as in *A Birthday Present*, because in this way, only this way, from her "side... [may] the universe slide" (Plath, *A Birthday Present*, 208). She understands that her relationship with Ted is very deep and equally ambiguous if not mortal: in the poem *The Rabbit Catcher*, also written in May of 1962, she perceives this terrible ambivalence, just a short time prior to their separation:

And we, too, had a relationship –
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also (Plath, *The Rabbit Catcher*, 194)

In the meantime her voice becomes dry, a "universal" deep language emerges, a song of the regions of darkness capable of not backing away in the face of anything.

Ariel is also, and especially for Sylvia, the voice of a “rebirth” that in the poem – accordingly entitled *Ariel* (October 1962) – finds expression in all of its tidiness of unrelenting tercets that proclaim the occurred transformation:

White
Godiva, I unpeel -
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning”
(Plath, *Ariel*, 239-40)

This is a very dense poem, where the “I” is no longer a personal reference; if anything, it is the acquisition of a transmuted identity where the wheat is sea foam, and the body of glory is an arrow and dew (mercury) that has completed its work, in order to unfold a scarlet gaze, lit by love – of that red which remains the color of all of her major poetry, the central symbol of the poetics of *Ariel*, in addition to a dye signaling the completion of her *Opus* – on the “cauldron of morning” (*Ariel*, 240), the luminous cauldron in which stands out the body of resurrection.

Sylvia was thirty years old when she discovered Ariel’s voice.

Hughes, in hindsight, believes that Sylvia was still not ready, that, divided between the astrological influence of Saturn and a psychic subjection to the Great

Goddess, her choice of Ariel was a weak and destructive one. There was an effect of illusion, made slippier and more dangerous by the lunar influence of rapture and possession resulting from an excess of identification with the mobile spirit of the air. Was that the case? Did she really not have, as yet, the balance and maturity to produce pure gold from that sinister lead in which she had immersed herself? Had she experienced an inverted or abortive alchemy, as one gathers from some verses contained in the poem *Apprehensions* of May 1962 (195-6), where the oppressive and claustrophobic alternation of a white wall, a grey one, a red one, and at last a black one, in an atmosphere of emptiness, of “sourness” and of “unidentifiable birds” would suggest the sign of a fall?

Elsewhere, however, Ted himself acknowledges that such “birth” represented a “temporary” triumph and the completion of Sylvia’s “first, brave attempt... to recreate her history and remake herself”.¹³ Then who was Ariel, was he “the new babe of light” or “the old / babe of dark flames and screams / that sucked the oxygen out of both of us” (Hughes, *Suttee*, 1140)? Was he “our Mercury” that connects and nourishes the voice or only the indifferent and gloomy “psychopomp?”

The God

The last person who saw Sylvia before her death, on the night of February 10, 1963, was her neighbor. He met her after she had bought some stamps and was returning home. He said afterwards that she stopped in the hall and waited there for a long time, because when he opened his door a few minutes later asking if she was feeling alright, she replied: “Yes, I am having the most wonderful vision”.

In early morning of the following day Sylvia left some bread, butter, and milk next to her children’s bed, flung their window wide open, and sealed off the door with adhesive tape and towels. She then went down to the kitchen and sealed off

¹³ Ted Hughes, “On Sylvia Plath”, *Raritan* 14.2, 1994: p. 9 [translator’s note].

there too all fissures. She then lay herself headfirst in the oven, leaned her cheek on a folded napkin, and turned on the gas.

Perhaps Sylvia had made an appointment with death much earlier, at least since that August of 1953, when, at the age of twenty, and after swallowing about fifty sleeping pills stolen from her home's medicine cabinet, she crawled through an underground passage that led to the basement. She then hid behind a woodpile, after moving the pieces and rearranging them one by one behind her. She would have died at the time if the overdose had not forced her to vomit and if, after two days of fruitless search, her wailings had not led to the woodpile, where she was well-hidden and scarred on a cheek for having brushed her face against the floor.

Sylvia, with her "exaggerated American / grin" and "Veronica Lake bang" that caught Ted's attention when he saw her in the picture of the Fullbright Scholars in 1956; the "lithe and smooth" "Beautiful beautiful America" of their first Romantic encounter. Perhaps Sylvia did not stand a chance, choked as she was by an "insulation of alpha", the highest educational achievement in American schools, on which Ted so much insists in the poem *Telos*. Sylvia who was trying to shun her perfection, her affinity to a bullet of "gold-jacketed, solid silver" (Hughes, *The Shot*, 1053) fired off with too much violence, who was trying in every way to escape "the Furies of the Alpha", (Hughes, *Telos*, 1157) but was not able to desert her deep and inflexible aspirations, and even when "[you] hurdled every letter in the Alphabet" and you hurled "yourself beyond Omega / [you] fell / into a glittering Universe of Alpha" (*Telos*, 1157). Her destiny, according to Hughes' reading – certainly not linear, but not uncertain – was inescapable.

Many explanatory interpretations were put forward and many questions remain open: was she just suffering from bipolar personality, as hinted by some hasty psychiatric diagnosis, and owing to the fact that her parents had burdened her with too much ambition for an unreasonably high goal destined to inevitable and irremediable collapse? Did she worship perhaps a secret cult in favor of a sacrificial geture – extreme and homeopathic – honoring the Great Goddess, the primitive Bee Goddess, of which in her final months she will become priestess?

A gesture aimed at healing the world that had progressively abased itself and desertified before Sylvia's eyes, through her own – physical and literal – death? Was her life led by an anxiety for purity so strong that she almost became a “heretical Cathar”, as Fusini argues, or had she surrendered to the deadly vortex of a Medusean maternal code from which she could not free herself? Was she attaining, as Hillman contends in his acclaimed book on suicide, a passage into the ultrapersonal or an openness to the tragic that finally erases the individual factor? – that extreme transformation which exchanges becoming with being and is welcomed by a sudden peace, because the “Kingdom” has finally been reached? – Did she feel the bitter and stinging anguish of revenge, toward her father who had abandoned her, toward her mother who had drained her soul, and toward Ted who, as her father previously, had betrayed and abandoned her?

Had she been devoured and swallowed by her deadly “double”, or in an extreme act of realization of her own soul's task had she gone beyond the boundary between the body of flesh and the body of light? Would poetry have been sufficient to save her? Could it – in agreement with Ted's belief – have been the instrument, as are initiatic mysteries and magical practices, to contain her grief, heal it, transform it, and ultimately spare her the abyss?

Her God, beyond question, was demanding. He was a God in search of sacrificial victims.

You were like a religious fanatic
Without a god – unable to pray.
You wanted to be a writer.
Wanted to write? What was it within you
Had to tell its tale?
The story that has to be told
Is the writer's God, who calls
Out of sleep, inaudibly: ‘Write.’
Write what? (Hughes, *The God*, 1163)

That is how Ted interrogates and almost explores, in *The God* – a crucial poem for piecing together the enflamed wounds of that story – “your story, my

story”.

Sylvia was determined, inflexible, strict, and demanding, in love as well as in writing. She went as far as comparing herself to Saint Teresa of Avila, whose biography she read during those years. She knew that “the story has to be told”. Writing was her God; writing was a “religious act”, as she wrote in her Journal: “Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reliving of people and the world as they are and as they might be (...). The worst thing, worse than all of them, would be to live with not writing”, she wrote as early as December 12, 1958 (Plath, *Journals*, 436-7). Writing was the love of her life, her Demon-Slave, and her verses a “spurt of blood”, enlivened by a possessive and relentless spirit that swallowed her up.

Sylvia, who, like a “desert ascetic”, longed for a voice that was late in coming, offered verses to her personal God, “little phials of the emptiness”, “crystals of salt from your sleep”, and Ted goes on, “like the dewy sweat / on some desert stones, after dawn. / Oblations to an absence. / Little sacrifices” (*The God*, 1164). The birth initially, however, was that of a dead child, which Ted, with all the love and pain that transpires from this extraordinary poem, depicts as the scene of a Pietà, in which he is also involved:

Like a woman
Nursing a dead child. Bending to cool
Its lips with tear-drops on her fingertip,
So I nursed you, who nursed a moon
That was human but dead, withered, and
Burned you like a lump of phosphorus. (Hughes, *The God*, 1164)

But then the child moved, Sylvia’s tragic “*duende*”, bloody and obscure, comes alive and “blood oozed at your nipple, A drip feed of blood. Our happy moment!” (*The God*, 1164).

That was also a victory, a moment of sudden and rapidly lost complicity, of common achievement. But the complicity vanished and the God asked for a total sacrifice, human sacrifices, the mother, the father, Ted himself: “your God snuffed up the fatty reek” of the pyre. “His roar was like a basement furnace / in

your ears, thunder in the foundations” (*The God*, 1165)

Then you wrote in a fury, weeping,
Your joy a trance-dancer
In the smoke in the flames.
‘God is speaking through me,’ you told me.
‘Don’t say that,’ I cried. ‘Don’t say that.
That is horribly unlucky!’
As I sat there with blistering eyes
Watching everything go up
In the flames of your sacrifice
That finally caught you too till you
Vanished, exploding
Into the flames
Of the story of your God
Who embraced you
And your Mummy and your Daddy –
Your Aztec, Black Forest
God of the euphemism Grief. (Hughes, *The God*, 1165-6)

The God of the euphemism grief; an extreme, possessive, inexorable God, who in Sylvia’s works, from *Bell Jar* to her latest poems, seems to act cruelly – displaying a form of obscure and all-devouring love – against everyone and everything, and because of his fury and the anguish that issues, even the word pain proves to be a euphemism.

