The Spiral Journey, Remedios Varo, 1962

Remedios Varo

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Spiral Journey

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Dedicated to my friends and colleagues Jules Cashford and Patricia Sohl and in honor of the 40 years of Ami Ronnberg’s extraordinary and creative dedication to the symbolic life through her work at ARAS
Foreword

As the year 2022 begins, I reflect on why it feels the right time to offer this work on Remedios Varo’s Spiral Journey to ARAS Connections. Perhaps it is due to the sense that, at this moment in history, our collective consciousness needs to see the immense creativity of a woman who was both deprived of her homeland by a Fascist regime’s victory in the Spanish Civil War and then was forced to flee her adopted country when the Nazis invaded France.

Her courage and tenacity, along with an extraordinary capacity for friendship, according to Janet Kaplan, allowed her to finally find a hospitable new home in Mexico where her creativity bloomed and her greatest works were painted. Jung said: “Only a thing that changes and evolves lives, but static things mean spiritual death” (C.W. vol. 18 para 1595) Remedios’ life and art was one of both change and spiritual evolution. In this way it is a beacon for the times we are living through now.
The labyrinth, the spiral path is the sacred approach to the world invisible to human senses, but ever present as an image within the soul.

Like a snail’s shell, the spiral path is where we live. It is all around us – even though we cannot see it.

The spiral is associated with the moon and the rhythm and flow of the oceans’ tide. It is the rhythm and movement of folk and tribal dance and the blur of the Whirling Dervish. Dance was one of the earliest forms of worship. It invoked fertility, protection and transformation and was, therefore, essential to the shaman.

The spiral is linked too with the journey or pilgrimage. While most often we read about the masculine heroic journey, Remedios Varo’s paintings created during the last decade of her life, reveal the thresholds of the uniquely feminine path toward wholeness.

This journey is often imaged as a labyrinth or spiral.

“the treading of an obstructed path is the key motif of labyrinth symbolism. The maze being a symbol of the outer shell around the hidden center. Overcoming the obstacle that obstructs the entry into the center denotes transformation; and re-emergence from its re-birth.”

And so, we carry with us the ubiquitous historical and cultural nature of this archetypal image of the spiral, as we explore this motif in Varo’s paintings.

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1. Maria-Gabriele Wosien, *Sacred Dance: Encounter with the Gods*, p. 27.
Remedios, whose full name was Maria de los Remedios Alicia Varo y Uranga was born in Spain in the town of Anglés, north of Barcelona on December 16, 1908. Her father was a hydraulic engineer and during her early life her family moved throughout Spain and North Africa due to his profession. ²

Her mother named her Remedios, after the Virgen de los Remedios as a remedy to forget an older daughter who had died. ³ We need not underestimate this act of

²Janet Kaplan, Unexpected Journeys: The art and Life of Remedios Varo, p. 11.
³Ibid.
naming, whether one sees it as archetypal destiny or developmental wound. It is both. She is linked by it to loss, death and the burden of a mother’s grief. And in another sense, she becomes a child of the Great Mother, the Blessed Mother.

Remedios’s mother was a devout Catholic from a very traditional Basque family. While her father who was from Andalusia was more agnostic than Catholic. She had two brothers. The older one became a doctor and “questioned her bohemian life and the seriousness of her artistic pursuits. Her younger brother, who was to die in the Civil War, became Remedios’s closest playmate.”

Of her mother, Remedios said that she worried that her non-conformity shamed this “good-hearted, traditionally devout woman”.

“Although Varo’s temperament was similar to her father’s, with their shared tendency toward fantasy and their mutual interest in art, she always felt cowed by him and kept him emotionally at a distance. Yet, it was he who encouraged her artistic development, taking her to museums and training her in the skills of mechanical drawing. Recognizing her budding skill, he drilled her in the rigors of his craft, instructing her in the correct use of the rule, the carpenter’s square, and the triangles.”

We shall see later in her painting, *Creation of the Birds* how this knowledge of the triangle appears as a tangible and symbolic tool of her art. When the family traveled throughout Spain and North Africa for his engineering work, he “set her to the task of copying his drawings and diagrams.”

