OF GODS AND STONES: ALCHEMY, JUNG, AND THE DARK NIGHT OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

David M. Odorisio, Ph.D.
Lee, MA

ABSTRACT: John of the Cross’ mystical text The Dark Night (DN) presents a candid portrayal of the ego’s encounter with the numinous or transpersonal dimensions of the psyche. When viewed through a Jungian alchemical lens, the encounter becomes significantly amplified to reveal novel insights into this psychospiritual ordeal. The article first unpacks and explores the DN through Jung’s Collected Works and Letters, and subsequently offers an in-depth interpretation of the dark night experience through the lens of the alchemical nigredo, including depth psychological and transpersonal perspectives. Finally, the article re-visions the DN in light of the nigredo, albedo, and rubedo stages of Western alchemy, drawing parallels between these and the purgation, illumination, and union stages of the Western Christian mystical tradition. In both instances, a coniunctio or mystical union results, where new self- and god-images arise from the illuminating darkness of night and into conscious integration.

KEYWORDS: John of the Cross, dark night, C.G. Jung, alchemy, nigredo, god image.

John of the Cross’ (1991) 16th century text, The Dark Night (DN), offers a stark portrayal of the soul’s journey to God from purgation to illumination and union. From a Jungian perspective, this journey can be interpreted as the ego’s encounter with the numinous (Otto, 1958) reality of the transpersonal Self. As an archetype that contains both light and dark aspects, the encounter between the Self and the ego can be terrifying and filled with negative affect (Washburn, 1994), which, depending on how it is navigated, can result in a positive disintegration and subsequent renewal of self- and god-images (Welch, 1990).

In this article, two aspects of the DN are considered from both Jungian and transpersonal perspectives: the dark night as (a) an encounter with one’s personal darkness and/or the archetypal shadow of the Self, and (b) an experience of abandonment following illumination, and preceding union. The DN’s depiction of these aspects are then interpreted through an “alchemical hermeneutic” (Jung, 1963/1970, par. 366). This interpretive lens frames the dark night in a new dark light by entering more deeply into the text through the nigredo, albedo, and rubedo of Western alchemy. The alchemical hermeneutic reveals a parallel process between these stages and the purgation, illumination, and union of the Western Christian mystical tradition where, following Washburn’s (1994) “spiral path” (p. 237), both self- and god-images dissolve in order that a renewed and functional ego-Self axis (Edinger, 1972) might emerge.

THE DARK NIGHT IN JUNG’S COLLECTED WORKS

Jung’s writings on the DN are scattered, but can be pieced together to formulate at least two perspectives. The first is the DN as an example of the
encounter with the dark side of the Self, or archetypal shadow. In a 1948 letter to Canon H.G. England, Jung (1973) writes:

We like to imagine that God is all light, but S. Johannes à Cruce has the truly psychological notion of the darkness and the seeming remoteness of God as an effect of the divine presence. This state of darkness is by far the most trying and most dangerous part of the mystical experiences. (p. 485)

In a 1953 letter to Victor White, Jung continues this line of thinking, comparing the dark night experience to Christ’s abandonment on the cross. He writes, “This is exactly what S. Johannes à Cruce describes as the ‘dark night of the soul.’ It is the reign of darkness, which is also God, but an ordeal for Man” (1975, p. 134).

Each of these letters, written relatively late in Jung’s life, need to be framed in the context of his work on the shadow of the deity, or the “dark side” of the Self (Jung, 1952, 1959/1968). To Jung, darkness and “evil” are not representative of the absence of God *per se* the early Christian doctrine of *privatio boni* (evil as “privation of the good”); rather they are direct attributes or characteristics of the god-archetype itself (Jung, 1959/1968, par. 74). Jung interprets the *DN* as a continued amplification of such an encounter with “God’s shadow” (Lammers, 1994), interpreted here as the dark side of the Self.

A further amplification of these letters might also focus on the abandonment experience, which Jung (1975) describes as “the reign of darkness, which is also God, but an ordeal for Man” (p. 134). Jung (1973) describes this aspect of the *DN* as “the seeming remoteness of God,” and considers it, “the most trying and...dangerous part” of the mystical journey (p. 485). According to Underhill (1911/1990), abandonment is an essential stage of the *DN* journey; preceding union through a further purification of the soul. While abandonment is not an element of the *DN* that Jung reflects upon at length, it does have important transpersonal and alchemical implications that will be further outlined below.

A second interpretation that Jung offers to the *DN* regards its alchemical significance. In “The Psychology of the Transference,” Jung’s (1946) psychological commentary on the alchemical treatise *The Rosarium Philosophorum* (Smith, 2003), he writes:

… the fact that medieval alchemy had connections with the mysticism of the age, or rather was itself a form of mysticism, allows us to adduce as a parallel to the *nigredo* the writings of St. John of the Cross concerning the ‘dark night.’ The author conceives the ‘spiritual night’ of the soul as a supremely positive state, in which the invisible – and therefore dark – radiance of God comes to pierce and purify the soul. (par. 479)

Jung interprets the *DN* “as a parallel” to the *nigredo* state of Western alchemy, and draws connections between not only the historical significance between each (both Western alchemical practices and the Christian mystical tradition
were very much alive in the 16th century), but also the purifying nature and purpose of both the dark night and nigredo experiences.

