Alchemy's Dance of Darkness

1.

Alchemy can be found in almost every civilization in one form or another. In Japan, for example, swordsmiths were "masters of the fire." And, as Paracelsus, the 16th Century Swiss alchemist, said "Fire alone is the whole work and the entire art."

Japan's greatest swordsmith was perhaps Masamune (c.1264–1343) In one legend Masamune is challenged by his pupil, Myramasa, as to who can forge the finer sword.
They each, in turn, placed their sword in a creek with its cutting edge facing against the current. Muramasa's sword, named "10,000 Cold Nights," cut everything –fish, leaves, insects—floating past it. Then Masamune lowered his sword, "Tender Hands," into the water. Only dead leaves were cut, while everything living floated past it unharmed. Masamune's sword was pronounced the best, as, unlike Muramasa's bloodthirsty sword, his showed compassion. Even in the forging of deadly weapons there was a strong spiritual element at work in alchemy.

The word "alchemy" probably stems from the Egyptian Keme, which means "black earth," as Egypt was called the Black Land, referring to the fertile Nile Valley (The black in blacksmith, the "masters of fire,"[1] is said to derive from "a layer of oxides that forms on the surface of the metal during heating.[2] However, perhaps it goes further back, to Keme, as there are always antecedents, until, like the "beginning" of the universe, they are over the horizon, and thus unseen.

In China, around 60 BCE we have the first record of the ingestion of an alchemical elixir of immortality. Called "salvation by ingestion," instead of prolonging life, ironically, these substances, such as cinnabar, a soft red ore that Chinese alchemists called "dragon's blood," from which mercury used to be derived, ironically proved to be fatal. However, in contrast to this extreme, a practice that continues into our time, such as in a recent story about Silicon Valley billionaires who are investing "in new biotechnologies that they hope will enable them to do what no human has ever done: cheat death. The technology includes some dubious treatments, such as being pumped with the blood of much younger people,"[3] Robert Ford Company tells us that "Dietary guidelines were certainly integral to all of the Daoist traditions in (China's) early medieval period…"[4] Interestingly, Company writes that

> Many of the vegetable and mineral substances which are to be gathered and prepared by the seeker of transcendence, according to Ge Hong, share two

sets of traits: first, they are rare, hard to obtain, and located in barely accessible places; second, they harbor marvelous qualities---their effects of health and longevity, of course, but also their strange appearance.[4]

2.

Alchemy matured in Europe during the 15th Century and lasted until "the extended 18th Century." In 1718, Herman Boerhaave. a newly-appointed Professor of Chemistry at Leiden University, delivered a talk titled, "Chemistry Purging Itself of Its Errors." In it Boerhaave said, "We are horrified and embarrassed by the silly nonsense (meaning alchemy) into which chemists plunge with sinful trespass. What fables, superstitions, and fancies! Hardly anywhere can more raving madness be found,"[5]

By the late 18th Century, alchemists had retreated into secret societies and Victorian occultism. This continued through the next two centuries. Even in 1952, historian of science, Herbert Butterfield, wrote that modern scholars who study alchemy end up "tinctured by the same sort of lunacy they set out to describe."[6] However, ten years later, Frank Sherwood Taylor's book, *The Alchemists*, began to rescue alchemy from the dustbin of scientific ridicule. It was, in part, the discovery that that great pillar of modern physics, Sir Isaac Newton, had been a serious alchemist.

Back in 1923, C.G. Jung met Richard Wilhelm, a Christian missionary to China. Wilhelm had made a translation of the Daoist alchemical text, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, to which Jung wrote a commentary. More recently, Thomas Cleary, the distinguished translator of Zen Buddhist texts, wrote: "Although Jung credited The *Secret of the Golden Flower* with having clarified his own work on the unconscious, he maintained serious reservations about the practice taught in this book. What Jung did not know was that the text he was reading in fact was a garbled translation of a truncated version of a corrupted recension of the original work."[7]

Be this as it may, Jung's interest was not in the accuracy of Wilhelm's translation, but that it led to his realization that the Chinese alchemists were "talking in symbols---those old acquaintances of mine."