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4 Ibid., p. 14
5 Ibid., p. 11
6 Ibid., p. 16
7 Ibid., p. 15.
8 Ibid.
Remedios received a traditional strict Catholic education from the nuns. This environment that was described by the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti, remembered from his own childhood as “reactionary and savage Catholicism that darkened the blueness of the sky from the days of our childhood, covering us with layers of gray ashes”.

Remedios’s rebellious character emerged in this traditional environment. Her imagination roamed freely. “She sprinkled sugar on the floor in front of her bedroom door at the convent school to help detect eavesdroppers and spies.

“She read Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, and Edgar Allen Poe, as well as literature of mysticism and Eastern thought. She is even said to have written secretly to a Hindu, asking him to send her some mandrake root because she had heard that it had magical properties.”

We see clearly then, from early in life she had an affinity for the imaginal world and the dark side of existence. We know she was widely read in “mystic and hermetic traditions” which included Gurdjieff, Blavatsky, Meister Eckhart, the Sufis, alchemy the I Ching and Jung.

Varo’s artistic skill was present from an early age, then supported by her father and subsequently refined at the Academia de San Fernando the most prestigious art school in Madrid. Later her technique and mode of expression was expanded when she was a member of the Surrealist group of artists and poets in Paris during the 1930’s.
For most of her life in Europe, Remedios was forced by circumstances to paint commissions in order to survive. But in the last decade of her life her true genius emerged as she began to paint her “inner journey”, the journey of feminine individuation. It is to some of these paintings that we now turn.

What an extraordinary depiction of the journey through the houses of life – which float upon this sea of the collective unconscious. These houses form the earthly solid aspect of the spiral and culminate in the central tower of the artist’s life. Her journey is always toward this tall central tower. The buildings and turrets give the image an enclosed sacred feeling. They recall a medieval monastery, a place of contemplation.

This medieval setting reminds us that through a dream Jung was led to the study of alchemy, a discipline from ancient and medieval times before art and science were severed into separate disciplines. Jung’s study led him to the discovery that alchemy was a metaphor for the deep process of transformation of the psyche. Alchemy was the antecedent of Depth Psychology. He found that the strange and arcane images of the alchemists occur in the dreams of modern people but they are “clothed” in contemporary garb.

Alchemy, in short, is the art devoted to transformation of human consciousness. The vessel used by the alchemists often had the shape of a tower or an egg. It contained the *prima materia* usually referred to as lead or shit, the substances that are lowly, disdained, depressing, or shameful. It is the less acceptable, undeveloped, wounded, and vulnerable aspects of ourselves that are to be transformed into the gold of creativity and connection to the divine spark within us.
The wound is where the divine can incarnate. Alchemy is about the conviction, a Gnostic belief that God depends upon human consciousness for His or Her redemption. It speaks of the individual human being as the essential instrument in continuing the work of creation.

We see in this detail the central tower contains an egg-shaped perch with a *Fleur-de-lis* at its top; and on it stands a beautiful bird with wings spread. The soul has been imaged as a bird throughout human history.
The egg-shaped perch echoes the shape of the empty boat that sits in front of this, the last and central tower.

The French *Fleur-de-lis* refers to the mythic Iris, who symbolically represents the rainbow and was, therefore, a messenger of the gods.)

*Figure 3 The Spiral Transit, detail*
Each individual boat that we see is unique. Some reveal a female figure with her hand on a round mandalic wheel steering as the wind fills the sail. She moves in concert with the spirit – a masculine energy that propels her.

Figure 4  The Spiral Transit, detail

In other images, there is a man who steers. The most haunting of these is the boat we see at the bottom center of the painting. It shows a woman wrapped mummy-like in a white cloak. She sits motionless unable to move as the man with a red beard steers the boat. It is driven forward by a paddle wheel rather than by the wind in a sail.
Is this what it is like for a woman to be “animus driven”? She has lost her feminine autonomy in the driven measured, Apollonian world of patriarchal consciousness. This boat has no sail, only a tape measure.

In the bible measuring indicates judgment and destruction.14 This is precisely what happens to a woman when she is caught by the negative aspect of the Masculine. Her autonomy and ability to reach out, to nurture herself is cut off --- just as her hands are cut off in the fairytale, The Girl Without Hands.

