

## REVIEWS

*Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women*, by Sylvia Brinton Perera, Toronto, Inner City Books, 1981, 112 p., \$9.00

This is an exciting, difficult, engrossing book about women's search for freedom and healing, and our desperate need to discover an inner female authority in a predominantly male world. Combining a third millenium Sumerian text, *Ishtar's Descent*, with dreams from her own Jungian practice as a model for modern woman's journey, Sylvia Perera presents a vivid image of female initiation.

We who are "father's daughters" in a psychological sense (cp. "mama's boys"), defined by men as "docile daughters", "good mothers", "bright, achieving partners", develop "animus-egos" that goad us into living goal-oriented, compulsive, over-achieving lives. These false centers drive us on to ever new accomplishments, make insatiable demands upon our time and energies, and worse yet, are always critical of the the results. It is that part of us that "projects the power", that attempts to control by manipulation (a real ugly!), that accommodates too willingly, that finds it difficult to ask for help, that is unable to admit and value one's own needs. This sentence struck home with me: "Too often there is no distinction felt between the unmothered woman's need for the mother, and her need for male partership. . . .(These women) continue to seek strength and mothering from men and their own animus, even devaluating feminine nurturance when it is available to them."

Somehow, someway, we must learn to dis-identify from compulsive male judgments and find female values within for our own salvation and wholeness. This is not, of course, a brand new thought. Esther Harding began writing about it fifty years ago, and it is an idea that has been coming to the surface more and more in Jungian literature (for example, Marion Woodman's *The Owl Is The Baker's Daughter*). Sylvia Perera describes this process with such force and clarity that we are able to travel with Ishtar down through the Underworld of our own lives to her dark sister Ereshkigal, the Mother Goddess, source of the deepest instinctive female energy, and return with new insight and awareness. The dread initiation involves "suffering, disrobing, humiliation, flagellation, and. . . crucifixion on the underworld peg." In the course of this the great energy of the Goddess "turns back on itself, goes down into

self-preserving introversions, (and becomes) the energy that makes a woman able to be separate unto herself and survive alone'—centered, grounded and whole.

The Goddess is making herself known in many of us today. But the great need is to experience her with awareness and not with passive acceptance that leads to masochistic suffering. Some of us perhaps take this journey voluntarily, and some of us get booted into it. But if we miraculously survive to tell the tale and can experience this archetypal ego-sacrifice to the self, we can begin to share in the cycle of healing and transformation through which wholeness comes.

I found it a heady experience to read and relate to the vivid passages in this book, to recognize steps along the journey, and to see them as parallel to my own. (Time to knock on wood and confront inflation!) To realize with real elation and a sense of wonder, that women like me can find in this tale a symbolic journey similar to the Christian Hero's journey, but told this time in female terms. Here is the story of the *via dolorosa*, the crucifixion of the ego to the Self for the sake of salvation, the descent into Hell, and the resurrection, told some 3,000 years before the birth of Christ. It gives me the same exciting validation that Neumann's retelling of the story of Amor and Psyche did when I recognized that story as an early acknowledgement of woman's role in the achievement of consciousness.

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*Woman, Earth and Spirit: The Feminine in Symbol and Myth*, by Helen M. Luke. Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1981. 102pp., \$8.95.

Helen Luke, has worked more than thirty years as a counselor to men and women who sought to relate their daily lives to the reality of myth and symbol. This book evolved from separate papers written for study groups at her rural center, "Apple Farm." Its opening chapter, "The Life of the Spirit in Women," appeared first as a Pendle Hill Pamphlet. She forcefully addresses modern woman's need to recover the awareness and expression of her *authentic* femininity, which can take highly individual directions. One persist-

ent effect of the damage done by centuries of masculine dominance is that much of the current feminist propaganda is poisoned by actual contempt for the feminine. This is "the collective judgment of centuries about the inferiority, the dullness, the uncreativity of a woman's passive feminine nature." Her aim becomes mere equality with men, the achievement of comparable expressions of masculine creative Spirit.

"There has to be fuel before the fire will burn; there has to be earth as well as seed, before new life is created." Helen Luke deals beautifully with the symbolism of Fire and Air vs. Earth and Water in this connection, and quotes *the I Ching* on Yin the Receptive, the "equal and opposite" of Yang the Creative. "The Earth's condition is receptive devotion... all beings owe their birth to it, because it receives the heavenly with devotion."

