

Crossing the Threshold: Mysticism, Liminality, and Remedios Varo's *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961–2)

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According to Mexican critic Juliana González, Remedios Varo's surrealist work presents a heroine crossing an 'umbral' (*limen*, or threshold) into a 'trasmundo' beyond the natural and the supernatural (38). And so she underscores what other critics (Kaplan; Martín) have identified as a dominant theme of fantastic journey in the painter's work. All these critics are aware of a connection with surrealism's trespass of other thresholds, in-between dream and waking life, the real and the marvellous; and all, at the same time, acknowledge that the point of such a crossing is to secure 'higher knowledge', as the painter herself stressed. Yet the concept of the *limen* and the way in which it provides a key term for the analysis of the painter's work (and a way in this respect to rethink surrealism's esoteric ambitions) has not been discussed. Thus, even though Varo's work is said to be about a quest for hidden knowledge (Lauter) or even a rite of passage, a 'viaje iniciático' (González 36–7), terms which evoke the idea of liminality in an anthropological sense, discussion circles around this point, with no further investigation of the term *limen* or *liminality*.

In this article we propose to take up the question of the painter's work in connection with *liminality* more explicitly. We will argue that the *limen* Varo's heroines cross is a psychological one that takes them through a process culminating in a rebirth of the self, and that to the extent they are in-between identities and involved in a process of initiation, they can be considered liminars (Turner 96–7). We will also argue that in order to develop this theme, which culminates in her most autobiographical work, the triptych *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961–2), the artist needed to find a way conceptually to bridge surrealism and her interest in mysticism. She would have found a sympathetic approach in Jung, one of the founders of psychoanalysis, who turned explicitly to the question of religion in the troubled thirties, though, as we shall see, she revised his androcentric approach. We will suggest that Jung's writing helped the artist make a transition from surrealism to esoteric spirituality.

The theme emerges in the fifties, at the beginning of the decade of work done in Mexico that secured Varo's fame, and it crystallises in the triptych

Bordando el manto terrestre (1961–2, CAT 303–6). Throughout her work, Varo presents an archetypal seeker or wayfarer, interpreting his or her goals and vehicles as archetypal as well, as she draws on a range of esoteric symbols from a variety of sources, including alchemy, Symbolist poetry, classical myth, and a syncretic mixture of sacred texts of the East and West, from the gospels to Tao. What we posit, therefore, is that Varo does not record autobiography in the sense of a biography of herself so much as a biography of Self, as if all the seekers held a core in common.

To say that Varo's seeker is an archetypal one brings the artist close to Jung, whom virtually all scholars of Varo have recognised as an influence. His theory of the psyche embraces a hermetic spiritual orientation, but it also knows an outward aspect focused on the analysis of symbols in dreams and myth. Thus Jung offers the visual artist the possibility of translating an inner theme of journey into an outwardly identifiable one and vice versa. By documenting the works which would have been available to Varo we will be in a position to answer the question that is implicit in a significant body of criticism, which discusses the theme of quest in psychological or esoteric terms but has so far lacked a way to weave these strands together.

In concert with other critics, then, we vindicate a narrative of 'unorthodox spirituality' (O'Rawe) in Varo's work; yet, unlike them, we wish to explore two aspects of this question which have been missing so far. On the one hand, we wish to look at how the inner journey continues an early surrealist motif in her work and, secondly, we want to propose, in our lead-up to an analysis of the triptych *Bordando del manto terrestre*, that the inner journey can be read as the story – built up retrospectively – of a hoped-for initiation into esoteric wisdom (and all that this promises). To posit such a narrative requires the viewer to gather signs across an array of scenarios and characters; it requires us to read indirectly, both backward and forward, through symbolic imagery and an intrinsically metonymical process of meaning, whereby single scenes point reiteratively to effects and aims rather than accomplishment. We think Varo's protagonists are best regarded – retrospectively and prospectively – as liminars, characters who are on their way to initiation into esoteric knowledge.

They have departed from society and its structures, and though they are not seen to have arrived at a particular destination or achieved the superior knowledge they seek, almost every painting in her mature work suggests that they are involved in an ongoing search for hidden wisdom. They are various in kind, semblance, and gender, and as unstable as any character would be who is captured midstream in the process of becoming. If we were asked to classify them we might well say that, like the liminars Turner speaks of (96), they are unclassifiable: they waver between the sub- and the superhuman.

