

Stanton Marlan, *The Black Sun: The Alchemy and Art of Darkness*, College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005. Richly illustrated with color plates. 267 pages.

Marlan's Bardo Thödol

It is an axiom of archetypal psychology that each phenomenon contains within itself the means by which it is to be interpreted. In keeping with this, the book here under review, Stanton Marlan's *The Black Sun*, refers in its sub-title to "the Alchemy and Art of Darkness." It is an apt description of the approach that follows. When working with those darkest and most misery-filled moments of the opus that were known to them as "the black sun, blackness, *putrefactio*, *mortificatio*, the *nigredo*, poisoning, torture, killing, decomposition, rotting and death," the alchemists understood the importance of meeting these on their own terms (p. 11). Practitioners of a "black art," they knew that it was by going under, into the phenomenology of the soul's blackening, indeed, by becoming even "blacker than black," that the specific luminosity of blackness--the dark light of Sol niger--could dawn in their awareness as a whole plethora of previously unthought distinctions emerged. The practicing analyst, as Marlan himself so well exemplifies, must work in a similar spirit. Eschewing what Freud called the *furor sanandi* (or rage to cure), he too must enter the depression, despair, illness, disease, and death that he meets with in his practice, not for the sake of countering these in the manner of a light-bearer, but as part of an analytic effort to know them from within. As Jung famously expressed this in a line cited by Marlan, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious" (CW 13, ¶ 335).

Now light, and of course its king of kings, the sun, are dominant images in every culture. Making so much visible to the eye, these have readily, and from time immemorial, become metaphors of conscious awareness. We speak, for example, of the triumph of light over darkness,

day over night, of sunny dispositions, lucidity, and enlightenment. Writing with respect to the associations that exist between the sun's light and consciousness, Jung states that "for untold ages men have worshipped the great god who redeems the world by rising out of darkness as a radiant light in the heavens," adding that "within the soul from its primordial beginnings there has been a desire for light and an irrepressible urge to rise out of the primal darkness."¹

But light has also a dark aspect, a shadow side. Brilliance can scorch; brightness cast a withering stare. On the heels of the historian of religion Mircea Eliade's observation that "where history is on the march thanks to kings, heroes or empires, the sun is supreme,"² we now tend to think of the casualties of the solar metaphor's colonizing thrust. We think of the cultures that have been vanquished and of the peoples that are no more. Especially in university humanities departments has this issue been taken up as a concern. Critical of the violence that light as meta-metaphor has wreaked, cultural commentators of the post-modern ilk provide deconstructive readings of the logocentrism, phallogocentrism, and heliopolitics of the Western visionary tradition.³ What a text referentially declares in the definite script of its printed page is read in the dark-light of what has been repressed into its margins. In this effort these critics could be said to be following, however unwittingly, those alchemists discussed by Jung (and now again by Marlan) whose thinking included images of the sun being devoured by a lion, the dethronement and beating of the solar-crowned king, and the *coniunctio* of Sol and Luna.

There is yet another approach. The darkness against which light so often stands in victorious and even dominating contrast can also be conceived apart from light, not merely as light's absence, but as a phenomenon in its own right. As the epigraphs at the top of several chapters indicate, this is the position that Marlan has taken in his book. "When you see your matter going black, rejoice, for this is the beginning of the work," declares a line from the *Rosarium Philosophorum*.⁴ "Yet mystery and

manifestations arise from the same source. This source is called darkness ... Darkness within darkness, the gateway to all understanding," concurs the Chinese sage, Lao-Tzu.⁵

The analytic attitude that these quotations help to convey is one of hospitality towards the darkness. In a discussion of this Marlan avers that

... darkness historically has not been treated hospitably and ... has remained in the unconscious and become a metaphor for it. It has been seen primarily in its negative aspect and as a secondary phenomenon, itself constituting a shadow--something to integrate, to move through and beyond. In so doing, its intrinsic importance is often passed over. (p. 12)

Marlan, doubtless, is correct in this assessment. Throughout the ages there has been a phobic antipathy for all that is dark. This is not to say, however, that archetypal models of a more receptive attitude cannot be found. Besides those cited by Marlan in his epigraphs, Hades, Lord of the Underworld, comes readily to mind in this connection as the great host of darkness in our Western tradition. Writing with reference to this deity in his *Cratylus*, Plato expresses the view that the souls of the dead are held in the underworld, not only by dire constraints, but by the fascinating intelligence of their host.⁶