On the other hand, looking at things from a different – a more relaxed and detached – perspective, wasn’t perhaps the “story that has to be told”, likewise and in any case, the story of the progress of Sylvia’s shamanic spirit in her itinerary of transformation? Was it not also, in spite of violent and perhaps endless outcomes, the story of the journey that Sylvia made toward her own recovery and her own renewal? Her compulsion, her desperate need “to tell everybody” her story was, as Ted himself declared in an interview, an essential part of the spiritual journey that every authentic poet needs to make.

Unbalance, unawareness, carelessness: they are spread throughout “Birthday Letters”. What would have happened if Ted and Sylvia had picked up the signals

that transpired repeatedly before their eyes? If they had experienced several moments and several trials in a less somnambulant state and, if for instance, the *Epiphany* of the fox-cub on the “hump” of Chalk Farm Bridge had been taken more seriously by Ted? And if right at the time of the crossing, at the height of that crossing, perhaps still in time, his thoughts, rather than as “large obtuse dogs”, had been enlightened by the sudden offer of that “unpredictable, / powerful, bounding fox” (Hughes, *Epiphany*, 1116) that was staring at him and that the passer-by would sell him for just one pound?

If Ted had paid and returned home “with that armful of fox”, his ancient animal totem, that offer of sulfur and mercury seemingly capable of looking after the tortured alchemical union between him and Sylvia; if he hadn’t surrendered to the mundane preoccupation of limited space in their home, of the newborn baby girl; if he had understood, as the last part of the poem reads, “that whatever comes with a fox / is what tests a marriage and proves it a marriage” (Hughes, *Epiphany*, 1117); then perhaps his marriage would not have failed, and that sign of salvific Nature would not have sunk into the Underground from which, orphaned, it had emerged, while Ted would not have “walked on as if out of [his] own life?” (*Epiphany*, 1117).

If he had realized, while Sylvia was becoming familiar with Yorkshire’s beloved nature, seeing her again “with her eyes”, that the owl which had appeared quietly and suddenly and that defined his “masterpiece” of animator of forest mysteries – that owl which splayed its pinions into his face “taking [him] for a post” (Hughes, *The Owl*, 1064) – was not only an extraordinary “*coup de théâtre*”, but was also conveying him a sorrowful message; if he and Sylvia had had the sensitivity of the bats they met in the Karlsbad caverns, that extraordinary “clockwork, perfected like their radar”, which “oiled the unfailing logic of the earth” on the border between day and night, and knew how to sense, despite its physiological blindness, the arrival of a storm with great anticipation, in order to take shelter; if they had had the “eyes open” of those bats that “unlike us, / [...] knew how, and when, to detach themselves / from the love that moves the sun and the other stars” (Hughes, *Karlsbad Caverns*, 1108) as Anne Ravano’s brilliant translation of Dante underscores; shall we conclude then that the furious

turn of events would not have lured Sylvia into the Gravestone tomb? And Ted and his children to lay “in your death” enshrouded in and enticed by the sounds of wolves in the nearby city zoo, as sole protection during that long endless winter, in which at night he felt “awake in my body” with “my neck-nerve uprooted and the tendon / which fastened the base of my skull / to my left shoulder / torn from its shoulder-root and cramped into knots?” (Hughes, *Life after Death*, 1160).

Hughes celebrates Sylvia in verse; his task is that of a “*Tzaddik*”, the fisherman of the eighteenth passage of the Sephirotic Tree of Life, and he carries it out with commitment, love and intense suffering. He is the “*Tzaddik*” who exchanges the Vital Force between the world and the divine Fountain, who fishes out fallen sparks, shattered pots and fragments of soul fallen down from an unsuccessful divine creation. Hughes, as a “*Tzaddik*”, metaphorically feeds on them, and through their assimilation becomes always more conscious of the Divine and more capable at repairing damages, rifts, and downfalls. This is the task of the Shaman or of the Medicine Poet, which Hughes, here as never before, carries out to its fullest extent.

The poet, at the end of his life, after a long and impenetrable silence, leaves us his story; leaves us a heart wrenching secret that was addressed to his long departed wife; a labyrinthine web of motifs, hypotheses, questions, loving elegiac passages that, unfortunately, I have not been able to include all in writing. He offers his restitution, still enflamed and tormented, of the inalterable vortex in which life has tossed him headfirst.

In the last poem he dedicates to Sylvia, *Red*, the eightyeighth of the collection, he recalls that red was the color she most loved. Pervasive, all-engaging, rampant, as the hearts she disseminated all over the place, during the last period, as a partly infantile and partly symbolic reawakening of her inexhaustible loving devotion, and of the painful storm that was unsettling her mind. The color of passion and fulfillment, but also the symptom of an incurable wound; red “was your color”. Yet,

Blue was better for you. Blue was wings.

Kingfisher blue silks from San Francisco
Folded your pregnancy
In crucible caresses.
Blue was your kindly spirit – not a ghoul
But electrified, a guardian, thoughtful.

In the pit of red
You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness.

But the jewel you lost was blue. (Hughes, *Red*, 1170)

It recalls a passage from Ingeborg Bachmann's novel *Malina*. The blue stone is an ancient religious symbol that expresses "bond with the sky", an aerial symbol, a symbol of Ariel. In Bachmann's story, the protagonist, while having a dream, finds herself next to three stones, each of a different color: red, white, and blue. The red one emitted flashes in which one could read the message "live and be amazed". The white one was that of liberation. But the blue one, "in which all blues dart", said: "to write is to be amazed".

Sylvia, as Ted recounts in a poem dedicated to their wedding day, *A Pink Wool Knitted Dress*, on that day was "transfigured":

So slender and new and naked,
A nodding spray of wet lilac.
You shook, you sobbed with joy, you were ocean depth
Brimming with God.
You said you saw the heavens open
And show riches, ready to drop upon us.
Levitated beside you, I stood subjected
To a strange tense: the spellbound future.
(Hughes, *A Pink Wool Knitted Dress*, 1065)

The relationship between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath perhaps could have ended differently, if they had paid attention to the first spirit that showed up on the *Ouija* board, when, at the beginning of their relationship, they feverishly interrogated it. They should have backed off from that insidious game, from their

challenge, when the spirit would only answer “rotteness”, or “worms”, or simply “bones” (Hughes, *Ouija*, 1076); they should have withdrawn.

But we know today that their sacrifice – Sylvia’s sacrifice, Ted’s long night – has given us shining gems of the imaginal world, has retained the rare and magnetic power of astonishing us and healing us with that strange grammar tense, the “spellbound future”, an accessible time only in a condition of shamanic trance, made accessible by those who “write by amazing themselves”. Ted and Sylvia formed part of the creators who, according to William Blake, like magicians, attempt to “make the Sun descend”: their pen, a “kindling pen” with its power – poetic and artistic – tried to capture the timeless moment in which the Infinite manifests itself, even if at times, as so often is the case in Sylvia’s verses, “Objects / suffered in their new presence, tortured / into final position” (Hughes, *Drawing*, 1071).

At the memorial service for Ted Hughes, his friend and colleague Seamus Heaney read a beautiful poem by Ted, taken from the book *River* and entitled “That morning”, whose final verses bring back the full radiance of a “search” nevertheless accomplished:

Then for a sign that we were where we were
Two gold bears came down and swam like men

Beside us. And dived like children.
And stood in deep water as on a throne
Eating pierced salmon off their talons.

So we found the end of our journey.

So we stood, alive in the river of light
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light. (Hughes, *That morning*, 664)

We do not know why Sylvia killed herself. We do not know who her God really was: if he was her father, her mother, Ted, or her ancient poets, her invisible Lares, Stevens, Pound, or even Yeats – her latest tutelary deity – whose home she chose in order to spend the final months of her life, and die there. Nor

do we know what exactly forced Ted to keep silent for over thirty years, and what led him in the final months of his life to lay bare to Sylvia and to all of us, in all respects, his love and his desperation; to surrender that wondrous jewel, the quintessence of a shipwreck, which is his last poetry collection.

We do not know if Sylvia, on that night of February 1963, in the “beautiful vision” that she experienced, was able to only catch sight of the last rays of a world that was separating itself from her, or if she reached that “*visio smeragdina*” to which only a few select spirits may gain access in their imaginal journey of resurrection.

Or perhaps we already know everything, as witnesses in astonishment and inexplicably admitted to an “enchanted future” that has come into being through the insaturable verses of these two giants of the transmutation of the world into angel and glorious body.¹⁴ And we are in the know without being able to better express it other than making a genuflection before the hermetic refulgence of their poetry.

One thing however is certain: as Hughes again wrote in *Flounders*, a *Letter* that recalls their stay in America, and in which he describes a boating misadventure that occurred to them in July of 1957 – an adventure in which they experienced the danger of remaining lost at sea, and then the brightening up of a moment of delightful normalcy, when upon returning at the harbour with the boat full of “sea-robins”, the day “curled out of brilliant, arduous morning, / through wind-hammered perilous afternoon, / salt-scoured, to a storm-gold evening” (Hughes, *Flounders*, 1085) – they experienced “a toy miniature / of the life that might have bonded us / into a single animal, a sing soul” (*Flounders*, 1085);

well, at that moment Ted already knew all the way what governed firmly and imprinted its unequivocal mark to their life, because that adventure

... Was a visit from the goddess, the beauty
Who was poetry’s sister – she had come

¹⁴ The author clarifies this point by informing us that according to Iranian mysticism the imaginal reveals itself as an angel, whereas in alchemy it reveals itself as a glorious body [translator’s note].