The figure of the red bearded man reinforces this idea of the negative side of the Masculine or animus that can hold her hostage. In the fairytale Snow White and Rose Red, the girls try to free the dwarf whose beard is caught in the crevice of a tree. When they free him by cutting his beard, he only curses them. And, of course, there is Blue Beard, a tale of even darker power of the destructive aspect of the inner or outer masculine that dismembers a woman’s sense of identity.

14 Ad de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery, p. 317.
Let us turn for a moment to the goats we see within Varo’s *Spiral Transit*. They are animals that occur quite frequently in her work. Goats are associated with fertility and with the goddesses Hera and Aphrodite. They are also the steeds of witches and, of
course, Dionysus is called the “goat god“ – a god of women and the irrational side of life.

In astrology the goat is the symbol of Capricorn, the sign ruled by Saturn and associated with melancholy. Throughout history it is understood that the artist is a melancholic by temperament. Varo enhances this idea with the dark clouds that hover over her journey through life. We know that she was plagued by fears and insecurities, periods of depression and a long history of gastric problems.  

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15 Ibid., p. 217.
16 Kaplan, p. 223.
All initiation rites begin with a separation from the previous life. In this painting we see this break from the past and the familiar. We see what is the first break with old ways, the traditions of Remedios’s strict Spanish family and convent school life. Here, literally imaged as a narrow-walled place. She is cloaked like a pilgrim setting off on her journey. Note the snails at the lower right on the wall – she has painted them to remind us of the spiral nature of this journey.

*Figure 6 The Rupture, 1955*
The eyes, which peer from the faces in the windows of this traditional Spanish building seem as if they are aspects or complexes which observe her as she sets off on this journey. She looks up, gazes at something we cannot see. What we do observe is that a great wind has swept through this house of the past – blowing papers that represent words, thoughts, ideas that no longer are of use. The wind we know represents the presence of spirit, be it the Christian image of the Holy Ghost, Hermes the Trickster, or the breath of creative life.

She walks down these steps very visibly accompanied by her shadow. – As we know, the feminine journey of initiation always begins with a descent. This woman descends wrapped in her cloak which encapsulates her like a “chrysalis”. It will be her protection during the journey ahead. Notice how her eyes and face are shaped like that of a caterpillar.

Remedios Varo’s journey was both inner and concrete. She was uprooted often as a child as the family traveled for her father’s work. She married her first husband hoping to escape the confining traditions of her family. They settled in Paris where as a member of the group of Surrealists she found herself not only an emigré but an exile when Franco closed Spain’s borders locking her out of her homeland to which she never returned.

Remedios became part of the inner circle of Parisian Surrealists largely due to her companion Benjamin Peret who became her second husband. Peret, a poet, was a member of the Communist party as well as the inner circle of Surrealism. This artistic movement circled around the rather autocratic leadership of Andre Breton. The women
associated with this group were seen as “femme enfant”; which in equating woman’s creativity with youth and innocence, left little room for maturity or the aging process among the women artists of the group.” Surrealism, we remember, arose from a belief in a reliance upon the unconscious impulse and trust in the intuitive realm.

While living in Paris, Remedios led a bohemian life, framed by dire poverty. “The specter of an entire day’s sustenance limited to coffee...”. She was imprisoned because of her relationship with Peret. And then not long after she was freed, the Nazis invaded France and she fled to Paris. After a long and dangerous journey, she reached Marseilles. Aided by many seeking to save artists and intellectuals she and Peret embarked on another harrowing journey to Casablanca. She and Peret ultimately reached Mexico where she would spend the rest of her life.

In 1947 Peret and she parted and in the early 1950’s (after the death of Walter Gruen’s wife) she and Gruen became a couple. It was he who supported her, making it possible for her to paint her greatest works.

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17 Ibid., p. 57.
18 Ibid., p. 63
19 Ibid., p.82-83,
20 Ibid., p. 21.
Varo’s wit and use of irony is apparent. But a deeper meaning resides in her depiction of all these girls who resemble Remedios. They are dressed in convent school uniforms and are intently focused on their embroidery – a traditional feminine skill. Like weaving, it is closely linked to the three goddesses: Clotho, Lachesis, and Antropos, the Fates who weave, measure and cut the thread of life. Remedios depicts the girls with a central figure stirring an alchemical vessel (shaped like an hour glass). Behind this central figure is another cloaked one who plays the flute.