Some Jungians term Jung's alchemical work "psychological alchemy." However, in light of what Jung said, I propose that we call it "symbolic alchemy." In a scholarly context, this approach can be seen in a transdisciplinary model; that is, the fluid movement *between* symbolic alchemy and the depth psychology along with, in a post-Jungian sense, mythology, somatics, and other relates disciplines. We may also include what the Japanese call MA.[8]

The concept of MA is rich in meaning, and ambiguity. It basically means an 'interval,' as in a gap between things and events. In symbolic alchemy MA would be in the transition between metaphors; that is, in "the included third," a move that takes us into a truly creative space.[9]
In music MA is the Cagean silence between notes that extends to the length of the composition.
Entering the same circle, MA is where alchemy and dance join hands.

3.

Staying in Japan we take up its dance form called Ankoku Butoh, "the Dance of Utter Darkness." It's founder, Hijikata Tatsumi, created its name "to denote a cosmological dance which completely departed from existing dances and explored the darkest side of human nature."[10]

Hijikata Tatsumi was born in 1928 in the northeastern prefecture of Akita: cold, hard, farming country, Hijikata arrived in Tokyo at age 23, a country bumpkin, but not for long, While working at odd jobs, he began studying European avant-garde dance, such as that of the German Expressionist Mary Wigman, and absorbing books, especially Jean Genet's novels, French Existentialist philosophy, and the work of surrealistic artists. He became friends with the novelist Yukio Mishima, the fanatic nationalist and finalist for the Nobel Prize for Literature. From these influences, and Japan's traditional arts, especially Noh and Kabuki, by the end of the 1950s, Hijikata had shocked the Japanese Dance World with erotic dance form he called Butoh, its guiding aesthetics that in the blacker than black darkness creativity, thus transformation, takes place. "So this darkness," wrote Marie-Louise von Franz, "is a symbol for something that occurs again and again wherever an essential creative impulse of consciousness appears."

Since the 1950s, Butoh has become an international dance form. Here's a sample of the contemporary Japanese butoh dance company, Sankai Juku, who perform around the world:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTHTPBp842g

In *Alchemical Studies*, Jung wrote of "the light of darkness itself, which illuminates its own darkness." So, in 1952, when Hijikata arrived in Tokyo, age 23, the city was only just beginning to recover from a devastating war, including the two hellish atomic bombs that finally ended the war. But it was not just the loss of lives and destruction of cities; the country was also dealing with sudden cultural and religious changes, as the emperor, whose majesty the Japanese had worshipped as a god for over 2000 years, had literally overnight morphed into an ordinary, albeit still privileged, mortal being.

"Yes," wrote Kurihara Nanako, the war affected Hijikata greatly, as it influenced a whole generation of Japanese artists and writers. And of course butoh contains a lot of 'Japanese' elements. However, the origin of Hijikata's butoh is far more complicated."[11]

Western dancer and author Sondra Fraleigh wrote: "(A)s in Jungian explanations of alchemy—the darkness of material is something that must be experienced consciously before transformation and integration can take place…Butoh does not purify and sublimate; it is muddy and often ugly… downward and dissolving."[12] Indeed, Butoh is the dance the soul does when death weighs it down.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0_WlmDUSRk

Another aspect of Alchemy's Dance of Darkness is that it can be androgynous, and some Butoh dancers, like Hijikata's most famous, and resilient, collaborator, who was still dancing at age 93--Kazuo Ohno

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUjhQLB0hXY

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6Ix96_t_ZU

Here we are in a *post*-Jungian practice, as Jung played anima and animus against and through each other not in an androgynous or transsexual sense, or in the many other such categories by which some persons are now identifying their gender, such as indefinite, trans-or pansexual. There is also the Otherkin community, people who identify with vampires, or various animals, ordinary or mythological.[13]

One of Hijikata's favorite writers was Antonin Artaud, most known for his "theatre of cruelty."[14] Addressing this seemingly negative text, French philosopher Jacques Derrida could have been also been discussing Hijikata when he wrote:

"It affirms. It produces affirmation itself in its full and necessary vigor. But also in its hidden sense, the sense most often buried, most often diverted from itself: 'implacable' as it is, this affirmation has 'not yet begun to exist.'"

Derrida continued: "Thus, whatever can be said of the body can also be said of the theater."[15]

To this we may add James Hillman, who wrote, "How can we have faith in what we do if the words in which we do it are disembodied of substance?[16]

4.