To tell poetry she was spoiling us.
Poetry listened, maybe, but we heard nothing
And poetry did not tell us. And we
Only did what poetry told us to do
(Hughes, *Flounders*, 1085).

Andrei Tarkovsky's salvific slime

Imaginal anamnesis

A sloping grassy hillside. At the bottom, shaped like a circle, a foggy mirror of still water; perhaps a pond or a lake. A boy's nape covered with blonde hair, an

adult female, a dog, and another woman. Then, with their backs turned to us, they walk down the hill while a female voice begins to sing a lullaby.

First of all, *nostalgia* takes the shape of a small family's descent and immersion amidst grass, water, and fog while a woman sings a song. We move down, toward this area that reflects and drops, and then, we suddenly come to a halt. History steps in.

The *dolly*¹⁵ – a rocking and tilting device for any elevation or descent, a true lyrical organism for any *shot* – slowly climbs up, with plenty of time for a slow development, in tune with the world. A boy's blonde face, a woman's hands on his shoulders, in the background a low wooden construction and a small pond; on its shore the man with black hair and the dog, clearer long streaks reflected in the water, on a dark background, like windows in the sky, in the water of the sky. Behind the two figures there is still the low building, while one makes out a dacha. The *dolly* still goes back up, slowly; it climbs and leaves in the background the pond, images and house, and all around, as if to collect in a miniature the described portrait – the perimeter of a church, a medieval abbey rises with its sharp walls, and tall cusp windows within its walls, like eyes and mirrors.

Slowly the church is already farther down and reveals its smashed roof. The church contains the house, the figures, and the pond. Then the dolly stops; its eye remains fixed on this dual world, where everything is contained and everything overflows. Snow begins to fall on the abbey and on the dacha, in the grey countryside of a stunned Tuscany. The atmosphere is orderly, still, and peaceful. One can hardly hear the voice of a woman singing a lullaby. On a superimposed image appears an inscription: “dedicated to my mother”. This image¹⁶ ends one of Andrei Tarkovsky's most controversial movies, most

¹⁵ The *Dolly*: “In filmmaking and television production, a wheeled support with a small crane that allows quick movements of a film camera or video camera in a horizontal or vertical direction” (Dizionario della lingua italiana De Mauro, ed. 2000).

¹⁶ The movie is *Nostalgia* (1974), which tells the story of a Russian writer, Andrej Gorçakov, who, upon researching the life of an 18th century musician, also Russian, begins a journey of multiple meanings with the help of a woman, Eugenia, and especially of a man, Domenico, whom he meets in Bagno Vignoni near Siena. The latter is a complex figure that, we learn, has imprisoned

penalized by critics, most opposed by the “semiological” hermeneutics of some hazardous and hasty psychoanalysis. Shortly before this last scene two men have died in incidents involving fire. Two men or two parts of the same person, a Russian and an Italian, passed each other a lit candle. They offered themselves in an extreme gesture. The former set himself on fire in a square of Rome. The latter traversed a thermal bath with great effort by walking a lit candle from one side to the other, a weak flame, where the sulfurous water is already depleted; the candle that Domenico, “man of God”, gave him, asking him to carry out this last puzzling mission. They are both killed at the same time and complete an extreme, sacrificial journey. Yet only thanks to this sacrifice, it appears that Gorçakov, the main character, recovers in the Italian cathedral the silence of his memory of the Orient.

It seems then that the “descent” toward the pond of that small family – a descent stuck in one’s memory – is now released and transformed to a higher degree. In the image of the abbey that contains the dacha many divisions are once again pieced together. The one between man and his past, making man finally reappear integral, in the amphitheater of a true place of exile: Gorçakov (it is not difficult to perceive in this name a pseudonym of the author, who at the time was an exile in Italy) finds again the boy, the woman, the dasha, and the dog – persistent symbols in Tarkovsky’s cinema of loyalty and integrity (*Dark* is actually the author’s dog *in real life*, his great and true wolf-dog). And he finds water, the pond at the beginning, one of the many bodies of still water beloved by Tarkovsky, since, unlike the ocean, they refer to smallness, to a “microcosm”, and to its microphysics (Di Giammatteo, 1989, 17), and can mirror the crashing

himself and his family in their home for seven years while awaiting nuclear catastrophe. He will entrust Gorçakov with the ritual task of carrying a lit candle from one side to the other of a hot mineral pool located in the town center. A deed that the protagonist will in fact accomplish at the end of the movie, causing his death, at the same cinematic time in which Domenico will set himself on fire in a demonstration of extreme protest in Rome. The movie ends with the image described above in the abbey of San Galgano in Chiusdino, Tuscany (This basic description, actually, as the others too that will follow, can only help in re-calling the essential plan of the plot, but cannot and does not expect in any way to restore the hypercomplex density of the plot and images that only vision, and no narrative, can approximate).

of the smallest ripple, veiling and unveiling, in a slow and regular motion, the manifold nature of becoming, on the surface and in depth, by moving it elsewhere, by making it iridescent.

Gorçakov finds in the end a haven of peace and the woman's voice, which, in the beginning, was singing the descent for that family intimacy that remained suspended, according to a typical chiasmic pattern of its cinematic and poetic language.

"Yet the first sparse flakes of snow appear in the air and, dancing slowly, as if in a dream, settle on the ground" (Tarkovsky, 1994, 268), on this impossible landscape, snow that is alien to the Tuscan hills, a kind of snow that soothes and permits this *imaginal* conjunction. The old "Abbey of Chiusdino" – also a ruin of a medieval past that seems extinct in the West – contains the small Russian world preserved in memory, like in a Proustian "casket".

There is an extreme place of possible healing for that "mortal" *nostalghia*, that "profound compassion that ties not so much to one's own privation, lack or separation, as to the sufferings of others to which we draw near for a passionate bond" (Tarkovsky, cit. in Masoni-Vecchi, 1997, 93). Because *nostalghia* is for sure a private matter; however, in the Orient, it is a deeper symptom of perception and suffering, of a collective suffering, of a world-wide suffering.

It was not by chance that Tarkovsky perceived his own cinema as "nostalgia of harmony" (Borin, 1989, 113), and such feeling actually, understood along those lines, appears to deeply saturate the fabric of his imaginary. Nostalgia is indeed a private matter, an *endured* matter, paid up, experienced, but it is also a cosmic feeling, a warning for the safety of things, of man in the world. And this nostalgia, an "ailment for one's country", for a return, for a dwelling, is seeking a home.

Where is there appeasement for nostalgia of a peaceful world, of integrity and faithfulness to our land, to our place of birth as native land, as land-depth and foundation, as dwelling? Tarkovsky points out an exploded religious space, the *rescued* perimeter of a ruin of faith, which perhaps because of this wrecked condition and this tenacious persistence – Tarkovsky was very careful about the religious atmosphere of places and times – can welcome and offer shelter.

In a certain way a new form of conjunction takes place here between the East and the West, between Tarkovsky's family "squaring" – dascha, water, family, dog, nature fraught with personal meaning, but also saturated with the material density of Russian soil – and a large religious Christian building, belonging to Western Christianity, now worn-out and cracked, but all the more impressive; and in its exile from the center, in its divestiture, all the more sympathetic. Everyone finds his own nucleus in this distance from the center, in this place of non-return. Here, then, the sky can merge compassionately with the earth, not in tumultuous water, but in the snow's slow transmission, in a dreamy and suspended dance that treats water and sky as one vibrant plane. Time has finally been exorcised, or even better, tamed:

it gently snows, even if it's spring. Times and spaces are getting closer. The loyal dog protects them. Time does not destroy them, but becomes eternity: eternal memory, *večnaja pamjat* (Špidlik, in Zamperini, 1989, 20).

As a matter of fact, Tarkovsky is able at this point to turn *nostalghia* into an *anamnesis*, by joining what had been lacerated, by reconstructing it, at the risk of forcing places and times. And the image: an extraordinary *euphemistic imago*; that of dual interlocking, a recurring motif of the author's *imaginal* poetics, which he had already used previously, in his own *Nostalghia*, where another *interlocking* scene would capture in Domenico's home – following the image of a river and distant Russian hills imprinted on the floor – the edge of a window and, beyond, the Tuscan hills. Even in this instance it is meant to seal the motion of re-uniting, of assembling, and not only to seal distance and exile. The distance that "builds miniatures", as Bachelard states, paraphrasing Bousquet:

distance does not impoverish anything; on the contrary, it brings together in miniature form a country in which one would like to live. In miniatures of distance, scattered objects are 'assembled' and therefore offer themselves to our 'possession,' denying the distance that created them (Bachelard, 1975, 195).

What is happening here in a very original way is a simultaneous procedure of “miniaturization” and “dovetailing”: “the pattern of duplication through consecutive dovetails guides us directly to processes of ‘gulliverization’; processes where [one carries out] the reversal of solar values symbolized by virility and gigantism” (Durand, 1972, 212). Miniaturization and dovetailing, typical practices of “euphemization” according to Durand, surely carry out, even in Tarkovsky, the function of fighting off death, the “struggle against putrefaction (...) and temporal decomposition” (414), but also a function deeply rooted in the director; namely, one that recovers the harmonizing and binding potential of a nocturnal – by virtue of being female – system, against splits and wounds of the world caused by male reason, by its gigantist and schematizing heroism.