The alchemical process we remember involves two parts, the oratory and the laboratory. Perhaps, this is echoed in the two-part vessel that the large central figure
stirs. This figure holds a book that contains the recipe or wisdom required for the cooking, and the flute player offers the song, the feeling, the devotional connection to this world of mystery. Music is that least tangible and most fleeting of the arts – and each playing or singing is unique – never exactly the same.

Yet, there is another side to this work, for the young women, all of whom have Remedios’s heart shaped face, are imprisoned in this tower. The dual nature of this tower is like Rapunzel\(^2\) -- a prison and a catalyst of her creative power and freedom. For, in this tower, all these aspects of her life she weaves into a tapestry of her own creation myth. We see an entire world flowing out through the openings in the tower. The folds of cloth reveal houses, ponds, lakes, trees, fields, and animals.

Paradoxically, the tower isolates her from the life she weaves, and yet, it is the imprisonment of her traditional upbringing which is the vessel in which her future creative life germinates. Her escape from the tower is already woven into the fabric of her life.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 21.
This small detail shows an adolescent girl meeting her love, a young man. We know that psychologically it is the positive masculine in a woman’s life (both inner and outer) that leads her out into the world – away from the imprisonment in family and cultural patterns that would crush her individuality and creative energy.
In this picture, the detail we have just seen has now taken on color and become her Lover -- Animus-- as the actual liberation from a restrictive traditional world is accomplished. In the outer world this figure appeared in the form of Gerardo Lizagarrá, her first husband with whom she fled Spain for Paris.

The Self, that inner divine spark, is often depicted as a mountain. Here, her lover -- Animus leads and protects her, as the wind of spirit billows through their garments. They travel in what looks like a boat made from a seed pod.
This numinous figure with a face of mother of pearl is a soul guide. The music that spirals out from the flute seems to raise up these stones, one by one, to form the spiral tower. The stones bear the imprint of snail shell, leaf, fish and fern – they are fossils of the basic elements of earthly existence. These fossils link one life to all life – to the beginning of time – to timelessness – to eternity.
This is Remedios Varo’s Annunciation. It shows the woman who has accepted the call literally and symbolically linked to the universe and a large round star through the fluid form of her red hair. Psychologically what humans project into outer space
represents that which resides in inner space -- the personal and the collective unconscious. The alchemist spoke of the macrocosm reflecting the microcosm.

The hauntingly beautiful image shows this woman’s body suffused with light that comes from this star, the *rotundum*, the divine spark, the self. In her right hand she carries a small *athanor* or glass vessel in which the alchemist put the “prima materia” which he or she then spent a lifetime laboring to transform into gold. To further emphasize the nature of this work, we see this woman wears an alchemist’s mortar around her neck. In myth and fairytale, a necklace represents a woman’s deepest identity.

This is a distinctly feminine image of the call. We see dark shadow like images emerging from the labial like fold of vaginal slits in the walls of the passageway. Here is a metaphor for the emergence of feminine consciousness. These figures are various complexes -- seeking to enter into consciousness. We are reminded that Jung spoke of the idea that one does not become enlightened by imaging figures of light but by making the darkness conscious.  

This appears to be precisely what this radiant woman does as she walks through this passageway of life. Her flowing red hair (Remedios was a strawberry blonde) is connected to this star in the heavens, linking her with this “rotundum”, the Self. The enlightened ego consciousness links her to a greater wholeness. But note too that the tiles on the floor – the earth on which she walks, is made in patterns of four and eight, a double quaternio of alchemy.