Alchemy and butoh both function in a state of controlled disintegration, with the butoh dancer's body darkening into the *nigredo*. In Japanese, *do* means Way, as in Aikido, Judo, Kendo, etc. So that *nigredo* is "the Way of Darkness," a practice such as what the poet John Keats famiously called "negative capacity." In Christian terms, this is called "apophatic theology."

Although alchemy was packaged in Medieval Christian wrapping, inside it was a rebellious form of art, especially as interpreted within a symbolic; e.g., Jungian, practice, because alchemists sort transformation, not transcendence.

Alchemy's art was lost when it was apparently repackaged as practical chemistry, or so we read in books on the history of chemistry. In general, the scientist looks for what is, while the artist creates what never was. Thus, butoh generally rejects choreography for displacement.[17]

One of my favorite stories is John L'Heureux's short story, "Roman Ordinary," in which, "His Holiness Pope Paul VI is an ordinary saint. All day long he does what

he has to do, and at night he dances." At night, when everyone is asleep, the pope unlocks a cabinet that contains his bones, and dances before it. "The garments that surround his flesh seem to float free of it. There is nothing beneath those garments but water and air."[18]

As Hijikata wrote, "It's not about squeezing your body into a space, but about being stripped of things."[19] It is as if the butoh dancer is continually testing the complicity of each step, just as the Philosopher's Stone is a metaphor for an endless path of steppingstones.

In essence, we are all alchemical beings who began as *prima materia* curled in dark waters of our mother's womb. Suddenly the fluid drained, the darkness flooded with light, air rushed into our lungs, and the circulations that lead to an individualized life began, until…"Pain, exhaustion, death---these were the elements of his dance. But they were not dramatized, they were just there."[20]

ENDNOTES

1.The Forge and the Crucible." New York, 1962.
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blacksmith
3. J. Abramson, "Billionaires Dream of Immortality. The Rest of Us Worry About Healhcare." *The Guardian*. 5 July 2017.
4. R.F. Company, "Ingesting the Marvelous: The Practitioner's Relationship to Nature According to Ge Hong." In, *Daoism and Ecology*. N.J. Girardot, et.al., eds., Cambridge MA., 2001. p.127.
5. J.C. Powers, *Inventing Chemistry: Herman Boerhaave and the Reform of the Chemical Arts.* Chicago, 2012.
6. H. Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science, 1300–1800*. New York, 1950. p.141.
7. T. Cleary, The Secret of the Golden Flower. New York, 1993. p.3.
8. "Thus ma describes a meaningful interval in space, time, or space-time, an interval with both objective and subjective aspects, inherently relational, most easily apprehended in a religo-aesthetic context," J. Hamera, "Silence That Reflects: Butoh, *Ma*, and a Crosscultural Gaze." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 10 (1990) p.57.
9. The included third, or "included middle." "must necessarily integrate the discontinuous leaps between levels of Reality." B. Nicolescu*, From Modernity to Cosmodernity*. Albany NY, 2014. p.209.
10. N. Kurihara, "Hijikata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh." *The Drama Review* 44 (1) 2000. p.12.
11. Ibid, p.17.
12. S. Fraleigh, *Budoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy.* Urbana IL., 2010. p.3.
13. https://seriousotherkin.tumblr.com/post/140002644395/welcome-to-the-otherkin-community
14. A.Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*. Grove Press, 1994.
15 J. Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation." In. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago, 1978. P.232.
16. In, "Alchemical Language." *Dragonflies,* Fall 1978. p.40. Reprinted in, *Alchemical Psychology*. *Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman* Vol. 5. Putnam, CT, 2010. p.18.

17. “When I seriously consider the training of a butoh dancer, I think that what’s important are the kinds of movements which come from joints being displaced, then walking disjointedly for a couple of steps, with one leg striving to reach the other. “Fragments of Glass: A Conversation between Hijikata Tatsumi and Suzuki Tadashi. *TDR* Vol. 44 (1) Spring 2000. p.52..
18. J. L’Heureux, “Roman Ordinary.” In, *Desires.* New York, 1981.
19. Hijikata; Ibid. p. 63.
20. “Tatsumi Hijikata.” In, D. Richie, *Japanese Portraits*. North Clarendon, VT. 2005. p.111.

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