The nostalgic power of the feminine *with a thousand faces* that is present in the author’s cinema, is strongly exemplified here *even* because he dedicated the movie to his mother – which has strong biographical overtones, given her recent death – but largely because of the structure of the images, which take on the function of tying and weaving together what is dismantled, and to some extent, of preserving the necessity of an original loyalty. Yet the large nave of San Galgano is not a uterus that suffocates; the *dasha* is not only a return intended as regression; the *Madonna del Parto* is not – like the appearance of the pregnant wife during the movie – a symbol of impossible return to the womb, which Gorçakov in fact forbids himself to see, or cannot see anymore: what Tarkovsky tries to give us here is the luxury of an impossible recomposition, of an oneiric instant where birthplace, pond, man, dog, woman, and nature reside *in the* embrace of a smashed cathedral, and where the home is in the cathedral, as in an interlocking game that takes on an irreducible, rather than narcissistic, mystical taste; on a public, rather than private meaning. Inside and outside, high and low, appear reassembled; nature, culture, and faith seem as if they can coexist in this unique place, which acquires even more the taste of a *nowhere*.

There is actually no gratuitous aestheticism or lyricism; Gorçakov is “tired of seeing these excessive beauties”, as he recites at the beginning of the movie, right as he is on the point of *not* going to see the *Madonna* of the Italian painter.

He rather prefers to turn to the enigmatic plot of an internal perception of the visible; to return, in a slow backwards journey mediated by Domenico's alter-ego, to overlaps and passages, among countenances – mother-wife-lover – among places that stray between sleep and wakefulness, between near and far – Domenico's rooms that lead up to those of the distant *dasha*, the hills and watercourses that sail more in time than in space – mulling over his father's words, which are a commentary, resembling a steady bass, of the entire story:

I am a candle, I burned out at a feast / gather my wax in the morning / and this page will prompt you / how to cry and what to be proud of / how to give away the last third / of joy and die easily / and under the shade of an inadvertent home / how to burn as posthumously as a word (Masoni-Vecchi, 1997, 92).

A simple action such as that of ferrying a candle – perhaps a symbol of faith and eternal life, but also a recurring sign of Tarkovsky's poetics – from one side to the other of a hot water enclosure, of a swimming pool now empty and cold. This extreme gesture of *healing*, to which Domenico entrusts the fate of all mankind, extreme in every sense, because it has the childish stubbornness of a game, but also the severity and rigor of a mortal rite, recalls for a certain assonance a particular “action” to be carried out every day at the same time, and which Alexander in *The Sacrifice*¹⁷ seems to deeply trust, in the hope that

¹⁷ In the movie (original title is *Offret*, 1986) it refers to Alexander's story, an ex-actor and now a recognized intellectual who in a country home with his wife, his son Ometto – stricken by momentary speech impairment due to a minor operation – and some friends, experiences a sudden atomic threat. At end of a journey with reflective, unforgettable and initiatory implications, Alexander will be able to avert the tragedy thanks to a prayer, to a sacrificial vow, and the sexual encounter with the servant Maria, who lives in a deconsecrated church. After the encounter, which interrupts the menace and restores speech to Ometto, Alexander, taking advantage of the temporary absence of the others, sets the house on fire, fulfilling his vow of renunciation made at the time of the danger, and then will be taken away by an ambulance. In the meantime, Ometto will work hard to water the dry tree that his father planted at the beginning of the movie, exhorting the son to water it daily until it miraculously grew as experienced by a Japanese monk whose story was told by Alexander in an early monologue.

something may change: a ritual action even in the latter case, although the ritual is low, almost scatological,¹⁸ yet firmly connected to an *eschatology*.

This gesture, which resonates together with Domenico's "Russian" death (since only in Eastern countries they are familiar with the profound meaning of "setting oneself on fire", as the author has told us previously in the movie), this mortal embrace between two extreme heresies that share the radical symbolism (in the sense of the *unsaturated* dimension of the symbol) of their gesture, or this terrible sacrificial convergence, seems the necessary price for giving back to Earth its place, in a deconsecrated Abbey – the last uncovered "roof" of a faith in the infinite.

This is an extraordinary lesson, which proves how painful the imaginal "delivery" is, the *mitopoesia*, of which this scene of *Nostalghia* of course is strongly emblematic, and how concealed and tortuous is the path to produce a symbol that truly summarizes a Work – as the tenacious, bashful, and unyielding one provided by an author like Tarkovsky, poet of the images and alchemist of one of their removed, appeased, and truthful stages – in which you can finally open "an eye without eyelids".

The chiasmus

Tarkovsky is the poet that most frequently – in a recursive and almost percussive return of the same figures, as if there were an imaginal grid that helps filter time and its plots – makes use of the rhetorical figure of the *chiasmus*. A chiasmus stressed in every movie, which helps stitch almost in an impermeable casing, or perhaps permeable to uninterrupted discourse – the one belonging to the author's production – every single element, so as to give it form, within a circular and symbolic design.

¹⁸ The action in play, suggested by Alexander the father to Ometto the son, is that of pouring a glass of water in the toilet bowl (as if intent on making slowly sprout the obscure and magmatic bottom of the water, a water-manure that the world has removed and, in fact, merely empties). Moreover, even San Galgano to a certain extent seems to evoke by association the miraculous character of Alexander's encounter with Maria in the deconsecrated church.

Therefore, Ivan's dream of immersion in nature and reunion with his mother at the beginning of the movie¹⁹ ends symmetrically with his return to places from his happy childhood, although nature is affected by some indelible alterations (the dry and burnt tree). In the opening scene of *Solaris*,²⁰ Kris Kelvin, the protagonist of the movie, stands out against images of water from a pond in the lush countryside nearby his family home, and he returns there in the last scene, although to a more tormented and enigmatic landscape, by that time swallowed up by individual experience and displaying all the signs of an inner transmutation.

Beyond the prologue of childhood stuttering, dealing with the complexity of talking, which appears as a sort of *methodological* introduction, the meadows and forests of childhood return at the beginning and at the end of the autobiographical journey "with a thousand levels" of *The Mirror*.²¹ The opening images of the *Stalker's* home, with both his wife and little girl asleep, are

¹⁹ The movie is *Ivan's Childhood* (orig. title *Ivanovo Detstvo*) (1962), in which twelve-year-old Ivan, an orphan of war, who actively participates in combat and therefore knows its horrors, becomes a skilled partisan and an expert in risky missions. Watched over and partially protected by a captain and tenant, he will, nonetheless, be taken prisoner and later hanged. The adversities of war are interspersed by four dense oneiric sequences in which the boy returns to his childhood of peace and intimacy with his mother.

²⁰ A 1972 movie, in which psychologist Kris Kelvin is appointed to investigate the occurrence of mysterious phenomena aboard a space station orbiting the planet Solaris, where he finds a *sea* that produces strange effects. Kelvin, after taking leave of his father and his home, will experience a complex encounter with the other crew members of the station, and the creatures that the *thinking ocean*, bombarded by x-rays, seems to extract from the recesses of psyche and memory of the various characters. So Kelvin will meet again his wife who had died previously committing suicide, and will experience with her a new and agonizing relationship that will leave its marks on him. Upon returning to earth he will go back to his father and kneel in front of him, while a lengthy final shot will show us his father's home and the area around it as a small island within the the *ocean* of Solaris.

²¹ In the movie (orig. title *Zerkalo*) (1974), bearing a very intricate structure, the story of the adolescent author intersects with that of the adult author, who actually experiences as in a mirror the events of his family of origin and those of his actual family, marked by the withdrawal of the paternal figure and of himself from his first marriage, and by the centrality of the relationship with his mother, against the background of the troubling events of the political and war history of the period. The incident is labyrinthine and characterized by a most intense elaboration of images, the amorous and in-depth intersection of an inextricable and recursive personal path.

connected – in reference to the Stalker’s voyage to the Center of the Zone with his two clients – with the section about the return home and the final scene in *Stalker*²² in which the mutant girl enigmatically makes the glasses on the table move.

And again the images about childhood, nature and the house, although projected in a journey that modifies and repositions them; that opens and closes *Nostalghia*. In *The Sacrifice* the tree – Leonardo’s tree of life in the “Adoration of the Magi”, and soon after, the dry tree erected by Alexander – returns with perfect symmetry at the end of the movie.

A partial exception is *Andrei Rublev*,²³ a movie with a particularly unique structure mirroring the episodic pattern of Tarkovsky’s own novel (1992): yet the final scene, the shot of the island in the middle of the river under the rain on which four horses stop – the presence of the horse is a recurrent theme of Tarkovskian imagery, with powerful symbolic meaning (Frezzato, 1977, 38) – evokes, as early as the prologue, a first dazzling appearance at the time of the fall of the hot air balloon: a black horse rolls around on the ground and eventually rises majestically, one moment before the shot in which you see the balloon on the ground, deflated, shaken by the gas flowing out, almost a wounded animal (perhaps an allusion to the insolence of any *automaton*), and nearby the corpse of the bold flying man. This is perhaps an allusion to man’s absence of power,

²² The 1979 movie narrates the journey of three characters: the *Stalker* (the Guide), the writer, and the scientist, figures with strong symbolic traits, within an enclosed and forbidden space called the *Zone*, a sort of decayed structure invaded by nature and water, where it is believed that a meteorite has fallen or an extraterrestrial phenomenon has taken place, making it impassible and where there is a Room of Wishes, to which only the *Stalkers*, secretly, can lead. In the first and last part, outside the *Zone*, are introduced, at the beginning and end of the journey, the home and family of the Stalker, whose daughter, Monkey, is regarded as a daughter of the *Zone*, a “mutant”, stricken by paraplegia.