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22 C. G. Jung, C.W. vol. 13, para 335.
Her cloak that was a chrysalis has now become a boat in which she travels on the river of life. This boat has both wings and rudder allowing her, like a bird, to catch the wind and adjust her course. Some say she is a female Ulysses, as she sets off on this journey. She wears a sturdy trench coat and a rather masculine bowler hat. This forms part of a needed persona which Remedios’s deeply sensitive, traumatized nature seems to have required to make her way in the world.
The goblet that she looks at is the source of this river of life. It is the container and fountain at one and the same time. Janet Kaplan in her extraordinary book compares it to the Grail.\textsuperscript{23}

The birds in the trees appear to be ravens – the alchemical symbol of the \textit{nigredo} the blackness that is the beginning of the work of transformation. They like the wings which propel this egg-shaped boat, suggest the energy of the god, Mercury, whom the alchemists called Mercurius, the Trickster, who represents the unconscious itself.

Mircea Eliade wrote “Every exile is a Ulysses traveling toward Ithaca, toward the center. What we have just discovered in that the chance to become a new Ulysses is given to any exile whatsoever (precisely because he has been condemned by the gods, that is by their powers which decide historical, earthly destinies). But to realize this, the exile must be capable of penetrating the hidden meaning of his wanderings, and of understanding them as a long series of initiation trials (willed by the gods) and as so many obstacles on the path which bring him back to the hearth (toward the center). That means the depressions, the dry periods of everyday life.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} Kaplan, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{24} Eliade, p. 19
Surely this is an image of such a period of life. We are reminded that the spiral journey brings with it an encounter with one’s inner demons. A meeting with the
complexes within the psyche that suck away psychic energy is essential. For they drain away our life blood until we redeem them through consciousness.

Observe how tiny the woman is compared to this “vampire energy” that carries her in his bottle. We know of no better illustration of Jung’s idea that the complex has us we do not have it. Here the vampire represents what happens when a woman falls under the grip of the negative animus complex. She feels trapped in a sense of helplessness, futility and despairs of ever getting out of his hold on her.
The process of freeing one’s self from obsessive compulsive or addictive complexes requires that an archetypal energy be activated in the depth of the psyche within the inner forest or place of healing nature Varo depicts here. This energy
electrifies her hair, her consciousness. This is the energy that allows her to break the pattern, the vicious circle that restrains growth. The bird, a raven or vulture, suggests the death -- like feeling of this psychological state.
Here we see the woman as she leaves the office.

“[T]he veiled heroine..., exits from a door marked Dr. F. J. A. which Varo explained in her notes as a reference to Freud, Jung and Alfred Adler. The patient drops her father’s disembodied head into a small circular well, an act that Varo
described as ‘correct to do when leaving the psychoanalyst’ and as a result is able to drop one layer of her veil. However, just as the basket she carries holds yet more psychological waste, so other layers of veil still remain, covering her mouth and leaving her mute.”

It is intriguing to note that her hair is gray echoing the father’s beard. It forms both horns and a crescent moon shape suggesting her connection to the goat so prominent in *The Spiral Journey* painting and her connection to moon or Feminine consciousness.

In the basket of ‘psychological waste’ which she carries we can determine there is a watch, a key and a pair of spectacles. Perhaps these refer to a masculine sense of time, a belief that it is the key and a vision that no longer suits this woman’s unfolding identity.

Above all, this image suggests that what she drops into the well is patriarchal energy. Whether it is the feeling she had of being cowed by her father or more generally the family, educational, social or even artistic traditions that impede her sense of self and her creative life.

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25 Kaplan, p. 155
What is it that Varo tells us in the charming picture that bears such opposite titles? As the woman strokes this cat (whose fur is precisely the color of her hair) sparks fly out forming inter-connected wheels of energy that electrify her hair. Three other cattails of the same hue peek out from the hem of her long gown. The energy of the
woman and cat is clearly linked. We see the emotional bond as they gaze into each other’s eyes.

The cat is a lunar animal long identified with the goddess who often assumed her cat form. The identity between woman and cat speaks of instinctual knowledge as she pets this feline friend sparks shoot out. They remind us that these sparks or “scintillae” of light are referred to in alchemy as the light of nature.

Jung quotes the alchemist and homeopathic doctor Parcelaus, saying:

“...’sparks scintillating in the blackness of the arcane substance .... change into the spectacle of the interior firmament and its stars.’”

Is this not exactly what Remedios has painted here, an interior firmament and its stars?