Jung’s writings on the DN are unfortunately brief and amplify the dark night encounter as nigredo only in passing. My intention in this article is to continue this alchemical-hermeneutic inquiry where Jung has left it, offering a more thorough treatment of the dark night as a psychological experience. Before proceeding, it is necessary to first understand the DN as described by John of the Cross (1991). I will then expand John’s encounter with the dark night through the inclusion of more contemporary post-Jungian and transpersonal perspectives before offering an alchemical interpretation of the DN text.

**The Soul of The Dark Night**

*The Dark Night* was written as a commentary to the poem of the same name in the latter part of the 16th century in Spain by the Carmelite priest and Catholic “Doctor of the Church,” John of the Cross (1991). It is the continuation of a previous work, *The Ascent to Mt. Carmel*, which outlines the structure of John’s psychologically sophisticated mystical theology. In *The Ascent*, John (1991) describes the “active” nights of the senses and spirit, whereby a spiritual practitioner of her own volition (hence “active”) purifies herself from both sensate and spiritual attachment through ascetic practices.

In the DN, John (1991) continues this theme, dealing specifically with the passive nights of both sense and spirit. In the passive night it is God, rather than the practitioner, that “does” the purifying. The purpose, or result, of such purgation is a closer union between the individual and her Beloved. From a Jungian perspective, this union serves as an alchemical coniunctio, or differentiated union of ego and Self (Edinger, 1985). There also occurs in the passive night an integration of “sense and spirit” (John of the Cross, 1991, p. 398) through their mutual purification, which can similarly be understood as a coniunctio in and of itself.

The focus of this article’s alchemical interpretation is on Book Two of the DN text, where John describes in detail the passive night of the spirit. I believe it is to this experience that Jung (1946, 1973) refers when interpreting the dark night as the ego’s contact with archetypal shadow material as well as alchemical nigredo, and subsequent abandonment experience by God. John (1991) describes the passive night of the spirit in rich detail:

> God divests the [mental] faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings. (p. 399)

This passage offers evidence to support Jung’s (1946) parallel between the dark night and the nigredo of Western alchemy. Additionally, John’s detailed
description furthers Jung’s (1963/1970) dictum that, “the experience of the [archetypal] self is always a defeat for the ego” (par. 778). It is the “radical relativizing” (Corbett, 1996, p. 23) of the ego that is experienced as both alchemical nigredo and dark night, and underscores Welch’s (1990) interpretation of the DN as a death of self- and god-images.

The afflictive nature of the experience, however, is only one aspect of the encounter with the darkness. For John, the passive night of the spirit is also, paradoxically, an encounter with the light aspect of the deity.¹ He writes: “This dark night is an inflow of God” that “produces two principal effects in the soul: by both purging and illumining, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God through love. Hence [it is] the same loving wisdom that [both] purges and illumines” (p. 401). In this sense, the dark night experiences of purification and illumination serve as a parallel to the alchemical nigredo and its following stage, the albedo, or whitening (Metzner, 1986/1998).

John (1991) follows his description of the paradoxical nature of the night with the following question: “Why, if it is a divine light…does the soul call it a dark night?” (p. 401). His answer to this question can be seen, from a psychological perspective, as an articulation of the encounter with the shadow. He writes, “The brighter the light, the more the owl is blinded…. Hence when the divine light of contemplation strikes a soul not yet entirely illumined, it causes spiritual darkness.”² When viewed from Edinger’s (1972) perspective, this passage reads as the “alienated ego” (p. 38) (here, “the soul”) coming into contact with the transpersonal numinosum of the Self (“the divine light of contemplation”). To the ego still persona-identified, the Self appears in its “dark” or malefic aspect, threatening to devour the ego and its self-image. While the experience is meant to liberate the ego from its attachment to external sources, if it is over-identified with the persona, the ego experiences the encounter as a death. There is too much consciousness for the ego, still attached or immersed in the unconsciousness of shadow, to handle.

This aspect of the dark night experience is equally crucial to Welch’s (1990) understanding of how god-images “die.” An important element of Jung’s (1952) theory of continuing the incarnation is that it is the dark or shadow aspect of the deity that need to increase in consciousness. It is through the dark night experience that the ego is granted awareness of both its own shadow as well as that of the archetype. Through the “dark light” emanating from contact with the Self, the ego undergoes a successive purgation, which it experiences as a death. Thus, “the hand of God, though light and gentle, [feels] so heavy and contrary” (John of the Cross, 1991, p. 403).

As the light of the night increases, so does the pain, as the shadow aspects of both the ego and the Self reveal themselves more transparently, with the ego bearing an increasing burden of both its own dark shadow and that of the god-image (Edinger, 1984, 1992, 1996).³ John (1991) writes: “Both the sense and the spirit, as though under an immense and dark load, undergo such agony and pain that the soul would consider death a relief” (p. 403). When considered from an alchemical perspective, this aspect of the DN takes the form of the  

---

² Edinger, 1972, p. 38.
nigredo, the “blackening” of consciousness that not only precedes, but follows illumination (albedo), and leads to an eventual union (rubedo). It is to this alchemical hermeneutic that I now turn.

Alchemical Hermeneutics

Practically, Jung (1946, 1953/1968) applied the processes and transformational states of Western alchemy to the analytic hour in order to understand his patients’ unconscious dreams, fantasies, and behaviors. Theoretically, Jung (1942/1954, 1963/1970) utilized alchemical stages as a lens to interpret religious and spiritual texts. The use of an “alchemical hermeneutic” (Jung 1963/1970, par. 366) enabled Jung to interpret or translate religious phenomena and mystical experiences into psychological terminology as evidence in support of his developing practice and theory.