²³ The movie dates back to 1966 and is the story, divided into nine episodes and a prologue, of the artistic suffering – during the period of the bloody fratricidal wars in 15th century Russia – of painter Andrei Rublev, a resilient follower of harmony. The story is structured around events marked by a strong personal, symbolic, and historical significance. The episodes portray a difficult path that combines a reflection on history, violence, and artistic operativity with more personal and religious themes. They ultimately lead up to the colored vision (after a prolonged black and white) of Rublev’s icons.

and to his *hubris*, displayed by his desire to free himself from the former, to his longing to move away from the earth, where the horse instead immerses itself with pleasure.

But what certainly strikes us, and it has already been pointed out varyingly²⁴ (Borin, 1989, 49 and Masoni-Vecchi, 1997, 33) is the alfa-omega, the *Azoth* that seals the work of the Russian director (leaving aside his first featurette, the academic but equally anticipatory *The Steamroller and the Violin*):²⁵ the chiasitic link between the first scene of *Ivan's Childhood* and the last of *The Sacrifice*. In both appears a tree, in both a child, in both a condition of orphanity and expectation, of obstinate and pained loyalty.

The tree and *Puer* are both symbols of life and renewal, but obstructed, tortured, and offended. The children are both orphans, although in different ways. The scene with Ivan as a child, at the beginning of the movie, is shot through a spider web, perhaps in order to recall his destiny as prey or victim, before the camera moves up and travels along the trunk of a tree; just like at the end of *The Sacrifice*, where instead it captures the image of a child lying down, and then moves up again along the trunk of a tree, a dry tree that “his father said would flower one day”²⁶ (Tarkovskij, 1992, 321). The tree and the child are, of

²⁴ For example: F. Borin, op. cit., p. 49 and T. Masoni-P. Vecchi, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁵ A movie of the 60's (original title is *Katok i skripka*), which tells the story of a little boy, Sasha, who is mocked by other kids of his age while on his way to take a violin exam. His performance, even owing to feelings of shame, produces negative results. While walking back home, he runs into Sergei – a steamroller operator – who gives him a ride on the roller. It makes his friends envious. The child and the driver of the vehicle have an intense conversation, after which Sasha treats his new friend to a brilliant violin performance. The two are supposed to meet again later in the evening to see a movie, but Sasha's mother forbids him to go to the appointment. While the man walks into the movie theatre with a friend, Sasha falls asleep and dreams about riding again the steamroller with Sergei.

²⁶ A. Tarkovsky, *Racconti cinematografici* (op. cit., p. 321). The motif of the blossoming tree refers to the short story that Alexander tells Little Man at the beginning of *The Sacrifice*. Here Tarkovsky seals the meaning of his work and artistic endeavor: “a monk, step after step, pailful after pailful, would bring water to the mountain and soak the dried out tree, believing without a shadow of doubt in the urgency of his activity, without abandoning, even for a moment, his belief in the miraculous power of his faith in the Creator, and so he witnessed the Miracle: one morning the branches of the tree came back to life and were covered with small leaves. Yet is this perhaps

course, two recurring features in Tarkovsky's cinema, and yet rarely do these trees lead the camera toward the sky. They are suspended archetypes of a tension between man and the world, man and nature, and matter and spirit that remains invoked, exerted, but fundamentally unsatisfied. Even at the end of *The Sacrifice*, in the final shot, the camera will produce in fact a horizontal shot, faithful to water and earth – the essential elements of the director's imaginal world, a ground level that appears as a possible horizon, perhaps the one mostly, although painfully, felt by Tarkovsky.

At the end of *Ivan's Childhood*, after the little boy's tragedy has taken place in the story, a final oneiric insertion projects a fragment of shattered and wounded utopia, and shows Ivan playing in the water with a little girl. The scene, however, will be insistently contrasted by the disquieting image of a blazed and dry tree stump, "an obscure and burnt emblem of ferocity" (Borin, 1989, 64).

A painted tree stands out at the beginning of *The Sacrifice*, from a work by Leonardo Da Vinci, a rather disturbing Adoration of the Child, of which Tarkovsky shows the faces of the kings depicted as frightened old men. The camera moves across the trunk without letting us see the infant Jesus, and reaches the thick foliage in order to turn abruptly to the scene of the dry tree planted in the sand by Alexander. Perhaps the author is speaking here of an aspiration, of an urge for equilibration, of composition between heaven and earth, and between art and life, which yet appears always more problematic – the image is ambiguous, the tree is dry – and in a certain sense emerges as an impossible task, but not for that reason discardable.

This task is certainly threatened or even demolished by none other than the ashes of Renaissance culture, which regards Leonardo as its leading representative, and with whom the director had a difficult relationship, precisely because of the anthropocentrism that such culture has helped promote in the Western world, and because of its deleterious effects. These are effects that go on until the threat of catastrophe incumbent upon mankind, an atomic menace

a miracle? It is only the truth" (A. Tarkovsky. *Scolpire il tempo [Sculpting in Time]*, op. cit., p. 212; it is the last paragraph of the book).

whose concrete presence was sensed by man himself, after Hiroshima, after the underground explosions, after the nuclear power plants, and after Chernobil – an event that will occur precisely during the first screenings of the movie.

Sacrifice faces this knot and tries to untie it, through radical torsion to an s-reason of a religious type, to a painful lowering, to the removal of any possession or rule: Alexander will choose self-sacrifice, a total retirement from the world in the hope that this might foster reconciliation or survival. He will choose a liaison with the maid Maria that has magical, as well as mystical and sensual traits, and will retrace perhaps the unbound stages of the interior struggle between faith and worldliness that Rublev had already experienced – he will reassemble them in a harmony that is remindful of a work of art.

And yet in this last work there seems to be no more space for a mythopoesis, for an expressive translation that is not truly a total sacrifice. Tarkovsky had always been a valid interpreter of this tendency and openly defended it, as when he offered his explanation of Rublev's initial scene: "creation requires from man the integral gift of his being" (Frezzato, 1977, 5).

Nostalgia for the center

The chiasmus is a circular figure, which intersects and joins, encloses and suspends. Tarkovsky's entire work is chiasmic, from one movie to the other, from one sequence to the next; slow sequences that satisfy time until one recognizes its natural plot, until one gives back the world to the world. A few levels, far fewer than those of Eizenstein – he would love to point out – a few levels inhabited by fixed and persistent symbols, across a tortuous pilgrimage that nonetheless leads up to a Centre, an invisible and inaccessible Centre, which nonetheless acts as an irresistible magnet. And this is, for example, the meaning of "Zone" in *Stalker*. It is a tortuous space, just as tortuous and circular are at the same time the structure of *Solaris* space station, Otto's bicycle circonvolutions in *The Sacrifice*, and again the very structure of the movie *The Mirror*, which sends back the cloggings of our mind; or as Bogani observes, it returns our "mechanisms of association" (Bogani, in Zamperini 1989, 89).

Of course the formidable labyrinth around a *u-topian* place is exactly the journey accomplished by the *Stalker* and his clients, associated by some to Deleuze's and Guattari's "rhizome" (85), since it is a place where everything is undone and reassembled, constantly disclosing new entries, new "traps": an unpredictable, imponderable network, which yet appears accessible, perhaps in the name of mystery, but also in the name of that endless mystery tied to the search of a Centre, according to a typical anthropological recurrence.

Is it a removed place where it appears that no one can go near, perhaps because forbidden to any literalness of concrete appropriation? A place that is poetic and sacred at the same time, the Centre of the Zone, the legendary "Room of Wishes", to which we get close through a twisted course that requires disorientation and wandering, not direction and impetus; that requires us to get near *stealthily*, following the trail of "vague material comets" (Borin, 1989, 115), metallic dice hung on a cloth ribbon that the *Stalker* throws in front of him according to a sort of *artisanal* revelation; a path where we are not allowed to retreat, since there is no reversion in symbolic paths or in initiatory ones.

An unexperienced or wise [zone] that leaves no guardians in front of the treasure door and entrusts its heroes to a guide that does not know the way, to a 'coward' that makes them go ahead first and lets them get shot, to someone who does not decide anything on his own for fear of making a mistake, to someone who cheats with straws or matches. Not to a wise and learned Virgil who benefits from moments of rest or pause in order to explain, teach, and train, but to a 'worm' who lies down, lends a humble and devout ear in the depths of the earth, does not answer questions or 'does not know,' and just leaves his disciples alone to interrogate their own oracles and interpret the responses (Barioglio, 2001, unpublished).

A place that is finally free from Mankind, the "Zone", and for this reason *sacred*, that is, reserved to God. In its nature, after this sort of *Dissipatio Humani Generis*, resumes its course, infiltrating, embracing and macerating the "dormant" testimonies left by man's journey. Only in a place deserted by man can there reside desire and disclosure. This is perhaps the heart of Tarkovsky's poetics, its *apophatic* feature, so to speak, or to phrase it in Sandro Bernardi's

words, the affirmation of a true “negative theology”, which is aware that any quest for Truth involves the space of what is not portrayable and the ambiguity of what is visible (Bernardi, in Zamperini, 1989, 97).