The painting’s original title *Madness of the Cat* suggests the link between spiritual enlightenment and madness. And, indeed, we know this about the archetypal world – the boundary between madness and extreme creativity is often very thin. To be in touch with her deep feminine instinct, might feel like the rabidness or madness of the cat. That so-called domestic animal, that is just out of reach of our ego control, if not totally feral. Her electrifying thoughts blend with the energy that shoots forth from the cat as she touches her.

As they blend together in this dark green interior space, a whole constellation of star energy, --- wheels of light are produced. The cat seems to have pounced on the table.

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26C.G. Jung, C.W., vol. 8 para. 392
producing a kind of chaos. The cloth is skewed, the milk is spilled – flooding out to create a sort of “Milky Way” which symbolizes both the sacred river on which the divine child comes and the path by which souls ascend to heaven. And is this “spilled milk” not a form of the “felix culpa”, the happy accident or sin out of which new life may grow. This liquid seems to transform into a “mossy” river, a greenness that evokes basic vegetative life and is associated with friendship and protection.²⁷

²⁷de Vries, p. 328.
Varo gave us this image of depression, of the utter passivity that so immobilizes this woman. Her arms and legs have become wood like the chair. The pattern of the chair is a fleur-de-lis, which we saw as the bird soul sat on the perch of the central tower of death in *The Spiral Journey*. This is how it feels she says – death like -- as she takes on the pattern of this inanimate chair.

We can say like Varo whose wit was never far from the surface, that the painting gives new meaning to the phrase “to blend in with the furniture”. In this psychological state Remedios seems to say that even the chairs have more life than she, as their legs anthropomorphize into claws – giving an eerie Magritte-like surreal feeling.

Yet the cat sits quietly below, observing from a distance.
Is this image Remedios Varo’s evocation of the “forty days” in the wilderness, the desert as the place of exile and preparation – a place of temptation where “the devil” or all that is shadow confronts us. In psychological terms transformation always requires
the time in the desert – a place of wandering where one feels cut off from “the water of life”. For, in the human psyche – just as with the Yin/Yang symbol – the opposite is contained at the very center – at the core of the interlocking energies of dark and light. In French, the phrase is “les etremes se touchent” or the opposites touch one another. It is a description of the psyche.

Remedios shows us the desert as a rocky, stony place where the wanderer is turned into stone. Depression can feel like this --, yet, if one can go on, is able to find the meaning in this “arid place” – not allowing the devils of the psyche to overwhelm one – then, it is a “rite of passage” and one is reborn. Here we see the paradox of this dry place. For, in her left hand, the hand associated with the unconscious – she holds a glowing “STONE”. The numinous nature of this stone tells us that it is the “lapis” of the alchemists – the imperishable stone that is both source and goal of the “art” – the art of alchemical transformation. The stone is associated with indestructible eternal power. It is a symbol of the Self – and often in the legends of the Grail, the grail is imaged as a stone rather than a cup.

Here, this feminine figure becomes one with the layers of the earth’s sediment which spirals up and around to form her traveling clothes. She and the dry rocky ground are one. We wonder if this is not Varo’s way of portraying the myth of death and rebirth like Innana or Persephone which begin with the woman being taken under or into the earth. The glow of her garments suggests an “inner light”. We see the body through which the “subtle body” glows. So, this is an image of both the descent – into the unconscious – and the enlightenment that can arise from that plunge into darkness.
This figure is formed by the combined triangles of immanence and transcendence of masculine and feminine – of the Yin/Yang symbol seen in the opening – at the heart
chakra of her chest. The Hermit combines the opposites and thus brings balance to psychic life. Here the hermit is found in the woods – the tree is like an “initiation hut” – it is a womb-like enclosure of the Great Mother – which protects the initiate so that the opposites can join producing new life energy. In primitive initiation rites the initiate is placed apart in a special hut. It is symbolically the place of introversion – it is in the words of Winnicott – a transitional space.
Here Varo gives us “her” image of the Alchemist and tells us that the labyrinth and the alchemist point to the same reality. We see again the towers so familiar in her

**Figure 20 The Useless Science on The Alchemist, 1955**

*(original title: The Mechanical Labyrinth)*

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work. Here they house the wheels whose turning provide the energy for the process which is the extraction of the essence of the drops of water that fall from above.