Readers of Marlan's book, I am sure, will have a similar experience of their interest being captivated by a fascinating, Hades-like intelligence. Part of this, I believe, Marlan achieves through the cornucopia of amplifications he provides. Working in the spirit of Edward F. Edinger, a former personal analyst and mentor, Marlan carefully circumambulates his theme, bringing in comparative material from many traditions, both ancient and contemporary. This approach is then tintured with the inheritance of another seminal contributor, James Hillman, with whom he also worked analytically and later, collegially. The influence of this precursor is felt in the sense of poetic nuance that Marlan brings to the images with which he works, in the suspending of the soteriological urge,

and in the bridge-burning turn to an underworld perspective. The defining mark of Marlan's book, however, does not reside in the contributions of these masters, but in his own masterful integration of what he has learned from them with the wider intellectual and artistic culture of our times. In *The Black Sun*, Marlan's "alchemists" are not only Mylius, Paracelsus, and Fabricius (though these are duly referenced), but the philosophers Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Lévinas, the critical theorists Derrida, Kristeva, and Foucault and the expressionist painters Mark Rothko, Max Ernst, and Anselm Kiefer. The result of this is a Jungian analysis of the most difficult reaches of the soul's life that is true to the substance of the Jungian approach while at the same time overcoming the isolation that much Jungian discourse has had from the wider sphere of learned discourse.

A moment ago I mentioned the Platonic idea of the underworld Hades captivating the interest of the dead with his fascinating intelligence. I want now to quote a paragraph from the third chapter of Marlan's book that conveys this same quality.

In the last two chapters we examined the primacy of light and the dark alchemy of descent, emphasizing the "blacker than black" aspects of the nigredo process in its most literal and destructive forms. This descent was an excruciating initiation into the most negative dimension of Sol niger and an entrance into the domain of Hades and Ereshkigal, Dante's world of ice, and Kali's cremation grounds. Our king's ego has been spoiled, our virgin's milk has soured, and we have drunk the poison of Holbein's dance of death and seen the black sun of Splendor Solis. The sun has blackened, and we have met Jung's Dragon. Our dark eye is opened, and we have entered Edinger's "gate of blackness." Hollowed out with Eliot, ranting with the philosopher Cioran, and lamenting with Job, one may wonder why we were ever born. In the face of such a devastating vision, analysis stands still--shocked. Salvationist fires are fanned but are held back; the heart is wrenched. Job's comforters are quieted, and no platitudes or new analytic techniques will do. Biological remedies, primal screams, and spiritual fantasies are hollow. There is no rush to cure; perhaps there is no cure at all. Silence is in the soul of patient and analyst alike: a quiet pair sitting in the grip of Sol niger, dark and light, burning and ice cold, standing on ground that is no ground, a self that is no self and that has been devoured by a green lion or a black hole. (pp. 65-66)

In this passage, as throughout his entire book, Marlan does not merely talk *about* the black sun. Gripped by it, affected, he lets it speak. This, it could be said, is the authenticating mark of a *Jungian* analysis. "We should never forget," writes Jung, "that in any psychological discussion we are not saying anything *about* the psyche, but that the psyche is always speaking about *itself* (CW 9, i, ¶ 483). Making this point in another way, Jung refers to the alchemical practice of naming the unknown by the name of the more unknown, *ignotum per ignotius*.⁷ Like the black-on-black paintings of Rothko which Marlan discusses, analytic practice, too, consists of a recursive turning of the phenomenon in question, whatever that may be, upon itself to the point where its self-sameness begins to give way to the latent particulars which are its distinctiveness, depth, and soul. As Marlan's analysis shows, the intelligence of Hades, the dark-light of Sol niger, does not come from an external light source that is brought to bear upon a phenomenon from without; rather, like the *lumen naturae* of Paracelsus (1493-1541) and the *senus naturae* of William of Conches (1080-1154), it is in the immanent reflection that each phenomenon brings when, through restatement and circumambulating amplification, we make its "darkness conscious" by imagining in its terms.

Another important facet to *The Black Sun* has to do with the drawing of comparisons and contrasts to the views of other Jungian analysts who have also written on the maleficence of the psychic process. In his influential 1996 book, *The Inner World of Trauma*, Donald Kalsched elaborated a theory of what he calls "archetypal defenses of the personal spirit." According to Kalsched, when ordinary defenses fail in the face of unbearable psychic pain and anxiety, the psyche may respond by turning upon itself in such a manner that from out of its own internal splits a drama featuring a brutal persecutor and innocent victim is produced that encapsulates the patient's personal spirit. While this affect-imagery is typically very disturbing, Kalsched understands it to be serving a protective function, albeit a very costly one. Like a fire that has been set with the aim of

creating a burned-out barrier in the path of an even greater and more terrible fire, the negative expectations and internal attacks of the increasingly inhibited and life-avoiding patient keep the unthinkable from being experienced.