The use of an alchemical hermeneutic serves as a tool for interpreting religious experiences through a psychological lens, thus affording a deeper level of sophistication to the interpretation of the text. In the context of this article, alchemical categories such as nigredo, albedo, and rubedo are used to interpret the purgative, illuminative, and union stages of the DN. Additionally, the alchemical processes of each stage, such as mortificatio, putrefactio, sublimatio, and coniunctio are also utilized to offer a greater variety of psychological subtlety and depth to the DN text.

The Nigredo in Western Alchemy

As cited above, Jung (1946) interpreted the nigredo of Western alchemy as parallel to John’s (1991) dark night experience. This section serves to further amplify the dark night experience using the alchemical hermeneutic lens of the nigredo. The purpose of applying this alchemical lens is to offer a parallel amplification between the DN and the nigredo aspect of the alchemical opus, of which Jung (1946) intuited a connection. I believe this helps to see the dark night in a new “dark light” and further tease out the already acute symptoms of this rare psychological and spiritual ordeal.

The nigredo was viewed as the beginning of the alchemical work. Abraham (1998) writes that in the nigredo, “the old outmoded state of being is killed, putrefied and dissolved... in order that it may be renovated and reborn in a new form (p. 135). To the alchemist, “there could be no regeneration without corruption” (p. 135). The nigredo marked a “death” in the prima materia, or “black earth,” that mysterious substance which contained the seeds of the alchemical goal, the lapis or philosopher’s stone (Rulandus, 1893/1964). As the Rosarium explains, “Take of it [the prima materia] but very little, divide the whole, grind it earnestly, until it be possessed with death of the intensity of blackness like dust” (Smith, 2003, p. 44).
Considered the “Key of the Work,” (Smith, 2003, p. 44), it was through the “torture” of this original material that the alchemical opus began its circular procedures. It was from the nigredo state through the albedo, or whitening phase, and onto the rubedo, or reddening, that the original material underwent an innumerable number of transmutations until the final, miraculous birth of the stone (Waite, 1896).

Lead, represented by the planet Saturn, is the element most associated with the nigredo and plays an important role in the alchemical process. Abraham (1998) writes, “Lead, Saturn and melancholia are inextricably linked in alchemy. The nigredo is a time of suffering and lamentation as the dark shadow of melancholia is cast over the alchemist witnessing the events in the alembic” (p. 116). It is the “circular distillation” of the alchemical process that begins “with the black lead, with the darkness, coldness, and malignity of the malefic Saturn” (Jung, 1963/1970, par. 303). Lead was a key element in the alchemical process, specifically in the nigredo stage where it was one of the base elements utilized in the purification process. It is due to its common, yet important, value that lead/Saturn, came to be viewed as “inverted gold” (Evola, 1995, p. 82).

Depth Psychological Interpretation

As with the passive night of the spirit in John’s (1991) DN, the alchemical nigredo with its lead-like quality can also be interpreted psychologically as an encounter with the shadow at both personal and transpersonal levels. Edinger (1985) writes, “In psychological terms blackness refers to the shadow,” which when confronted, “is born the light...[i.e., the] positive consequences of being aware of one’s shadow” (pp. 149-50).

Von Franz (1980) highlights the particularly leaden quality of the nigredo as a “death” of shadow projections, and subsequently superficial or out-worn self- and god-images. She relays the Egyptian legend of Seth, who tricks Osiris into entering a lead coffin, quickly covers it with additional lead and throws it into the sea, killing him (p. 84). Von Franz interprets the story as an analogy to what happens when a person stops projecting unconscious contents and instead begins to look at herself in more honest light (p. 86). She writes that the process of withdrawing projections is “like suffocation, a kind of death,” (p. 87) for the impulse to project outside oneself is killed – an alchemical mortificatio.

As with the dark night encounter, containment in the “lead tomb” or sealed alchemical vessel intensifies the psychological process. In an important interpretive passage, Von Franz (1980) writes that the person undergoing this dark journey becomes “roasted in what one is... cooked in one’s own juice, and is therefore the tomb, the container of the tomb, the suffocated one, and the suffocator, the coffin, and the dead god in it” (p. 87). Importantly, she adds, “The one within is naturally not the ego, but your whole being,” implying that
it is one’s entire psyche, including god-images, archetypes, and shadow projections, that are all being “cooked” (p. 87).

It is through the transformation of the individual personality that the god not only dies, but it is reborn. Von Franz (1980) writes, “The analogy is Seth catching Osiris, and now because he has been caught by Seth...[representing] the powerful principle of evil, he is transformed and resurrected” (p. 85). In other words, it is through consciously making contact with the shadow aspects of one’s self (the “principle of evil”) and the subsequent withdrawal of projections onto artificial or less than adequate self- and god-images (“suffocation”) that the relationship between the ego and the archetype (the Self) is transformed and a renewed relationship forms.

As with the dark night, it is the paradoxical leaden “blackness” of the nigredo that also contains the essence of what is to become alchemical gold. Jung (1975) defines the nigredo in a 1958 letter as “night, chaos, evil and the essence of corruption, yet the prima materia of gold, sun, and eternal incorruptibility” (p. 440). He concludes this letter, written upon reception of an art piece, with a curious statement, “I understand your picture as a confession of the secret of our time” (p. 440). Does this secret contain the “seed” of a more complete, whole, and psychologically integrated relationship between ego and transpersonal Self? Perhaps it is this “dark light” that can serve as a key to unlocking the mysterious birth of a new, transfigured or more fully incarnated Self.