Remembering that what is above symbolizes that which is below (in the theory of correspondences) – we know that these drops are the moisture or “dew” of the unconscious. In writing about the alchemical process as metaphor for psychological transformation Jung says:

“he will see that these instructions are typical alchemical procedure for extracting spirit or soul, and thus for bringing unconscious contents to consciousness.”

In short, what Varo has depicted is the way transformation occurs in the human psyche through the careful process of bringing the unconscious and consciousness together – these opposites form a new third thing – and here are symbolized by the black and white tiles of the floor. The rigid and flat becomes supple and flexible. This is what occurs when slowly rigidities or defenses can dissolve to allow new life – a larger more resilient way of being.

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Here the supple tiles transform into a mantle of Mother Earth herself – a grassy carpet envelops her. The woman stands in the forest – where the starkness of the alchemist diligently at work is here balanced by a ray of light which illumines the flowers that grow out of what is an otherwise brown and dead forest floor. As these flowers
emerge, we see that it is music, the most intangible and ever-changing art, which connects the upper and lower worlds. Music is metaphor for the world of feeling. For life emerges as she plays this imaginal instrument. The birds emerge from their chrysalis like shells – they are red – filled with the essence of life.

Figure 22 Creation of the Birds, 1957

Here the alchemist is shown as an artist who is an owl. The owl moves at night and sees in the dark – and will, so to speak, see in all directions for it can turn its head almost fully around. It is the bird associated with Athena, the goddess of wisdom – and thus in Judeo-Christian tradition to Sophia. This owl artist creates by filtering light from above through this magnifying glass in the form of an upward pointing triangle – an
allusion to the masculine filter of discriminating focused consciousness which, in a woman, helps shape and give form to feminine creative energy. The macrocosm of the sky symbolizing the inner universe of the unconscious feeds the raw material into the double egg-shaped vessel from which flow the colors red, blue and yellow. From these she makes green. It is as if the first three colors represent Jung’s concept of typology where red is feeling, blue thinking, yellow intuition and the fourth – sensation is represented by green. The fourth is called the inferior function for it is totally in the unconscious – and yet it is by accessing it – the place we feel most lacking or wounded that the golden flower – the treasure is found.

And, here, we see that it is this beautiful “instrument of the heart” – her feeling, that connects her to this world of creation. As she works, the opposites fertilize each other in the urns on the back wall -- making one aware that life, libido, psychic energy exists as a tension of the flow of energy between the opposites. This liquid is transmitted and then transformed into paint – creating the birds – the new life within, the soul. In Babylonian myth the souls in the underworld always wore garments of bird feathers.
Figure 23 *Star Catcher, 1956*

This is one of the most beautiful and haunting of all Varo’s works. It is the most numinous for it portrays the Goddess – a huntress like Diana, goddess of the moon and
protector of women. She is found in the place where the opposites join, shown again by the black and white tiled floor. This painting reveals the dual nature, however, of the goddess. She radiates light which forms her cloak but she is dark, a dark goddess, a “Black Madonna”. She holds a butterfly net. It seems that this is how she has captured the moon – now carried in a bird cage. The butterfly net reminds us that this moon is related to psyche, the Greek word for both soul and butterfly.

This “caged moon” is a beautiful image of how the feminine has been treated. It looks weak. One feels as if she, the Goddess, is bringing it to us, the viewer, so that it can be nurtured and released. It is our work that she gives us to do, to help restore moon consciousness to the world.

It is most interesting to note that the form this goddess takes with the labial-like folds of her cape revealing her inner darkness and depth, is the form of the Rorschach image that relates to the mother, the feminine, linking this image yet again to the idea that she is “The Great Mother” – who contains both the darkness and the numinous light.

Two years later she painted this image.
This is Varo’s only work that reveals a mother child relationship. She terminated her only pregnancy, feeling that her circumstances and the responsibilities were more than she could manage.
Here we see a woman alone in a hut-like structure feeding this caged moon. She is surrounded by space (the metaphor again for the “inner space”: the unconscious), which provides the nourishment funneled through the roof of this little house. This celestial pablum must be processed through the meat grinder of the ordinary everyday world and ego consciousness. I love this image – the extraordinary confluence Varo achieves of the mundane and lowly meat grinder and the vast heavenly spaces of the unconscious, which provides the raw material – the prima materia to be processed into food for this moon soul. This is an image of both the individual process of caring for one’s moon nature and the work of the collective feminine.