There is much merit in Kalsched's account of the archetypal defenses that may be constellated in the face of a severe trauma. Many patients do suffer in the manner he describes. But as Marlan is able to show, this is by no means the whole story. The black sun is not only "a kind of black hole whose gravity draws the vulnerable ego or Self ... into a doomed stasis" (p. 72). On the contrary, when read in terms of its difference from the humanistic categories of ego and Self it may reflect a moment in the soul's life in which ego-illusions and idealized notions of wholeness and Self will not do. As Marlan puts this, "... the emergence of Sol niger requires a reflection on that which is beyond the humanism of ego psychology and which attempts to take on questions of the death of the ego or perhaps even the Self as part of psychic possibility" (p. 72).

The death of the ego is a theme that has been written about by another Jungian analyst, David Rosen. In his 1993 book, *Transforming Depression*, Rosen introduces the term "egocide" to describe an important process by means of which the psyche pushes itself beyond its defenses. As Marlan summarizes, "Egocide makes possible a psychic transformation and constitutes a death-rebirth process. In that process, ego identity dies or is symbolically killed along with one's former perspectives of oneself and life" (p. 73-74). Now, while Marlan finds merit in Rosen's view, it is clear from his discussion that for him it does not go far enough. Working in terms of a classical distinction between ego and Self, Rosen's egocide is the killing or analyzing to death of that negative, destructive ego that has, as it were, a false attitude to the Self. The problem with this, if I read Marlan aright, is that the critique of consciousness to which the ego has been subjected is not extended to that guarantor of the ego's rebirth, the Self. As Marlan puts it, in Rosen's analysis "what

Jung calls the Self is not destroyed" (p. 74). This is a crucial point. The importance of Rosen's egocide concept notwithstanding, consciousness remains within the economy of the ego if its highest determination, *its* Self or God, does not go under in a complimentary process of deicide. For, even as the ego "dies" the choristers of a Jungian metapsychology sing, "The King is dead, long-live the King." This is hardly a requiem for the ego.

Clearly, Marlan's analysis of analysis by means of the black sun has pushed off from the glossary definitions and shop-worn colloquialisms that Jung's concepts, like those in any field, have become. Adapting a strategy from poststructuralism, he proposes that we now place these "under erasure." Having long been reified into a Sun-like entity in our working parlance, the term Self (to take but one example) must now be written in such way that its simultaneous deletion--we may think here of the elusiveness of the spirit Mercurius!--may be indicated. As Marlan puts it, "Using Derrida's strategy of *sous rature*, the notion of the ~~Self~~ under erasure, rather than being seen as a transcendental idea, essence, or substance, comes even closer to Jung's recognition of its mystery and unknown quality. Seen as a trace, the ~~Self~~'s invisible presence is both marked yet effaced, and its shadow Otherness, seen otherwise, is both paradoxical and mysterious, both light and dark, yet neither" (p. 185).

But let us back up a step. Faithful to Jung's writings, the glossaries define the ego as the subject of our conscious knowing and distinguish it from that greater subject, the Self, which expresses the wholeness of the conscious *and* unconscious. What is it, then, about the ego that analysis needs to push beyond?

Within the above mentioned "economy of the ego," the phenomena of experience and things of the world are but a means to an end. "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," as Wordsworth puts it. It could even be said that by this shop-till-you-drop logic, the death experience,

too, has been conceived in terms of the ulterior purpose of a rebirth that is really little more than getting and spending in a new key. But the initiation that Marlan darkly envisions is about the dissolving or desubstantiation of ego such that the phenomena of experience, including depressive states and the imago of death, are soulfully regarded as values in their own right, ends in themselves. As Marlan (again drawing upon Rosen's important idea of egocide) puts this, "as we move from egocide toward the reevaluation of the ego and the death instinct, we move from a simply biological or traditional psychological understanding toward a symbolic and metaphorical one and from literal death to a deconstruction of the literalist ego, which is part of the teleological aspect of the psyche itself" (p. 77).

Here we may be reminded of a statement of Jung's. Writing with reference to comparative material such as that which Marlan provides in his book, Jung states:

Psychic existence, and above all the inner images ..., supply the material for all mythic speculations about a life in the hereafter and I imagine that life as a continuation in the world of images. Thus the psyche might be that existence in which the hereafter or the land of the dead is located.⁸

Further to this, another passage from Jung may be cited which again touches on the issue of the hereafter or land of the dead, this time in a manner that is resonant with our earlier discussion of the depressive critique of the economy of the ego that the black sun seems to bring.