But that like liminars, too, metaphors of birth and death are as crucial to an understanding of what happens to them as they are for neophytes involved in classic rites of initiation (Van Gennep 91–3). Thus Guida interprets the woman ‘bandaged’ in a blue shroud in *Encuentro* 1959 [CAT 253] as someone who is looking for a new identity in the face which peers out at her from inside a coffer, while in *Centro del universo* (1961), a man cloaked in tattered white feathers and funnelling stars into his head is pregnant with the cosmos (visible within his belly).

If there is a recurrent seeker in Varo’s painting, it is a subject in transformation who is typically on his or her way somewhere – a wayfarer on a hard road or waterway or inside a dark forest moving toward a life-giving source, or spiritual boon – a pearl of great price, a chalice that may be the Holy Grail. As Juliana González states, ‘lo principal son los viajes y los viajeros; todo es tránsito, paso, camino, vuelo, navegación, exploración, aventura, misteriosos desplazamientos y “llamadas”’ (36). The question for critics is to see that this imagery is used chiefly to offer visual analogues for an inward and esoteric rebirth. Hence Varo’s characters are often preoccupied with shedding unwanted relations (with father figures in *Mujer saliendo del psicoanalista*, 1960 [CAT 292]); cherishing a wiser or more enlightened self (the owlet-child and Virgin Mother enthroned of *Mujer sedente* 1950 [CAT 95]); or journeying toward a tangible sign of superior knowledge – the Grail, the Philosopher’s Stone – which will transform them definitively (*Exploración de las fuentes del río Orinoco*, 1959 [CAT 249], *Tránsito en espiral*, 1962, CAT 334).

Ironically, the very trait of in-betweenness attaching to such figures was noted by a critic who is otherwise wary of reading Varo’s work as narrative. Brad Epps remarks that Varo’s characters are ‘truly emergent figures, in process in the otherwise static space of the painting’ (199). We think that insofar as they are initiands they may properly be termed *liminars*: individuals who find themselves in between one state (of lower consciousness) and another as they strive to become a different, higher self who can hope for union with what is perceived to be sacred. The challenge for the painter was to find ways to represent such in-betweenness as well as a sacred goal that was not open to external verification, which could only be dimly grasped by those who had not known mystical experience themselves. We think she did so chiefly through the esoteric symbolism in which her work was invested, and the dreamlike other-worldliness of her landscapes, where the logic of the physical world is often contradicted.

As one would expect of an inner journey we find that there is almost always an invisible *limen* or threshold implied in Varo’s work: what we are given to see cannot be assigned to the world of the senses and, as we view the picture, we must suspend disbelief and accept that we have already crossed into the

supernatural. Varo's painting, like surrealist painting in general, conceptualises the frame as a window onto the marvellous which the painter 'reveals'. The spectator sees what would not be seen if the painter him/herself were not a 'seer'. This will remind one, surely, of surrealism's celebrated focus on what the inner eye of the artist has beheld (Matthew). But there is another sense too in which we can speak of the liminality of what we see. Typically, the spaces Varo's characters occupy are inner or enclosed even when they open onto the heavens or to woodland. It is as if Varo depicted characters who were enveloped or harboured within a greater space, as if she could not conceive of them existing outside of a container, from which they will eventually 'hatch'. Her characters are, regardless of the literal hour in which they are depicted, part of what Gilbert Durand termed a nocturnal regime. We agree with Alejandra Zanetta (*La otra cara* 189) that it is a symbolic regime associated with the feminine, inasmuch as all closed containers and space – be it tree trunk, pavilion, or forest – are, by analogy in the Jungian psychology with which Varo was familiar, womb-like spaces (Neumann).