This image is the sequel to the Star Catcher which was painted just two years before. The Goddess brings us the task of nurturing the weak and caged moon. And we must daily do the kitchen work of transformation. Kitchen work can at times be tedious even boring, but it is vital that this humble work, even the mundane tasks of life, be honored as necessary to nourish the moon child. It is not great flights of spiritual fantasy communing with sky gods, but rather the reverence for these human tasks that Varo paints.
The work of feeding the moon seems now to have transformed. A rebirth has taken place. The hut no longer has a ceiling but is open to the sky, a motif connected to the feminine divine. It is an image found in Celtic/Druid worship where the place of

**Figure 25 To Be Reborn**
worship is open to the sky. There is such an open-air cathedral in New Harmony, Indiana.

As women begin to touch these deep layers of psyche in their dreams, sometimes a church or great room open to the sky appears. Here, we see a birth of the feminine as the now naked woman, the reality under the persona, breaks through the labial folds into the inner space where the Grail, the cup, reflects the moon and contains the water of life. This inner room and even the altar-like table are made of wood – the feminine substance. This woman’s eyes radiate with moon consciousness, and her breasts, the source of feminine nurture, echo the moon’s shape as it glows in the chalice.
Remedios seems to have known, unconsciously at least, that she was nearing the end of her life, for we see her in the river of life with only the smallest piece of wood under her feet as she draws close to the spiral mountain. She points to this mountain as

*Figure 26* Ascension to Mount Analogue, 1960
a Self symbol. Recall her early work titled *The Escape* where as a young woman she seems to be carried up toward the mountain in the distance, accompanied by her inner masculine companion. Here, she stands in the river her cloak billows out with the wind, but now there is no masculine figure with her. This figure seems androgynous, for now she has united the opposites within her soul. Yet, we still feel how feminine this image is with its “wing like” forms suggesting contact with the world invisible. She represents the woman who has traveled a long way toward wholeness. The title “Mount Analogue” alludes to a book by the surrealist writer Rene Daumal which also uses the idea of the spiritual journey, as a voyage to find a spiraling mountain, to seek a magical golden flower that could only be picked if one did not want it.29 This golden flower is the eponymous one found in the famous Chinese book of alchemy, *The Search of the Golden Flower*.

29Kaplan p. 171
In Spanish this title means “dead life reviving”. This extraordinary spiral is Remedios Varo’s last painting – completed shortly before her sudden death from a heart attack.
attack at age 55. It is a testament to her belief in the cycle of death and rebirth. It is one of her very few paintings in which no human figure is present.

Human life has been swept up by the whirlwind into the wholeness of the cosmos. The sun at the center in the form of a candle represents the flame that is not extinguished in death -- the eternal spark.

Again, we see the microcosm reflecting the macrocosm: as the tangible world, the natural fruits, form the planets themselves, as the eight plates (a number of completion and infinity), move in a spiral to the left, the direction of the world beyond consciousness. Eight is the number of regeneration or new beginnings. Baptisteries like the famous one in Florence were often octagonal. The dragonflies we see are the “butterflies of night” – they also remind us of the soul’s transformation or immortality. The architecture is like a chapel. It is the inner room of the tower of The Spiral Journey. It is made of wood, the feminine element, and we see that new life is already sprouting from the floor.

We feel the energy in this, Varo’s depiction of the myth of the eternal return. The fruits become planets. The individual life is swept up into the all, a life lived in harmony with the music of the spheres – as this great whirlwind scatters the seeds that already sprout anew.
Remedios Varo
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Afterword

For anyone wishing to learn more about the art and the life of Remedios Varo, Janet A. Kaplan’s: *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* is the indispensable and watershed work. In addition, there is the excellent Catalogue Raisonné: *Remedios Varo, Ediciones Era*. And in the Spring of 2021 Routledge will publish a fine psychological work on some of her late paintings: *Jung, Alchemy and Remedios Varo* by Dennis Pottenger.

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