It is highly sensible of the *Bardo Thödol* [*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*] to make clear to the dead man the primacy of the psyche, for that is the one thing which life does not make clear to us. We are so hemmed in by things which jostle and oppress that we never get a chance, in the midst of all these "given" things, to wonder by whom they are "given." It is from this world of "given" things that the dead man liberates himself; and the purpose of the instruction is to help him towards this liberation. CW 11, ¶ 841

After reading Marlan it can be said that not only the souls of the dead need the guidance of a

Bardo Thödol. Grappling with depressive suffering, patients and analysts need something of the same. Rich in amplifications and written with a foot in the grave, Marlan's book is such a guidebook--a *Bardo Thödol*, so to speak, for that sickness unto death by which the living are afflicted in our postmodern era. The aptness of this comparison comes across exquisitely well in the clinical cases that Marlan discusses. Indeed, in the dreams and paintings of both the woman artist and the depressed pastoral counsellor we see the "great reversal of standpoint, calling for much sacrifice," that Jung said "is needed before we can see the world as "given" by the very nature of the psyche" (CW 11, ¶ 841). As an analyst myself I found it most inspiring to observe again how rich our work can be, when, in its darkest and most despairing moments, darkness itself gleams.

A final reflection. When thinking critically about a work of psychology, we do well to recall a cautionary statement of Jung's regarding interpretation and the archetype. "The archetype," he writes,

... is a psychic organ present in all of us. A bad explanation [therefore] means a correspondingly bad attitude to this organ, which may thus be injured. But the ultimate sufferer is the bad interpreter himself. Hence the "explanation" should always be such that the functional significance of the archetype remains unimpaired, so that an adequate and meaningful connection between the conscious mind and the archetype is assured. CW 9, i, ¶ 271

In this passage Jung conveys an important truth. The attitude of the psychologist, and of that greater subject, psychology itself, is crucial. Unwittingly, however, Jung falls foul of his point even as he utters it. Here I have in mind his unreflected characterization of the archetype as an *organ* and of his speaking of the conscious mind *here* and the archetype *there*. Is not the identification of the archetype as an *organ*, the conception of its interiority as being inside us, and the *here* and *there* of ego and archetype itself a wrong attitude?

With his adaptation of Derrida's *sous rature*, Marlan brings correction to this positivizing,

essentializing tendency in Jung, as did Hillman before him with his move from archetype as noun to the adjective, archetypal.⁹ "Organs," "archetype" and "Self": these, we may understand with Marlan, must be placed under erasure in our discourse today: as ~~organs, archetype, Self~~.

But does it not follow from this that the black sun must also be struck out? While reading Marlan's book, my one critical thought was that the black sun in his text sometimes seems to remain a positive entity--something in front of consciousness (as Giegerich would put it). If psychology, as we have already heard from Jung, does not say anything *about* the psyche, but is rather psyche speaking about *itself*, does this not apply as well to the black sun?

Marlan writes: "In our attempt to speak the unspeakable, we have noticed that the Self, too, casts a shadow, and we have focused on this shadow, recognizing the unnamable, invisible, and unthinkable core of the idea, which some have referred to as a Divine Darkness while others have called it a non-Self. The non-Self is not another name for the Self but is founded in the recognition of the problematics involved in any representation of wholeness and a mark for the profound expression of this mystery"(p. 213). The point Marlan is making has to do with the insufficiency of any signifier in conveying the fullness of human experience. Without disputing this important insight, I find myself subject to a doubt on another score. It is the same doubt that Santayana raised with respect to mysticism. In the view of this philosopher, mysticism "consists in the surrender of a category of thought on account of the discovery of its relativity."¹⁰ Eschewing the specific and finite, the mystic deserts reason and judgment on account of their share in these. The upshot of this is that "... instead of perfecting human nature, [mysticism] seeks to abolish it; instead of building a better world, it would undermine the foundations even of the world we have built already; instead of developing our minds to greater scope and precision, it would return to the condition of protoplasm--to the blessed consciousness of an Unutterable Reality."¹¹

For all its talk about the unconscious and the numinous, analysis is not mysticism and betrays psychology when it insists on being so. As psychologists we must not leave the black sun a mystical object, or bring a false prestige to our patients' despair and depression through the strange grandeur of its name. The luminosity of these dark places resides, as Marlan has so capably shown, in that alchemy and art of darkness that our *psychology* becomes when it has itself become the Sol niger that thinks in their terms.

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References

- ¹ C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, tr. R. & C. Winston, New York, Vintage, 1965, p. 269. Cited by Marlan, *The Black Sun*, p. 13.
- ² Cited by Marlan, *The Black Sun*, p. 13.
- ³ Cf. Marlan, *The Black Sun*, p.16.
- ⁴ Cited by Marlan, *The Black Sun*, p. 9.
- ⁵ Cited by Marlan, *The Black Sun*, p. 97.
- ⁶ Cf. James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, New York, Harper & Row, 1979, p. 121.
- ⁷ Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 354.
- ⁸ Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, pp. 319-320
- ⁹ James Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman, Vol. 1*, Putnum, CT, Spring Publications, 2005. p. 70.
- ¹⁰ George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1957, p. 14.
- ¹¹ Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 15.