The “Zone” as a space that remains inaccessible, menacing, indecipherable and very near, as shown by the central shots of the movie; but inaccessible in so far as it is “saved”, precisely in its incongruity, in its collapse and distant vicinity. In order to get close to it we must give up any pretensions to authority, give up any sort of “weapon” (the Writer’s gun, the Scientist’s explosive). We can only reward it with a respectful silence flooded with rain, or the abandonment of any certainty, as occurs to all three characters that are traveling, that is, to the Writer who even gives up the Word, his great rhetorical blunt weapon; to the Scientist, who lays down his enhancing and *enlightening* pretensions; and ultimately, to the *Stalker* too, who cannot enter, and for whom – in spite of a substantial weakening, his *descent* – the Place is only the goal of the Other.

A space perhaps accessible to the “mutant”, a poeticizing, mysterious, as well as sorrowful figure, who knows how to intone passion with the words of a poet,²⁷ while it moves objects in an ulterior space, perhaps that slim space that the “sons of the Zone” are familiar with, if we want to accept, among its many possible meanings, the Zone too – and especially as the space of an Imaginal World, as a place of necessary realization of subtle bodies, as a place of possible Transmutation and infinitely forbidden to any hope of literal realization.

Cosmos of water

Search for the sacred and portrayal of the tree are, although in different ways, magnetic poles of Tarkovsky’s work. But his sacrality and his trees are always summoned downwards, a “bottom” that softens any form of orthodoxy into

²⁷ These are the words of 19th century Russian poet Fedor I. Tyutchev: “I love your dear eyes, my friend / with their play so bright and wondrous / when you suddenly raise them / and like lightning in the sky / you cast a swift glance.../ But there’s a charm that is greater still: / Your eyes looking downward, / at the time of the passionate kiss, / through the half shut lashes / the dusk and gloomy flame of passion” (cit. in T. Masoni – P. Vecchi, 1989, p. 89).

heterodoxy, every attempt to take flight into a further rootedness to the Earth and to its *pâte*. To its elements.

In the imaginal breadth of Tarkovsky's cinema, in the chained and recursive rhyme of his motifs – which almost seems to increase and to accumulate, from one movie to the next, to enrich itself, even if in a common symbolic code, as far as inducing a sort of imposed syntax, an echo of sounds and colors, of figures with an unmistakable dictate – prevails the code of elements and, at the centre of this, the insistent, obstinate, necessary body of earth and water. Earth and water, water and earth combined or kneaded, the body and soul of a dark environment; ochre, smut and anthrax. But essentially water.

From the violent downpour that hits Sasha and Sergei, from the puddles with upside down reflections in *The Steamroller and the Violin* to the sea in the last shot of *Sacrifice*, Tarkovsky's entire cinema is soaked with water: the water of the rivers; the water of the puddles and ponds; water that suddenly falls; endless, violent rain; watersheds or still water; dirty, hot, freezing water; water that penetrates indoors and in closed rooms; water that erodes and permeates, that flows in order to keep time and to corrupt things.

There truly is in Tarkovsky the permanent and decisive presence of a “hydrant psychism” that, as Bachelard states, represents a “type of destiny”, an “essential destiny that infinitely *metamorphosizes* the substance of a creature” (Bachelard, 1942, 8). And that makes Tarkovsky himself a “creature given to water” and, therefore, a “creature in vertigo” that “dies at each instant”, since “daily death is the death of water” (9).

It is water that transforms and generates into matter a profundity of death; a melancholy of matter that makes it more silent, intense, submerged, and dark. Yet this death of water must certainly not be understood in the literal sense, since it is more about a dissolution *in* the soul, as Hillman aptly explains, referring to Heraclitus at the beginning of the *opus*:

If we connect Heraclitus' statements about water and death with the familiar alchemical motto – ‘perform no operation until all has become water’ – then the *opus* begins with dying. When a dream image is moistened, it is entering a

dissolutio and becoming, in Bachelard's sense, more psychisized, made into soul, for the water is the special element of reverie, the element of reflective images and their ceaseless, ungraspable flow. Moistening in dreams refers to the delight that the soul feels for its death or to the delight of letting itself sink, away from fixations and literalized concerns (Hillman, 1984, 144).

Thus the omnipresent water in Tarkovsky's movies distances itself from a close decodification in a maternal sense, and to me it seems to refer to a cyclical path of the author's visual material, which needs, for its in-depth analysis *in anima*, to flow through liquid element, to constantly go beyond – as in fact occurs in the constant associations and *dissolves* of his movies – in a hustle and bustle that sensibly evokes an ongoing exercise of solution and coagulation, between dream and wakefulness, between *reverie* and history. The matter of memory, as that of facts, undergoes an alchemical elaboration that transforms it and dilutes it so it may be kneaded afterwards into a solid element, and then again be moistened, and so on, until it becomes imaginal substance.

Yet it is water that has a thousand reflections and transfigures the world into a "Platonic solemnity", according to Bachelard's expression (Bachelard, 1942, 69) in his commentary about Poe – since water, in a reflection, idealizes the world, makes its "flaws and miseries" collapse, replaces the given with a "mirage", and finally gives back "my vision". Water, as surface and depth at the same time, permits the achievement of that mysterious transmutation that turns the literal into a vision, which provides for an intermediate world capable of keeping together the interior and the exterior, the near and the far, the personal and the impersonal, but especially the material and the spiritual in an intimacy without a place. In a certain sense, Borin is right when he states that "Tarkovsky's waters reflect a powerful aspiration toward the Absolute starting with mutable reflections emanated from the composite worlds of the Earth" (Borin, 1989, 24), just as he is right about identifying their function of metaphorization of the temporal flux.

But water is much more; it really is the environment, the imaginal milieu of Tarkovsky's cinema, which never allows anything to be interpreted in a rigid sense. Everything dissolves in his movies: bodies, clothes, homes, walls, books,

and objects. Water melts and disintegrates, aligns and corrodes the “sleeping” bodies of underwater objects, along a muddy seabed, according to a sort of *liquid hermeneutics* that knows the destiny of all things is to become transfused, dismissed, eroded, lost, and that man’s history is only a transitory fact. Everything is directed toward deliteralization, everything is traced back to depth, to ambivalence, to an endless symbolic character that makes his cinema an extraordinary access to the interior experience of things, to the *soul of the world*.

The same *thinking ocean* in the movie *Solaris* is without doubt a “variation of the water motif” (28), but its density makes it something further, an impersonal materiality, the symbol of an “unknowable depth”, which yet has transformative, enclosing qualities, capable of giving form to the most hidden grumes, of producing authentic spiritual bodies, phantoms, and visions. One gets the feeling that with this figure, and in the vicissitudes surrounding it, Tarkovsky has touched upon a nodal point, a nucleus of his own poetics, where what intersects and comes into contrast are strictly the goals of giving emphasis to a subdued and marginalized inner depth, and that of a pursuit of cognitive rationality that aims at violating and annihilating – “a flash of light and a breath of air” sums up Hari’s death in the words of Snaut at the end of Kelvin’s stay on the space station – any evidence of “another” world, half way between memory and unconscious revelation; in other words, the stuff of any alterity that is not simulacrum.

Perhaps a *psychotic* nucleus – but truly revealing – before which Kelvin, who is sensitive to its message, who is *touched* by it, who shows a willingness to listen and also lovingly care for his expressions without time, will at last give in, in a moment of intense acceptance, and aware that it is not within his authority to dominate something that quite amply surpasses him. Perhaps it is this nucleus that the extraordinary final shot strives to capture by progressively moving back, allowing to reduce the image of the embrace between kneeling son and father, the house, the pond, and the island patch, which by then is placed in the *thinking ocean*.

The *ocean* of *Solaris* says a lot about the cosmological views of the director, of his awareness about man’s minority: the more the latter becomes engulfed in

heroic Promethean exploits, the more he will be inclined to failure and destruction. It says a lot about the necessity to respect the unknowable and to accept the symbolic density that lies in its indecipherability and, at the same time, in its need for care and attention. Here too water, which gains the density and viscosity of a rotating magma, no longer flowing, does not represent something foreign; it is rather the plastic and uncatchable substance that saturates each voyage toward the centre – however esoteric we may deem it – and provided the voyage requires the portrayal of a *concrete* spatial transfer.

Tarkovsky's gaze, in this damp environment, is capable of dissolving any rigid concretion and to let flow the subtle content of the imaginary; it is a gaze that constantly intersects the fourfold nature of the elements earth, fire, air, which spangles them and is sustained by them, as if basted. It is a gaze essentially lowered, which rarely looks up to the sky, the latter perhaps too distant because deserted by men or perhaps because the world is deserted by God; a gaze that eyes the Earth, even during Rublev's initial flight, that never has the tint of sky, but rather scours the clayey crust, sifts through it, follows its movements, from above, from far away, from close range, in order to grasp the complexity, the vegetable knots, the ferment, the perpetual coitus with water, as if to stress constantly a necessary and mysterious dynamics.

An unknown wind at times goes so far as to blow enigmatic messages, to cause fear and doubt, as in the "Zone", when the writer attempts to get close to the Room by the shortest possible route, or as in *The Mirror*, when the doctor abandons the house and is called upon to turn back and look at Andrei's mother, or when, in the same movie, he ends up knocking the items off the table and ripping the table-cloth – unexpected and unheard-of – always coming from a remote otherness.