These spaces are liminal because they augur a rebirth. They are essentially stages along a path, one which involves a return to the unconscious or to nature, to that which is symbolically not part of the waking world, or the world of reason and social order. Just as Victor Turner (building on Van Gennep) envisaged a stage in social rites of passage in which bonds between members of society were loosened and the 'passenger' symbolically left in between nature and culture, before being reintegrated into society with a new identity (Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton 8), so too – we argue – can one postulate a liminality that precedes the rebirth of the Self in a mystical sense. This peculiar liminality is what Varo transmits in her painting. She has found no better way to intimate that her characters are on their way to a rebirth than to depict them in places which we can identify as closed and protective. These spaces – often inside or open to nature – are a site of transformation and often house an object whose possession, while perhaps initially overpowering, will transform the seeker, releasing them from their 'in-between' state. Thus, the critical moment for the heroine of *Nacer de nuevo* (1960) [CAT 289] occurs inside a pavilion whose wooden walls have burst open to expose the surrounding night wood. The magical chalice she is about to grasp (a kind of Grail) reflects the crescent moon shining above a hole in the roof. And vegetation sprouts through the walls, as if the naked protagonist who is being 'reborn' and who also breaks through the walls, had just returned from immersion in nature.

Liminality implies narrative, a movement from one state or one place to another or at the very least a crossing. It can, of course, refer to the quality of what lies in between one state and another, as Turner proposed, yet he

also made it clear that liminality was a state to be overcome, inasmuch as a 'passenger' in a rite of initiation acquired a new status by virtue of his or her experience.

We take this to mean that liminality – which has usually been evoked in terms of space – also carries with it a certain kind of temporality. This is not, however, as one might expect, linear time, but, on the contrary, a repetition and, more specifically, a cycle or a spiral. Borders are crossed and in theory they can be recrossed, yet in a liminal crossing one never returns to the same place in an unaltered state. Having returned, after moving through a liminal state, one is at a 'higher' level than s/he was before. That is to say, the negotiation of successful passage is not a simple metamorphosis: it is to acquire wisdom and to be endowed with a power that enables the initiate to function as a new person once s/he returns to quotidian life.

Such is the pressure of the accruing narrative in Varo's work about a search or quest that one imagines that a seeker or seeker is present even in paintings that depict no human subject. Thus, in her last painting *Naturaleza muerta resucitando* (1963) [CAT 361] the viewer imagines that the guests who were present around the dinner table were 'incorporated' into the solar system spinning above the empty plates, once the meal became a séance and an unseen power lifted the fruits off the table and into orbit. A bursting pomegranate whose seeds sprout on the floor hints at a cycle of death and rebirth.

Some scholars (Kaplan, Lauter, Zanetta) would understand rebirth in psychic terms, and this has chimed well with their feminism. But in the indefinite distinction between the spiritual and the psychic, which feminist criticism highlights, we can see the relevance of Jung to Remedios Varo, for in his eyes this particular distinction was an idle one. Jung regarded all religious or spiritual sentiment as fundamentally psychic (Fordham 70) and thus he bracketed the question of whether there was a deity underpinning representations of God or the sacred. For this reason Jung might well have been a boon to artists who, like Varo and many surrealists, had left the Church but still felt drawn intuitively to the sacred.

Because he has often been evoked in connection with Varo but rarely discussed, we propose in the following section of this essay to provide background about what works by Jung the painter might have known and why his psychology would have exerted such a strong pull on her. In doing so we hope to provide a bridge between the surrealism of the old world and the hermetic turn it took after the Second World War (Sawin). Two of Varo's works from the early fifties will be examined in this light: *Trasmundo* and *Hallazgo*. Afterward we will turn to the theme of (inner) journey as it unfolds in one of Varo's most ambitious works, *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961–2), which we will argue provides a retrospective view of Varo's conception of

herself as a mystical seeker.

Several critics have asserted that Varo knew and read Freud's rebellious disciple (González; Kaplan; B. Varo), yet almost nothing has been said about what she might have read, when – or even if – this reading becomes evident, or why. Nonetheless, there is a strong case to be made on the grounds of what we see in her paintings that she had become acquainted with Jung – if not in the thirties, when he was introduced in Spain, then almost certainly by the fifties, when his works became widely available in translation in Mexico and Buenos Aires. According to Martica Sawin, who has studied the evolution of surrealism in exile, some of the younger surrealists whom Varo counted as her friends were convinced that Jung's idea of a collective unconscious was more relevant than Freud's focus on the individual psyche (160). Indeed, Jung may have been the catalyst for the motif of inner journey; given that this central metaphor in Varo's work (Kaplan 148) only takes shape in the ten-year period from 1953 to 1963. This is a period that saw the artist regain emotional and professional stability after a long spell of insecurity as a recent exile from the Second World War. Jung's writings may have entered her life when his theory about the phenomenon of a rebirth midway through life would have had special resonance.