Transpersonal Perspectives

A depth psychological interpretation approaches the nigredo through the lens of the shadow, and the perspective that old images of self and God might die in order that the birthing of a new god-image that incarnates both “light” and “dark” aspects of each might be born. From the perspective of transpersonal psychology, the DN can be further interpreted from an aspect of the nigredo not yet touched upon, the experience of what John (1991) describes as abandonment by God.

Similar to Jung, Metzner (1986/1998) also considers the DN in light of the nigredo and defines it as a “dark night of the ego” (p. 171). He describes the DN, following Underhill (1911/1990), as occurring “after an initial awakening but before the final illumination and union with God” (Metzner, 1986/1998, p. 171). Metzner emphasizes the frustration, pain, and confusion that the ego encounters in the dark night, but, departing from Jung, views the soul or Self as a “being of light” (p. 172) rather than one equally composed of divine darkness.6

Washburn’s (1994) in-depth treatment of the DN offers a transpersonal perspective founded upon psychoanalytic insights. His approach focuses particularly on the passive aspect of the DN, a process that he considers as a “journey of regression, regeneration, and higher integration” (p. 239) that is
both alchemical and archetypal. It is through the regressive elements of the DN that the ego experiences “negative oedipal and pre-oedipal object representations” (p. 244), particularly in personal relationships. This has important implications when considering John’s (1991) emphasis on abandonment, which Washburn (1994) also connects to negative affects, particularly of the borderline state, encountered in the DN, which include experiences of unworthiness, engulfment, and dread. These processes and encounters, when undergone with a certain consciousness and faith, however, lead to a marked re-integration, which Washburn (1994) interprets as the goal of the process and a “new beginning” (p. 315).

Alchemy and Abandonment

The path of the DN, when interpreted as a “pattern of departure and higher return” (Washburn, 1994, p. 293) has an important corollary in the alchemical dictum of *solve et coagula* (Abraham, 1998). This motto references the core of the art, which is that all alchemical materials must first be reduced, separated out, or dissolved completely, before any authentic re-integration might occur. This absence, interpreted alchemically, and encountered in the DN as a painful separation or loss of God, leads to the purgative darkness of the *nigredo*. If followed faithfully, the illumination of insight occurs; however, only to be followed by another loss. This “second *nigredo*,” the passive night of the spirit, leads to the desired goal, conjoining (*coniunctio*) with the Beloved through the *rubedo*.

To John (1991), it is the wound of love left by the memory of union post-departure that spurs the soul onward towards God, despite the tremendous pain and suffering of abandonment. As Underhill (1911/1990) writes, “For the mystic who has once known the Beatific Vision there can be no greater grief than the withdrawal of this Object from [the] field of consciousness” (p. 389). This withdrawal and absence of the Beloved can certainly lead to feelings of annihilation and dread of which John (1991) and Washburn (1994) speak. However, it is an experience that is fueled by the initial union of the ego and the Self, and the ego’s longing to re-experience that union. This process, defined by Washburn (1994) as a “spiral path” (p. 237) and “pattern of departure and higher return” (p. 293), marks not only the alchemical *opus* and the overarching movement of the DN, but of Jung’s individuation process as well (Schwartz-Salant, 1998; Stein, 2006).

**Purgation and Nigredo**

Now that the *nigredo* of Western alchemy has been amplified from both depth psychological and transpersonal perspectives, I offer a more thorough treatment of the purgative aspect of the DN specifically as interpreted through the lens of the *nigredo*. John (1991) describes the purgative nature of the dark night experience as follows:
The divine...strikes in order to renew the soul and divinize it (by stripping it of the habitual affections and properties of the old self to which the soul is strongly united, attached, and conformed), it so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance – absorbing it in a profound darkness – that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death. If feels as if it were swallowed by a beast and being digested in the dark belly, and it suffers an anguish comparable to Jonah’s in the belly of the whale. (p. 404)

Read alchemically, this same passage outlines the various stages and processes of the alchemical work indicative of the nigredo state:

The divine...strikes in order to renew the soul and divinize it...it so disentangles [separatio] and dissolves [solutio] the spiritual substance – absorbing it in a profound darkness [prima materia] – that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away [solutio] and being undone by a cruel spiritual death [mortificatio].

As Edinger (1985) makes clear, each of these stages of the alchemical work serves in the process of alchemical nigredo: separatio, the separating out or differentiating aspect of the work experienced as a “death” of the material; solutio, the dissolution of the material in order to cleanse and purify; and mortificatio, the alchemical “killing” of a material to reduce it to its original essence or “chaos” (prima materia). Each of these processes adds increasingly subtle layers of insights to the text. As with Jung’s (1953/1968) intuition of the therapeutic wisdom within the alchemical arts, applying the alchemical lens to the DN reveals similar psychological gold in the text.7

**ALBEDO AND RUBEDO: ILLUMINATION AND UNION**

Just as John’s (1991) journey through the dark night does not end with purgation, neither does the circular work of Western alchemy end with the nigredo. In order to complete an alchemical interpretation of the DN text, the amplification needs to consider the remaining Western alchemical processes of the albedo and rubedo and the stages of illumination and union in the DN. Up to this point, the primary focus has been on the purgative encounter with darkness in the DN and its alchemical counterpart, the nigredo. Both nigredo and the purgative phase of the passive night of the soul are preliminary phases, when the painful processes of mortificatio and putrefactio reduce the prima materia of the psyche to a blinding darkness. Old gods die, whether those created in the ego’s own name or archaic images of the divine no longer in service to the psyche.