Only fire, at times, flares up to unearth the visible, perhaps a spiritual clue, a fire with a thousand appearances, fleeting and violent, or calm and reflective; small fires and violent blazes, the small candle held by Gorbakov and the pile of large candles in the procession of the Madonna of Monterchi in *Nostalghia*, the burning barn through the rain in *The Mirror*, the impressive fire of Alexander's home, at the end of *The Sacrifice*; the embers barely giving off smoke in the final

scene of the bell episode in *Andrei Rublev*, which will prepare the great vision of the icons in color.

Motherland

But then the soil, the Russian Soil, the dark matter of the celestial body that invades the screen, which makes the cosmos terraqueous, low, misty, and torbid. Soil-and-water, attempts made to take the soil away from the water, soil adjacent to water, which almost always makes it a soaked or moist soil; a creative, forming soil. A soil in which Rublev's horse rolls about, at the beginning, right after the crash of the hot air balloon, of this missed elevation, in which the director – in another possible interpretation of this scene – has transfused his idea of a sacrificial dimension of the Work, of a “gift of oneself” in the sense that he who creates is forced each time to risk in order to make his dream come true.

A crash that is perhaps also the setback that any premature elevation, any detachment from the ground implies when it is not prepared by a *descent*, by lending an ear to the world, comparable to the one accomplished by Boriska in the episode of the bell at the end of the movie. Boriska who will know, although he *knows not*, although lacking his father's guidance and affectionate testimony – which the director endured himself to a certain extent in his own personal life – will be able to build the bell, because he will administer with love his knowledge of the earth and of places. He will know which is the right earth to dig, after turning down previous choices, and will find it by chance, as neglected “rock”, by falling, slipping, once again in the telluric magma of mud, as far deep as a pit, way down in the depths: there he will find the necessary mixture: the *pâte*.

It is a “*pâte*” Bachelard had already described as “the fundamental pattern of materiality” since “the very notion of matter is (...) strictly in agreement with the notion of *pâte*” (Bachelard, 1942, 19). A term whose possible translation is *silt*:

that which has always appealed to me is, largely and rightly so, the earth. I am fascinated by the process of growth related to what comes from the land, what

comes up from the depths, trees, grass... And everything leans toward the sky that, for me, has no symbolic value. In my opinion the sky is empty and there is nothing else but its reflections on the earth, in rivers, in puddles (...). Generally I love the earth, I do not see the mud, I see the earth mixed with water, and the silt from which things originate (cit. in Masoni-Vecchi, 1997, 15).

It is in fact clay carefully mixed with water the nucleus of that matter, which will be able to resonate (*retentissement*) in the fortunate shape of the bell, a symbol of conjunction between earth and sky. But Boriska will understand not only the nature of the mixture, but also the place, the cavity that needs to be created, the weight that the wooden structure can sustain, and the cooling time. All this will occur to him as in a dream, as in the effusion of knowledge not known, but rather heard or pre-heard, as an *appetite*, an unconscious bequest.

Andrei Rublev is a true Hymn of the Earth, the earth pours out from all over the place; it is the central presence, as it will be at the end of *The Sacrifice*, and earlier in *The Mirror*, in which Frezzato correctly captures the specificity of the Russian landscape:

the violent solar clarity, thick forests, dark valleys, the hissing of the wind, open and mysterious clearings, the grey foam of water, the majestic and orderly flow of rivers where death is not a sudden but natural return to 'the humid motherland'. (Frezzato, in Zamperini, 1989, 90).

Yet it seems really reductive, in this water-earth polarity, to detect only maternal dominance and "nostalgia for a prenatal union with one's mother", as Simona Argentieri (in Zamperini, 1989) claims – when she attempts to explain Tarkovskian "nostalgia" – in an article that is appealing but strictly governed by a single interpretative paradigm. There is without doubt the presence of the feminine in Tarkovsky's cinema and imaginary, a feminine often characterized in a maternal sense, and where characters, which blend with one another, almost always appear drawn from family life, and are often interpreted by women that in real life belonged to the director's family: his first wife Irma in *Ivan's Childhood* and in *Rublev*; Larisa, his second wife, in minor appearances of his

last movies; and his mother in *The Mirror*. After all, his diary points largely to his intention of proposing such roles to members of his family. Yet the feminine that is present in his work appears heavily transfigured in a symbolic sense, even perhaps as the symbolic and *operational* place of Tarkovsky's artistic operativity.

It deals mainly with a regenerative place, according to an alchemical interpretation, in which the reverse journey takes on the uroboric prominence of a noteworthy *regressus ad uterum*, which modifies the pathologizing evaluation of psychoanalysis, and if at all, takes it back to a mythologem that is widespread in great spiritual traditions and exhibits a clear archetypal dimension:

the return to an intrauterine life, in the Eastern and Western alchemical tradition, is a metaphor of the mastery of Time and of knowledge; therefore, it is an essential prerequisite for the conquest of immortality. This return seems to be its *via regia* thanks to the achievement of perfect knowledge: the *aurea apprehension* in terms of Western alchemy, the *jñāna* in Hindu and Buddhist terms, the *sama rasa*, that is, the overcoming of sexual dualism in the non duality of a follower according to the terms of tantrism and Indian alchemy (Schwartz, 2000, 24).

Now, if this kind of signification is not expressed clearly in Tarkovsky's cinema, one can still detect its presence right from the pervasivity of a female dimension that does not interdict or swallow the creation, but on the contrary becomes an imaginal *melting pot* and colors the content of the work itself. The feminine in Tarkovsky moves from the materiality of the Earth in order to achieve the depiction of a feminine at times hieratic (The Madonna by Piero della Francesca), but far more frequently carnal and religious at the same time (consider the couplings that translate into *levitations*, as if the only spiritual healing – elevation and transformation in a mystical body – should really go through female sexuality and abandonment).

In that sense the sexual encounter of Alexander and Maria in *The Sacrifice*, which seems a slow descent to a liminal territory for Alexander – a misteric-orphic territory where Maria is the priestess – ends with an image that actually evokes Michelangelo's *Pietà*, as Argentieri argues (in Zamperini, 1989, 32),

but it is not a symbol reducible to regressive death, to a return to the womb with traits that are merely narcissistic. It is rather a sacrificial gesture of *conjunction* and *healing*.

The consummation of the rite between Alexander and Maria “saves the world” in the sense that it reintroduces trust and gift of oneself (reciprocal in this case), lowering and sexuality as factors of transformation of the world (imaginal, but also real: the child Little Man regains his speech); in the sense that it regards reliance on a profound, magical, and mystical feminine as the answer to the problem of a civilization that is surely headed toward an apparently irreversible path of destruction and male reasoning.

Tarkovsky’s poetics is profoundly antimasculine and aligned against the schizomorphic and schizogenetic structure of culture, of civilization and of the male imaginary. In the author’s cinema there is no geometry; there are no abrupt cuts; the rhythm is “fluvial”, as Borin has adequately suggested; the images dissolve into each other; the tones are dark, whereas the imaginary as already mentioned is tied to dovetailing and miniaturization, to the cycle and the mirror, to themes of night regimen and the euphemistic-synthetic paradigm of the imaginary.

We are in a female orbit, but we could say, according to a *sophianic* declination, that it is one belonging to the Christian East, and on which Thomas Špidlik favorably insists. The presence of the maternal in Russian spirituality is tied to a concept geared toward a reconciliation of opposites and the force of contemplation. This mystical tradition, to which Tarkovsky is tied, has a lot in common with the Shiite Islamic tradition that Corbin talks about: here too one hopes for a “third vision”, besides a carnal and spiritual one: it consists of a specific sensibility (the “spiritual materialism” that is often called into question in order to designate Tarkovsky’s philosophy): “the Russian ‘sophianic’ tradition calls this primordial sense of all creatures *Sophia*, a knowledge of the world, and represents it as a divine angel with feminine forms, *das ewig Weibliche*” (Špidlik, in Zamperini, 1989, 17).

Thus, can the increasing relationships and mysterious magic of the transfigurations of various female characters, up until the mystery of Harey

herself, take on a different meaning, and can the world threatened by Prometheism – actually by the Faustian delirium of a masculine code no longer contained – find an extraordinary reward through translation into image of this recovered *sophia*? And giving back, therefore, the sense of a Ginosophy, of knowledge of the feminine, which goes hand in hand with another marginalized “Sophia”, that of the *Puer*, of which Tarkovsky turns out to be an ardent restorer? It seems that the director’s hope is strictly entrusted to these two removed codes, as to a sort of regained Philosophy of Nature that encompassed them originally, but today is overstepped by devices of rationalism and pragmatism.

Mutant children

It is no coincidence that the child or adolescent is at the center of most of Tarkovsky’s movies: a child often mutilated (*Stalker*’s “mutant”), or in-fant, because he stutters or is mute (Little Man in *The Sacrifice*, Andrei the boy in the prologue of *The Mirror*, the mute girl in *Rublev*); a child crushed by antitheses of the most dramatic expression of the masculine code – the war – (Ivan); a young man that survives and is in search of paternal redemption (Boriska); an outcast and a “prisoner”, but how rich in sensitivity and redeeming *weakness*; the *Stalker* himself, who is a character with extraordinary *puer* and Hermesian traits.