First, the facts about Jung in translation. His writing was available to Spanish readers as early as 1927, when the *Revista de Occidente* brought out *Lo inconsciente en la vida psíquica normal y patológica*. This was followed by *Teoría del psicoanálisis* (1935), *La psique y sus problemas actuales* (1935), *El yo y el inconsciente* (1936). In 1936 Jung's essay on archetypes ('Los arquetipos del inconsciente colectivo') was translated for the readership of the *Revista de Occidente*. It is worth noting, too, that Jung's appearance in Spanish coincided with several major Spanish artists' and poets' turn toward surrealism. By the time of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War a number of Jung's mature works might have come to the attention of avant-gardists.

Let us assume that Remedios Varo, as a member of the *Lògicofobistes* in Barcelona, would have had a particular interest in psychoanalysis, and that even in the thirties this may have extended beyond Freud. But even if she did not read anything in Spain by Freud's fractious disciple, she would have had a second chance to become acquainted with his theory in France, where his first major work had appeared as early as 1924 (*Métamorphoses et symboles de la libido*). Other works by Jung were also available in French, among them the *Essais de psychologie analytique* (1931) and the *Conflits de l'âme enfantine*, published around the same time.

Our argument has Varo reckoning with Jung later in life, when as an exile from fascism she was living her own sort of crisis, and when Jung had – according to some scholars, as pointed out above – gained ascendancy over

Freud among the surrealists. At least three key works were available to her in Latin America. Jung's *Psicología y religión* was published by Paidós in Mexico and Buenos Aires in 1949. This book consists of three lectures that Jung had delivered in Yale in 1937, in which he was at pains to show that religion was a function of the psyche. In a post-Nietzschean climate, Jung tackled the objection that God was dead by saying that it was our image of God that was dead (*Psicología y religión* 141). Anticipating the objection that religion was an illusion, Jung boldly dismissed the question of whether there was any God behind it. Religious sentiment, he said, was a very real illusion that could not be reduced to a symptom (167). We imagine that a stand of this sort would have been of deep interest to Remedios Varo, who had been drawn like many avant-garde artists to the teachings of sacred Eastern texts or Gurdjieffian practice (B. Varo; Arcq; O'Rawe).

Only a few years further on in the fifties a revised edition of Jung's first book was published in Argentina (and we can assume that this work too was available to Mexicans): *Transformaciones y símbolos de la libido* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1952). This was the work that marked Jung's formal break with Freud; and it was also the book that first vindicated the study of myth and the collective unconscious. Dating back to 1916, it presented a comparative analysis of the myth of the hero. Jung argued that dreams and mythology held a world of symbols in common, and in them he traced a pattern of the hero's struggle against the problem of incest, which he interpreted as a desire to return to the Mother. According to Jung, a hero was born only when he was *reborn*, after a monumental struggle to return to the maternal image and to conquer his longing to go backwards in time. However, Jung also presented the return as a stage in the quest for an inestimable treasure within oneself; he believed that one must return, but only to depart – to be born anew – and that it would be then, psychically, that one would find 'the treasure' within. (It is not hard to see how Jung's analysis of incest provoked alarm in Freud, for the return to a Mother principle in this sense is indeed reminiscent of the language of mysticism down through the ages.)

And, finally, in 1953 Jung's study of alchemy (*Psicología y alquimia*), which was to prove influential among surrealists, was published. In this text Jung made it plain that he understood the alchemists' Great Work, which would turn base metals into gold, as the goal of the self's desire for union with the divine.