However, as the via longissima of psychological life and the circulatio of the elements unfold, stirrings and possibilities of Washburn’s (1994) “new beginning” (p. 315) emerge. The alchemical “whitening” of albedo follows the blackening of nigredo, and serves as a lens for which to interpret the
illuminative experience that follows the purgative and precedes union in the *DN*.

**Albedo as Illumination in The Dark Night**

In the *albedo* phase of Western alchemy, “the body” (the alchemical materials) reaches a state of purification or “whitening.” Abraham (1998) writes, “The *albedo* occurs after the blackened matter, the putrefied body of the metal or matter for the *Stone*, lying dead at the bottom of the alembic [the alchemical vessel], has been washed to whiteness” (p. 4). She continues, “When the matter reaches the *albedo* it has become pure and spotless.... The body has been whitened and spiritualized...and the soul has been prepared to receive illumination from the spirit” (Abraham, 1998, p. 5). As the Rosarium (Smith, 2003) says, “The spirit enters not into bodies, unless [they are] clean” (p. 51) and depicts the *albedo* as a descent of dew from the heavens falling upon the putrefied or mortified crowned hermaphrodite (representing the “lesser coniunctio”) in the tomb (p. 50).8

Jung (1946) interprets the “dew falling from heaven [as] the divine gift of illumination and wisdom” (par. 484). He writes, “The falling dew signals resuscitation and a new light: the ever deeper descent into the unconscious suddenly becomes illumination from above” (par. 493). Hillman (2010) similarly equates the *albedo* to the “white and gleaming condition of the soul” and views this stage as a “transition of soul between despair [*nigredo*] and passion [*rubedo*], between emptiness and fullness, abandonment and the kingdom” (p. 128). From a transpersonal perspective, the *albedo* represents “the emergence of psychological consciousness, the ability to hear psychologically, and to perceive fantasy creating reality” (p. 158). In other words, the work of “whitening” represents the increase of consciousness necessary for the task of psychological work, particularly when it involves shadow material. This is not shadow that is “washed away,” however, but one that, according to Hillman (2010), is “built into the psyche’s body and becomes transparent enough for anyone to see” (p. 169).9

Jung (1946) likens the *albedo* to the “sunrise; it is the light, the illumination, that follows the darkness” (par. 484). In this sense, I see the *albedo* as a fitting alchemical lens through which to interpret the illuminative stage of the *DN*. John (1991) describes the illuminative effect that occurs through the purgative process:

> This divine and dark light causes deep immersion of the mind in the knowledge and feeling of one’s own miseries and evils; it brings all these miseries into relief so the soul sees clearly that of itself it will never possess anything else. (p. 403)

I interpret this passage from two perspectives. The first is that through undergoing the purgative (*nigredo*) experience involving the death of self- and god-images, the ego is left with the only option but to befriend its own

---

shadow(s). The illuminative gift of the dark night is the insight into shadow ("one’s own miseries and evils"). It is unconscious aspects that are brought “into relief” so that the “soul sees clearly.” This is the purity and “new light... illumination from above” that Jung (1946, par. 493) writes about when describing the albedo.

A second perspective from which to interpret this passage is that without a conscious connection to the archetypal Self, the ego “sees clearly that of itself it will never possess anything else” (John, 1991, p. 403). In other words, without “illumination from above” (Jung, 1946, par. 493) offered from the archetypal Self or functional god-image, the ego remains lost in its own dark shadow. From this perspective, it is the benevolence of the Self, rather than its malevolent aspect (as sol niger) that blesses the ego with meaning, vitality, wholeness, and the gift of consciousness or insight, as depicted by Edinger’s (1972) functional ego-Self axis.  

In addition to the increase in consciousness and formation of positive relationship between the ego and Self, it is important to highlight that in the illuminative phase it is the purification of the specifically mental functions that directly result in an increase in consciousness. The “intellect, will, memory, and imagination” (McGonigle, 1993, p. 530) are the aspects of consciousness that become “whitened” in order to “see.” From this perspective, both albedo and illuminative stages “work” upon the mental faculties, in order that, through the purgative aspect of nigredo and dark night, the practitioner, or “soul,” begins to understand “how reality becomes psychic; and psyche, real” (Hillman, 2010, p. 154).

There occurs an interior yoking of these mental aspects to create a psychological unification of both sense and spirit, human and divine, which marks the dawning of the alchemical rubedo, or union of the Western Christian mystical tradition. Shifting now from the illuminative nature of the albedo and into the unitive nature of rubedo, a discernable union of consciousness and unconsciousness appears. Here emerges the philosopher’s stone, the new god-image that may be born out of the alchemical night.

**Rubedo and Union in The Dark Night**

The rubedo stage in the Western alchemical process marks the “reddening” of the work, the bringing of blood and life back into the material. Following the separatio of consciousness from unconsciousness that allows clarity to “dawn” in the albedo, the rubedo signals a joyous re-joining or coniunctio of spirit and matter, soul and body. Abraham (1998) writes: “At the rubedo the silvery moonlight and dawn light of the albedo phase develop into the golden illumination of the midday sun, symbolizing the attainment of the philosopher’s stone” (p. 174). The material, purified through the purgation of nigredo and the illumination of albedo, is “now ready to be reunited with the spirit... At this union, the supreme chemical wedding, the body is resurrected into eternal life” (p. 174; Smith, 2003). In this “reuniting of consciousness and the
body” (Stavish, 2006, p. 149), spirit and matter, body and soul re-join in the differentiated union of rubedo marking the creation of the philosopher’s stone.