Remembering Ann Ulanov's distinction between the "elementary static" and the "transformative or dynamic" aspects of the feminine principle, we may be tempted to wonder if Luke falls back into seeing the dynamically spiritual as masculine by definition, and only the static aspect as feminine. Such a judgment would be unfair. It is easier to contemplate and admire the transformative feminine in all its glory, both in others and in our own emerging creative selves, than to render an equal tribute to Yin the Receptive! For that very reason, we are sometimes driven to acknowledge that Helen Luke's hammering on the Receptive may be just what we need.

The essay on the ancient Aryan dawn goddess, Eostre, from whom our word "Easter" is derived, may restore our lost meanings. "This image of the goddess bringing to birth the resurrected sun—or Son—out of the womb of darkness. . . carries a numinous power." She ties it in with the mythic truth of the Pueblo Indians' belief that if they were not present at every dawn to help the Sun rise by their worship, it would fail to rise. As Jung says, "If anyone lives his own hypothesis to the bitter end . . . he knows that Christ is his brother." "A true love costs no less than everything. . . In our individual lives it means we stand continually ready to accept the death of an old attitude, the loss of an object of love or veneration, the end of a projection that has lost its numinosity or its relevance to the present."

"Goddess of the Hearth," is my favorite chapter, combining a variety of symbols in a way quite new to me. Fire descends from heaven to meet earth's fuel; whether it then burns creatively or destructively depends on the nature of the fuel we supply and the quality of attention we give it; as T.S. Eliot put it, we have a choice between "fire and fire." The *I Ching* Hexagram #30, which also means "fire and fire," carries the curious injunction to steady perseverance and "care of the cow;" "an image of the slow, patient chewing of the cud which turns the grass of the earth into human food." "The cow is the passive, feminine heat of unremitting attention without which there can be no transformation of fire"—whether for the alchemist in his retort, the cook in her kitchen, or anyone "who seeks to transform the raw material of his or her life into the gold of consciousness." We must drink daily of the milk of the cow; we must ruminate. Without this, says the *I Ching*, the fire "flames up, dies down, is thrown away."

Helen Luke then turns to an interpretation of the hearth-goddess Vesta's virginity: only as a woman finds herself to be complete-in-herself, hence with no need for possessiveness, can she "bring unity to the family around the hearth." This holds true, in different ways, for the woman who has no literal hearth or family. According to the ancient meaning of temple prostitution, it is only through burning in the fires of instinct sufficiently to become "*capable* of a total giving of herself, body as well as soul," that a woman becomes truly virgin and able to <sup>4 4</sup> give the milk of her feminine warmth to all who will draw it." But to bring this about, long years of tending her essential feminine cowlikeness are required.

Another of my favorite essays deals with the "Mother and Daughter Mysteries," which is interesting especially as compared to Chris Downing's treatment.\* Helen Luke is content to follow the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* as it stands; but she too was sufficiently drawn to the thought of the mature Persephone's at-homeness in Hades' realm, to opt for a cover design taken from a votive plaque showing Hades and Persephone sitting together in state, companionable and broadly smiling, perhaps pleased with their worshiper who has offered them the emblems they like best. After all, All-seeing Zeus did arrange this marriage, for good and sufficient reasons!

♦Downing, Christine. *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine*, N.Y., Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981.

Attention is given to an episode in which Demeter, taking the first step away from total abandonment to her grief, volunteers to care for another child, the human son of the king and queen of Eleusis. Her treatment of the child is described perceptively as both right and wrong, and the mother's terrified interference as both wrong and right. After a petulant temper tantrum and a demand that a temple be built for her, Demeter enters a phase of introverted growth. This culminates in her true and greatest contribution to humankind, the founding of the Eleusinian Mysteries. No longer playing at being a goddess, she demonstrates the reality by offering one of the most profound ritualized inner journeys through which humans have ever been enabled to win their immortality.

There are three brief essays: one on Straw and Gold (the story of Rumpelstiltskin); one on "the Revenge of the Repressed Feminine" (based on the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus); and one on "Money and the Feminine Principle of Relatedness." The Latin *Moneta* was originally the name of a goddess (of the mint in which money was coined). Since she was forgotten and sank into the unconscious, Money "has acquired an ever-increasing autonomous power and is worshiped unashamedly as an end in itself." Helen Luke treats money in the light of the profound human principle of Exchange from which it was derived, and which, as celebrated in the poetry and novels of Charles Williams, is indeed numinous; and this is, of course, what money is for.

*Woman, Earth and Spirit* is a comparatively short book, but its author's insights are as unusual as her style and give us much to ponder.

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