Although we cannot – so far – place a date precisely on Remedios Varo's reading, critics have noted an undeniable shift in the artist's painting in the early fifties. Although she continued to work with a number of surrealist motifs in the thirties and forties, Remedios had not yet found her signature style or her major theme. Accounts of her life in Mexico in the forties suggest

an unstable love life – a break-up of her second marriage to Benjamin Péret around 1947 – and precarious economic circumstances that led her to take commercial work (Tíbol 45). In fact, by 1950 she had produced almost nothing that would secure her fame. One surmises that if she came across Jung in the late forties or early fifties, his writing would have made a strong impression on her, for Jung was an apostle of personal growth. He prefaced the fourth edition of his first book (*Símbolos de transformación*) with the claim that it was the fruit of a critical moment in his life, marking the onset of the second half of life, 'en la cual no pocas veces se produce una *metanoia*, una modificación de mentalidad' (19).

It is in the early fifties that Remedios Varo began systematically to exploit a gendered, feminine symbolism. Varo tends to feminise the cosmos by referring it to female symbols of origin. In the painting *Tejido espacio-tiempo* (1954, CAT 110), for example, we contemplate a medieval lady and her suitor through the normally invisible warp and woof of a magically woven cosmic egg. This is a clear allusion to mythology (and mythography) that links mother goddesses to the weaving of the world, as Quance has pointed out (47). In a study for an unexecuted mural in the Cancer Pavilion of the Medical Centre in Mexico City (*Creación del mundo* o *Microcosmos* 1958, CAT 214), Varo imagines a host of filmy white souls issuing from a temple on an island that is processing a 'heavenly placenta' (R. Varo 158). In a painting entitled *Carta de Tarot* (1957 [CAT 197]) she depicts a female figure with a star for a face and a triangular body, with an uncoiling serpent inside, forming horizontal figure 8s, the symbol of infinity (Cirlot 270); each of the figure's outstretched hands grasps one of the snake's heads, in an image recalling that of a Cretan priestess.

Yet, as we shall see in our discussion of *Bordando el manto terrestre*, it is far from clear that Varo *identifies* with Mother Goddesses as she would have known them; her references to a Great Mother can be ironic. Suffice it to say that the esoteric traditions in which she read highlight feminine symbolism. Some hermetic doctrines prioritise a feminine principle of wisdom (such as the Gnostics' *sophia*); others claim that the way to an integrated self is through a feminine muse like Mélusine (as Breton imagined in *Arcane* 17).

Drawing on all such sources and on the feminist impulse of her own formative years under the Second Spanish Republic, which had brought the vote and equal rights for women, Remedios Varo eventually found the courage to imagine women not as muses but as heroines who could embark on quests like the Grail. Jung did not conceive of such a thing. And yet, we would argue, he would have given her a framework for understanding that her spiritual hunger could be satisfied through a different concept of the unconscious than Freud had hitherto offered. In 1936 he wrote with a sense of urgency about the West's spiritual crisis:

El cielo se ha convertido para nosotros en espacio físico, y el empíreo divino no es sino un bello recuerdo. Nuestro 'corazón sin embargo arde', y una secreta intranquilidad carcome las raíces de nuestro ser... Nuestro interés por lo inconsciente se ha convertido para nosotros en un problema vital. Nos va en ello nuestro ser o no-ser espiritual. Todos los que han pasado por la experiencia del sueño que hemos mencionado, saben que el tesoro descansa en la profundidad del agua e intentarán sacarlo a luz. (Jung *Arquetipos* 30)

These words, as we shall see, might well serve as a gloss for *Trasmundo* (1955, CAT 134). Although this is possibly the first painting in Varo's oeuvre to depict a journey into a supernatural realm, its importance has not been recognised. It is a painting that suggests a transition between Varo's allegiance to pre-war surrealism and her discovery of spiritual analogues for the psyche's struggles.

Quoting Paracelsus as a supreme alchemist, for example, Jung maintains in *Arquetipos* that every human being contained a divine spark which potentially united him or her to the outer source of light that is deity. This involves a dialectic of immanence and transcendence (movement between inner and outer worlds) which has been used to explain the relation between self and deity in mysticism (Underhill 1974: 103–4). According to Jung, Paracelsus's image for the treasure that lies hidden within man is like the well-known symbol of the pearl (*Arquetipos* 138), evoked in the Christian parable of the 'kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 13: 45–6).