From a psychological perspective, the rubedo can be interpreted as the revitalization of psychic life. After piercing separatio, drowning in solutio, and the death-knoll of mortificatio, matter and spirit once again re-unite in the coniunctio of rubedo. Psychologically, Jung (1963/1970) describes the process as follows:

This dawning light [illumination] corresponds to the albedo, the moonlight which…heralds the rising sun. The growing redness (rubedo) which now follows denotes an increase of warmth and light coming from the sun, consciousness. This corresponds to the increasing participation of consciousness, which now begins to react emotionally to the contents produced by the unconscious. At first the process of integration is a ‘fiery’ conflict, but gradually it leads over to the ‘melting’ or synthesis of the opposites. The alchemists termed this the rubedo, in which the marriage of the red man and the white woman, Sol and Luna, is consummated. (par. 307)

The rubedo re-unites the instincts (emotional “reactions”) with the white purified body (alchemical materials), re-animating life and birthing the philosopher’s stone. Rubedo marks a conscious integration, or differentiated union of nature and spirit, body and soul, “above and below” (The Emerald Tablet of Hermes, 2002).

Hillman (2010) interprets the rubedo as a “sensous…felt…libidinal reality, an Aphroditic reality” (p. 261). He cites the woodcut engraving in the Rosarium titled, “vivification” (Smith, 2003, p. 95), where the female soul descends from the sky towards the mortified hermaphroditic king/queen. In Hillman’s translation of the text (Pérot, 1973) the commentary reads, “The soul descends here from heaven, beautiful and glad” (Hillman, 2010, p. 261). Hillman remarks, “Without beauty and pleasure of the world, why save it? … Only the object libido can fully reconnect us. Not duty but beauty, and the pleasing in all things” (pp. 261-2). From Hillman’s perspective, the rubedo is a sensuous vision, a felt, and lived experience, a “revivification” of embodied and soulful living.

This is certainly true of the highly erotic bridal mysticism of the Western Christian tradition (Feuerstein, 1992/2003). Despite Hillman’s (2010) critique against a “spiritualized and Christianized alchemy” (p. 260), a “red” and “libidinal” sensuality certainly occurred among medieval mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1987), Mechtild of Magdeburg (1997), John Ruusbroec (1986), Theresa of Avila (1979), and certainly John of the Cross (1991).11 John’s (1991) nuptial poetry of the bridegroom longing for his beloved follows the profound tradition begun by the Cistercian monastic tradition with their evocative commentaries on the Song of Songs (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine,” Sg 1:2, NRSV) and continued throughout the medieval Christian tradition (McGinn, 1996, 1998).
John’s (1991) *Spiritual Canticle* evidences to the erotic, “libinal,” and “Aphroditic” nature of the mystical union:

In the inner wine cellar
I drank of my Beloved, and, when I went abroad
through all this valley
I no longer knew anything,
and lost the herd that I was following.

There he gave me his breast;
there he taught me a sweet and living knowledge;
and I gave myself to him,
keeping nothing back;
there I promised to be his bride. (p. 475)

In his commentary on this stanza, John (1991) writes: “[T]he soul that has reached this state of spiritual espousal knows how to do nothing else than love and walk always with its Bridegroom in the delights of love” (p. 583). The soul in this state of union “is as it were divine and deified” (p. 582). In the *DN* text, the unitive encounter between the soul and God occurs, as does John’s (1991) entire spiritual journey, in darkness. Egan (1993a) writes, “For John of the Cross, night is for the sake of light and love, since the dark night prepares the soul for union with God in love” (p. 247). Following the nigredo of the dark night, and the illuminative albedo, the soul has finally returned to its beloved and betrothed: the body, cleansed and purified, ready for the divine union of the sacred “chemical wedding” (Godwin, 1991).

**A “Second” Nigredo**

Underhill (1911/1990) in her classic study positions the dark night of the spirit, not as an initial purgation, but following illumination, and preceding union. While she – admittedly – departs from the “classic” tripartite structure of Western mysticism, when viewed from an alchemical perspective, her developmental outline makes sense. Alchemically, the stages of the work (nigredo, albedo, rubedo) do not exist in a linear or codified fashion, but occur in a circulatio, a repetition that revolves the work cyclically (Abraham, 1998). Underhill’s (1911/1990) interpretation of the mystical journey as a path of purgation, illumination, darkness, and then union, finds a counterpart in the alchemical *opus*.

Interpreted alchemically, the process would involve the repetition of a “second” nigredo, following the albedo (illumination), and preceding the rubedo (union) of which there is ample evidence in the tradition, particularly in the 16th century text, the *Rosarium Philosophorum* (Smith, 2003), which Jung (1946) commented upon extensively in his initial studies of alchemy. In this series of twenty woodcut prints, a male and female couple undergoes a series of transformations, each depicting the various procedures of the alchemical *opus*. After each coupling or conjoining (*coniunctio*), there follows a subsequent
“death” (*mortificatio*). This process follows the alchemical dictum *solve et coagula*, dissolve and congeal (Smith, 2003), a process that repeats multiple times throughout the work and represents from a psychological perspective the continual re-organization and increase in consciousness that follows Washburn’s (1994) understanding of a “regression in the service of transcendence” and subsequent “regeneration in spirit” (p. 238) as outlined above. Through the *circulatio*, the alchemical materials continue their transformation from black to white to black to red along a path similar to Washburn’s (1994) “spiral journey” (p. 239), as the work progresses along its transmutation towards the philosopher’s stone.