The wounded *Puer*, as required by his archetype (cf. Hillman, 1988, 21 ff.) – but how could it be otherwise in a world dominated by a dissolving heroic rationality – makes an effort to interpret, in place of his author, the difficulty of speaking, unless through devious, metaphorical or *imaginal* paths. He can be assimilated to the “blessed and insane” that Tarkovsky discusses in *Sculpting in Time* when speaking about Otto and Maria of *The Sacrifice*, but of course also of Domenico and Rublev himself: for them

this world is full of incomprehensible prodigies; they move in an imaginary world, not in a real one. They neither resemble the empiricists nor the pragmatics,

and they do not believe in what they can touch, but true is what they see in their imagination (Tarkovsky, 1988, 210).

On the other hand, it is perhaps the *puer* Boriska that best translates Tarkovsky's reliance on meanings implied at this stage of life and the crucial nature of the *Puer's* creativity in view of a regeneration of man and the world. It will be the *innocent* (since it is founded on non-knowledge) and *orphan* (since it is articulated with a deficiency, particularly a paternal one) effort of bell *creation* that promotes a return to the Work (and to the voice) of Andrei Rublev, at the end of his *surrender* of the powers – perhaps regarded even as Luciferian – of the word.

The bell, Frezzato recalls, is indeed the object of the Great Work that is *Andrei Rublev*, as a symbol of every imaginary creator, and water and earth contribute to its casting:

on the one hand, rain falls uninterruptedly on an area that Boriska finds covered with a type of clay he deems particularly suitable for a successful casting; on the other hand, the motionless and inert matter, shaken by the flow of the element of celestial origin – a portrayal of the sacred nuptials of heaven and earth – will lend itself, in response to the resolution of an immature and youthful ardour, to the materialization of the *opus*, to the perfect casting of a bell that, due to its suspended position between heaven and earth and its form connecting it to the heavenly vault, is a symbol of universal harmony (Frezzato, in Zamperini, 1989, 43).

But of course the bell is also womb and sound, a blend of matter and voice, body and inspiration; a womb that generates singing, a poetic organ but also a seal of unity, of collective and consecrated foundation. And once again, as if to bless it, and in keeping with a propensity already valued in the feminine, at the moment of the first sound, the first scene captured by the movie camera is that of a young lady and then, next to her, of a woman dressed in white.

Frezzato captures a detail that is not obvious, that is, a chRometric succession in the final sequence of the bell episode, which seems to proceed from black to red, passing through white, even if he does not ascribe it explicitly to an alchemical work. The observation is very interesting, even because it is certain

that the black horse, the woman in white, and the red embers (only in the final cross-fade, because the scene is still in black and white), which rapidly alternate while Boriska is consoled by Andrei, are the extreme segments that pave the way to the contemplation of Andrei's icons or, rather, they mediate access to the *completed opus*. Somehow in *Andrei Rublev*, more than in other movies, the feeling of an accomplishment is achieved, and the effort a young *Puer* seems to be in fact the mediating Hermes of such feeling.

Tarkovsky sees in the boy – a young *God* of the forge, capable of drawing from the depths of the earth the philosopher's gold of achievement – an authentic companion, an authentic Architect, and he identifies with him due to a sense of orphanity and deep *lack*, that of a world overwhelmed by ferocity and destruction. At this stage of his cinema perhaps the author captures the height of a convergence of motifs, and the gold of the icons is really the seal of a gaze that for one moment has drawn near to the “beauty” of a profound creative rebirth. The icon is in fact “beauty that can be traced back to the divine it symbolizes, and lends itself to an act of anamnesis of the sacred through aesthetic and spiritual contemplation” (Duborgel, 1991, 89).

The icon is the melting point of an aesthetics and ethics of the image that knows how to portray by maintaining a limit of inaccessibility and that stands on the ridge between visible and invisible. If its bottom was named “light” according to Slavic treatises, it is because gold “symbolizes light as a wall of light, that is, at the same time as irradiation, as a runoff of light, and as an insuperable limit beyond which resides the other Whole in its inaccessible light” (Duborgel, 1991, 89).

Rublev's icons that Tarkovsky shows us at the end of his movie, by going through them in detail, drawing them closer and dilating them, between cross-fade and *zoom*, are perhaps the feature of an operativity that adopts the image as mystery and extreme environment; in which one contemplates the confines of humanity, its deferment to a *nowhere* of which yet the imaginal mediation is made possible by the intercession of the Angel-Image. The icon is the result of distilled operativity, produced by the passage of silence and death, which has recognized the feminine and folly, has mulled over religious dogmatism by

dissolving it, and has lowered itself until it could hear the clear and profound sound of earth kneading.

This is perhaps the brightest gravitation point of a poetics that can be defined as antihumanistic, feminine, terrestrial, but also *puerile* and “simple”, displaying the clarity and conciseness of haiku, which Tarkovsky truly appreciated, as stated by Di Giammatteo, and with good reason I believe. His movies seen as a whole appear in fact very close-knit, even overlapping each other, and his poetry is clear and limpid as his own father’s, who in all likelihood he constantly pursued throughout his entire short journey, like Boriska. And so it seems fair to turn to a brief fragment taken from one of his conversations disclosing emblematic content, and to Arseny’s poetry, with a final image. So we take leave although temporarily of this *companion of shadow*, of this imaginal Maestro. It is necessary and inevitable to leave unfinished the endless and polymorphous richness of his motifs; he leaves us a multitude of frames, of luminous flashes in which the world is given back to us: an immense world, but also intimate, of which remain carved female profiles, sudden flashes, stretches of dark water, clay, and the omnipresent dog.²⁸

He says: ‘you know, once I was in the dacha, with the window open. Air and water were coming in and on the wooden floor, and I let them enter because a puddle was forming in the house. It seemed a mirror and it reflected things in and

²⁸ On the transmutative power of Tarkovsky’s work it is worth mentioning another episode described in *Sculpting in Time*. For the making of *The Mirror* the director decided to rebuild the old family house exactly as it was during his childhood, and not only: at the time of his childhood, buckwheat used to grow in the area; it was then replaced by medicinal grass and oat. In spite of disapproval and distrust by local farmers, Tarkovsky ordered that the buckwheat be reseeded, and it grew vigorously: “it was a demonstration of the special emotional characteristics of our memory, of its capacity to penetrate beyond the veils unfurled by time; in other words, precisely what our movie should be narrating. Such was in fact the original idea. I do not know what would have become of the movie if the buckwheat field had not flourished! (...) How this was inexplicably important for me at the time. And the field grew luxuriantly!” (1988, 124). This is not about literalization, but strictly about the miraculous operativity of memory and creation, which leaves nothing unchanged. He quotes words by Dostoyevsky: “art, they say, must mirror life etcetera. It is all nonsense: a writer (a poet) creates life himself, and a such life, moreover, that before him it did not even exist in all its fullness” (171).

out. I enjoyed the birth of this event. But then the dog (Dark...) passes by and, of course, not knowing there was water, he gets his paws wet. He stops at once to shake off water droplets from his back paws.' Afterwards the dog goes into another room, and Andrei remains looking at the puddle. The sun comes out and the puddle disappears after a short while. The dog reappears and stops, because he suspects there is still water. They both stand there looking at the spot, so they can wonder how beautiful is a world that witnesses the birth of objects, and these objects disappear even if they are beautiful (Guerra, in Zamperini, 1989, 65).

A lengthy tracking shot watches over mother and son while they walk, on their way back home, along the banks of a river. The child is barefooted. The camera dolly accompanies them horizontally, and water flows in the back through dark green algae, rapidly. The camera frames for a moment the mother, her light hair tied up in a bun, her expression as if suspended, then the thick darkness of the forest, while a bird flies swiftly into the foliage; the camera moves back: a long breath of wind, one sees the table, with a lamp, a piece of bread, the jug, the plate, the spoon, the table cloth. The wind knocks down the lamp, lifts up the leaves, and objects slide on the shelf. The child is now at the doorway of the house and enters: curtains, perforated drapes and clothes hanging, in a floating of veils, which swell because of the wind that enters; in the back a mirror reflects the violent light outside, then the camera focuses, in the mirror the face in chiaroscuro of the child who slowly gets ready, and as if hesitant, to drink some milk. Throughout the slow flowing of the scene, in the background, the words of a poem by Arseny Tarkovsky, "Eurydice":

Man has just one body,
Lonely as solitude.
The soul is tired
Of this continuous frame,
Made of ears and eyes,
The size of a few cents,
And skin – scar upon scar,
Stretched over the bones.
From the cornea then it flies away
Into the heavenly wide open well,

Upon the icy path,
Upon the wings of a bird,
And listens through the bars
Of its living prison
The whispering of woods and fields, the
Roar of the seven seas.
Without its body a soul is ashamed,
As a body without its garment,
No reason or action, no
Projects or writings.
A riddle without solution:
Who can come back again,
From dancing on that stage,
Where nobody is dancing?
And I dream of a soul
Distinct, in different attire:
It burns, while shifting
From fear to hope,
As fire that feeds on spirits,
Without a shadow that wanders around the Earth,
Leaving in memory on the table
A bunch of lilac.
Run, child, do not weep
For poor Eurydice
And with your small rod around the world
Keep pushing your copper hoop;
Although still hardly audible,
In answer to your each step,
Joyfully and dryly,
The Earth resounds in your ears (in Borin, 1989, 109-110).

Is this impassioned soul perhaps – this material yet subtle body, “in a new garment”, which commits to the child the hope of a connection with the world, with the whispering terrestrial world – the “philosophical mercury”, the ultimate outcome of a journey that makes it possible to inhabit the world? Is the message also that his images of fire and salt make permanent any reflection governed by *Puer* and *Sophia*?

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