It is significant, therefore, that the divers in *Trasmundo* may be going after pearls, and that the scientific expeditioners on the ship in *Hallazgo* (1956, CAT 138) have sighted this marvellous gem hovering over the landscape. *Trasmundo* is particularly interesting insofar as it features a well-known surrealist motif in its headless passenger (with his empty suit) sitting on the deck of the ship alongside an ominous sign that the conscious world has been left behind. For at the ship's stern a long dark shadow projected from within the cabin represents the 'liberated' unconscious, and this, if we follow Jung, would have left the passenger without his head (his rational control). None of this is reassuring; yet the waters contain secrets, they are being plumbed by divers (whose heads are not visible), and this offers a more positive view of the unconscious. For the deep waters contain the symbolic treasure that mystical seekers are after. *Trasmundo* ['Back of the world'] turns out to be an ambiguous place in many symbolic respects; it is in between the rational and the irrational; it is fraught with peril but also possibility.

In retrospect this may well be the first work by Remedios Varo to posit the idea of a journey toward a mystical goal. But her palette will change, and although she continues to portray waters with the same unsettling mood that evokes the dream world, she will opt in later paintings – and here *Hallazgo* is a good example – to bring the traveller or seeker out of the waters and into

the safety of ship or boat or magical coach. And she will generally evoke their psychological proximity to the mystical goal of spiritual perfection in the gold and fiery red palette of alchemy.

The painter is at the beginning of a decade-long exploration of her major theme, which she chooses to develop through her protagonists, as if they were alter egos. But she has also developed the implications of their search for her own life story and in the triptych *Bordando el manto terrestre de la tierra* (1960–2), her most 'autobiographical' work (Kaplan, B. Varo), it is possible to read her own status as a liminar.

Bordando el manto terrestre

To depict a quest in painting implies creating a narrative, which is counter to the inherent stasis of the medium. Nor is it the case that Varo's paintings were executed according to a plan to trace a single theme or character in time. Yet we are granted licence to follow the protagonist's life journey across the three panels of the triptych by the artist herself, who interpreted them as a story in commentaries which she provided her brother (R. Varo). Here we see an initiatory journey in process: the heroine is a liminar, represented in fantastic, otherworldly space on her way to rebirth, which will involve, at least symbolically, a death of the older self as she crosses a threshold into another world.

Notice that the titles of the paintings are linked in a narrative sequence. The first, *Hacia la torre* (1960, CAT 303), anticipates the tower scene we encounter in *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961, CAT 304), whilst the heroine in the second panel weaves an encounter with a lover into her needlework, allowing the two to take flight in *La huida* (1961, CAT 306). In fact, despite reservations about assigning narrative to paintings, Epps has cited Varo's success in conveying a story that is 'effectively unframed, displaced, and imagined from one canvas to another' (189). In the triptych we have the privilege of following a young woman along an inner journey as she works to free herself from the constraints of traditional religion, takes control of her own destiny, and flees toward what promises to be a rebirth. The triptych has been analysed as a journey which culminates in the vindication of the Goddess and the advent of a new order 'basado en el principio de la complementariedad' of the sexes (Zanetta, *La otra cara* 176). Though we draw on some of the same sources, and coincide in our broad view of the heroine's goal of self-affirmation, Zanetta emphasises female creativity as what will free the heroine. Our analysis is of the spiritual journey for which the painter seeks visual symbols. The paintings feature imagery related to a journey and are replete with symbols that hint at a cycle of regeneration. Over the three panels, we encounter some of

the key tropes that emerge elsewhere in Varo's work and which adhere to a symbolic code that underscores the liminality of an inner journey.