**FROM GREEN TO RED IN THE DARK NIGHT**

**The First Garment: White**

Towards the conclusion of the *DN*, John (1991) adds an interesting “twist” to the alchemical matrix this far considered of black, white, and red. Towards the conclusion of the text, John encourages the reader to clothe herself in white, green, and red garments, corresponding to the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which are corollary to the three enemies of the soul: the devil, the world, and the flesh (p. 446). The purpose of the three garments is to “disguise” the soul and make her “more secure against her adversaries” (p. 446). John (1991) describes the first garment, representing faith as “an inner tunic of… pure whiteness” that “blinds the sight of every intellect” and provides “strong protection” against the devil, “the mightiest and most astute enemy” (p. 446). “If you desire, soul,” John (1991) writes, “union and espousal with me, you must come interiorly clothed in faith” (p. 446).

**The Second Garment: Green**

Over the white cloak, the soul is instructed to place a “second colored garment, a green coat of mail,” signifying “the virtue of hope” (John of the Cross, 1991, p. 447). This “green…disguise” protects the soul from “its second enemy, the world.” John (1991) describes the protective function of faith as a form of detachment from material desire, so that one does not “become absorbed in worldly things” (p. 447). The result of the coat of faith is that “one always gazes on God,” “looks at nothing else,” and is “content save with [God] alone” (p. 447). This interesting addition of the “greenness of living hope” (John of the Cross, 1991, p. 447) deserves specific alchemical attention.

Jung (1953/1968) remarks how the original four colors of the alchemical process (black, white, yellow, and red) were reduced during the 15th or 16th century (John’s cultural heritage) to three colors: black, white, and red. However, Jung (1953/1968) writes: “the *viriditas* [“greening”] sometimes appears [following the *nigredo*] though it was never generally recognized” (p. 229). What is one to make of this mysterious alchemical “greening”? The color green is in the alchemical tradition rich with symbolism and importance.
Abraham (1998) describes the appearance of the color green as a signal that the “infant Stone is animated and is growing to maturity” and is “associated with the alchemical generation which (sic) occurs after the chemical wedding of the two seeds of metals,” male (Sol) with female (Luna) (p. 91). Green is also a signal, however, that the work is not yet complete or “ripe.” Abraham (1998) writes: “Green in alchemy indicates that the matter in the vessel is in a state of unripeness, immaturity, or youth...[signifying that] the metal has [not yet] been dissolved into its first matter or prima materia” (pp. 91-92). Reference to the “green lion” in alchemical manuscripts speaks to this still “volatile” state of the material that needs further reduction and purification (Abraham, 1998, p. 92). “Greenness” represents, then, growth and renewal, and its appearance shows that the process of transformation is not (yet) fixed. Green goes on as the circulation of the elements continues. In the case of the DN, as with alchemy, green changes to red.

The Third Garment: Red

The third garment in the DN, “a precious red toga,” is the “finishing touch,” and represents charity, which “elevates the soul as to place her near God” (John of the Cross, 1991, p. 448). John (1991) cites a passage from the Song of Songs, “I am black, O daughters of Jerusalem, I am beautiful, and for this reason the king has loved me and brought me into his chamber” (p. 448; Sg. 1:5). I see it as highly significant that John cites this passage during his extrapolation of the red toga (rubedo). This passage can be seen as a crowning statement of both the DN and the alchemical landscape of which this article has traversed. It is the “black” that has become elevated to red, to union, with the Beloved. What once was “black,” corrupted, dead, putrefied, has been purified (made “white”) and now re-unites in red. In the red (rubedo) of the DN the contunctio finds completion in the “union of the three faculties (intellect, memory, and will)” of the soul with God (John of the Cross, 1991, p. 448).

CONCLUSION: OF GODS AND STONES

In the alchemical process, the nigredo marks not an end, but a beginning. As Edinger (1985) reminds us, “death is the conception of the Philosopher’s Stone” (p. 163). In this context I view the creation of the Stone as the equivalent to not only the birth of new god-images, but also as a symbolic representation of Washburn’s (1994) spiral journey: the regression in service of transcendence, and subsequent re-integration in spirit. Jung (1953/1968, 1963/1970) came to see the Stone as a symbol of the Self, and just as the Stone is born from the nigredo, the Self emerges from the encounter with one’s own personal darkness or shadow. The Stone, Self, or god-image that arises from this dark night appears as a coincidentia oppositorum, an archetypal image that represents and unites the opposites in a complex whole. In alchemy, this god-image manifests through the creation of a Stone that is male and female, light and dark, and integrates the worlds of matter and spirit. In the DN, it is an
encounter with a God who is dark yet light, who loves and yet abandons and wounds, through the apparent withdrawal or absence of love.

I view the DN journey as an important amplification of the death of god-images and removal of shadow projections, but also as an honest look at how a new psychological attitude toward numinous or transpersonal aspects is born. To John (1991), the “new” god remains cloaked in nada, “nothingness” (see his Ascent to Mt. Carmel); perhaps it is this divine imago cloaked in paradox that is able to contain the multitude of opposite and contradictory aspects of the human experience. In a 1952 letter to Neumann, Jung (1975) writes:

The humiliation allotted to each of us is implicit in his character. If he seeks his wholeness seriously, he will step unawares into the hole destined for him, and out of this darkness the light will rise…. The light cannot see its own peculiar blackness. But if it dims, and he follows his twilight as he followed his light, then he will get into the night that is his. (p. 35)

This, I believe, is the dark heart of the nigredo, the dark night encounter, and the deep psychological impetus from which any authentic integration arises.

My intention in this article has been to interpret the purgative, illuminative, and unitive periods of the DN through the alchemical lens of nigredo, albedo, and rubedo in order to offer a more penetrating amplification of the dark night encounter from a psychological perspective. When read through an alchemical hermeneutic, the DN offers further evidence of the dark process and leaden despair, as well as radiant hope and joy, that accompanies the death and rebirth of both self- and god-images. I believe the dark night as articulated by John of the Cross when read through the lens of Western alchemy speaks to this experience of psychological and spiritual death while encompassing its totality of depth and magnitude, beauty and terror.

NOTES

1 Thus serving as a coincidentia or complexio oppositorum, a unifying symbol marked by an integration of opposites, which can be interpreted as a symbol of the Self (see Jung, 1963/1970, par. 176: a “figure…at once bright as day and dark as night”).

2 John (1991, p. 402) cites the “ray of darkness” of the Pseudo-Dionysius (1987), an important figure in the history and development of apophatic mystical theology in the Christian tradition, of which John of the Cross can be seen as a culminating figure (see Louth, 2002, 2007; Turner, 1995). Apophatic (Gk, apophatikos, “negative”) spirituality can be defined as the “abandonment of all concepts, thoughts, images, and symbols – even and especially those of God” who can only be known, “through negation, unknowing, and darkness of mind” (Egan, 1993b, p. 700).

3 John (1991) writes, “divine and dark light causes deep immersion of the mind in the knowledge and feeling of one’s own miseries and evils; it brings all these miseries [shadow aspects] into relief” (p. 403) so the soul may see itself, and, I argue, the deity as well, more clearly.

4 In using the term alchemical hermeneutics I refer to the methodology employed by Jung (1963/1970) and Hillman (2010) as a theoretical model for interpretive (hermeneutic) inquiry, and which I have applied elsewhere to the understanding of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras (Odorisio, in press). Romanyszyn (2007) has developed a qualitative depth psychological methodology by the same name, which differs greatly from Jung’s use of the term/method.
This letter was written in response to a painting sent by the Welsh artist Ceri Richards. It contains in the center what could be interpreted as a “seed” imbedded within a heart. The colors are dark and grey, interspersed with light.

Wittine (2003) also considers the “dark night of the ego” from a transpersonal perspective, considering it a death of the persona as well as one’s god-images.

Consider also the following example of another strongly alchemical-psychological account of the purgative element in the DN: “[I]n order to burn away the rust of the affections the soul must, as it were, be annihilated and undone in the measure that these passions and imperfections are connatal to it” (John, 1991, p. 405). In other words, the same psychological “heat” that formed the initial “rust of the affections” (i.e., complexes, trauma-induced defenses, etc.) must similarly be applied in order for the same complexes and defenses to be unraveled.

Edinger (1984) marks the distinction between the “lesser” and “greater” coniunctio as follows: the lesser coniunctio is incomplete and requires additional separation (separatio) and coagulation (coagulatio), while the “greater” coniunctio marks the creation of the philosopher’s stone.

Hillman (2010) is quick to point out that the “transition to white” is not without its own unique dangers (p. 169), namely discernment between “The urge to white” and the “escape from black” (p. 170). I see this as an alchemical rendition of the pitfall conveyed by the modern term spiritual bypassing (Welwood, 1984; Masters, 2010).

John (1991) further illustrates the illuminative nature of the dark night with his famous example of the “ray of sunlight shining through a window,” which is only seen in proportion to the “dust particles in the air” (p. 411; see also Ascent, p. 194). I interpret this as follows: The more the ego-complex is worked upon, the more the light from the archetypal Self can shine through, often hidden and unseen, in order to more fully “incarnate.”

“Because we have been held in a spiritualized and Christianized alchemy, the rubedo has remained enigmatic, usually explained in terms of Christ” (Hillman, 2010, p. 260). Perhaps contextualizing the Western alchemical tradition within the larger scope of the Western mystical tradition helps to restore some amount of “red” enfleshment to the rubedo.

From a psychological perspective, I interpret the devil as the struggle with personal and archetypal evil; the world as attachment to persona or ego; and the flesh as the encounter with the instincts. Of course, all three can be interpreted as the cultural/collective shadow of the Christianity of John’s time.

It is significant that the author of Aurora also cites the identical passage (Song of Songs 1:5) to illuminate the alchemical coniunctio (Von Franz, 2000, p. 133). Von Franz (2000) interprets “the black woman” as “an embodiment of the nigredo” (p. 363).

REFERENCES


---

*Of Gods and Stones* 81


The Author

David M. Odorisio received his Ph.D. in East-West Psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA. He specializes in the alchemical study of religion, a hermeneutic approach to religious studies through a depth psychological lens, and has published in the journals *Philosophy East and West* and *The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, among others. Visit David at: www.ahomeforsoul.com.