In the first panel of the triptych, *Hacia la torre*, a group of identical young girls, dressed in the uniform of a Catholic school, follow a man and a nun – the 'Mother Superior', according to Kaplan – out of a doorway of a large honeycomb structure enclosed by high walls. Over the doorway hangs a coat of arms with an insect wearing a crown; it may be the Queen Bee. The pupils' wire-thin bicycles, formed from their own shawls, emphasise the singular logic of this place, which merges the marvellous with the real. The Mother Superior reminds us of the traditional religious schooling Varo received, whilst the beehive convent that the group is leaving can be understood to represent the Catholic education system's focus on self-perpetuation – something that Varo herself spoke against (Kaplan 18). The beehive also suggests a metaphor for a matriarchal order, with a queen at the centre – though Varo makes it clear that the association is ironic and even negative. It is striking that the seemingly hypnotised pupils emerge from the hive looking and behaving absolutely alike, apart from one girl, who peeks up at the birds that have broken free from the man's bag and which, according to Varo, guard the girls 'para que ninguna se pueda fugar' (R. Varo 59). Her ironic use of a symbol traditionally linked to transcendence (and which is used positively elsewhere, as in *Creación de las aves* [1957, CAT 171]), indicates disapproval of the spirituality that her teachers/captors represent. Set apart by her curiosity, the nonconformist among the girls becomes the reluctant worker we meet again in the tower of *Bordando el manto terrestre*, where her personal journey continues.

In the imagery of the tower another negative association intrudes. The tower can be understood to be so rooted that it represents an endless search within, which might preclude its space facilitating any personal transformation. This negative meaning might well be relevant to the aspirations of our future heroine, who for the moment only finds herself pressed into labour, as we see in the second panel, *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961). However, the tower can also represent the coming together of the lower and the higher, heaven and earth, or the conscious and the subconscious, and in so doing symbolise humanity's spiritual ascent (Cirlot 449–50). In that sense, the tower promises empowerment. It is there, after all, that our heroine practises a magical embroidery (her *labores*), which eventually enables her to flee to the mountain depicted in the final panel. The tower contains the alchemist's alembic: a double, egg-shaped still used to refine materials in the process of forming the Philosopher's Stone. In its esoteric significance the *lapis* is essential to the alchemist's search for humanity's 'latent gold', and is a metaphor for the self's rebirth into higher consciousness (Under-

hill 142–3; Schwartz-Salant 159). It would seem, too, that the threads that the girls use to embroider the earth's mantle are all produced through an alchemical recipe.

So far we can see that the heroine of the narrative is propelled beyond the received Christian spiritual model of Varo's youth – as seen in *Hacia la torre* – toward another sort of labour. Yet this too is seen with irony, for while the girls' needlework is magnified to supernatural strength, the young creators are not all willing collaborators in the process of making the earth's mantle. It is only when one escapes that the individual search emerges.

So far, the first instalment of the triptych sets the scene for a narrative of spiritual journey. In the second panel, *Bordando el manto terrestre*, a group of girls literally weave the Earth's mantle under the supervision of a taskmaster who prepares the magical thread in a mysterious vessel, an *alambique*, while reading from a *grimorio* or book of magical spells or recipes (Kaplan 19; B. Varo 116). It is from the alembic that the heroine draws the thread with which she eventually plots her escape from the tower, for she stitches a secret rendezvous with a lover into the unfolding world below, thus taking control of her own life. She is thus literally weaving her own destiny. Using the knowledge she has learned in the magical workshop – an enclosed space connected to the earth but situated in the heavens – our heroine sews her escape into the mantle, freeing herself from the 'women's work' prescribed by the book, so that she can pursue her own path through the forest below.

In this particular representation of weaving, a mythic feminine cosmology is both assumed and surmounted. Weaving is associated in classical tradition with the Three Fates and the idea of the warp and woof of the world captures what Bachofen saw as the ancient Greeks' and Romans' conception of Mother Nature as an *artifex rerum*. But here at least one girl balks at the magical service, and shows that she has a mind of her own. Perhaps she does not wish to be under the dictates of the Great Master, as Kaplan suggests. Perhaps she is a rebellious daughter uncomfortable with a Great Mother (Superior) or perhaps, as Quance suggests, she is a daughter who does not accept without irony the burdens of being a Mother Nature goddess (51). And yet, her rebellion takes place within a forest, a place regarded as a feminine – or rather maternal – symbol (Cirlot 112). On the one hand the girl is moved to leave behind the Catholicism that loomed over her early schooling. But she is also following a path that is well known in many spiritual traditions, according to which a hero is twice born. In *Símbolos de transformación* Jung had emphasised that breaking free as an individual was only possible after a symbolic 'combat' with a Mother image. But Varo proposes a different resolution, one with a *positive* investment in maternal symbols that is typical of mysticism.

She plots a love story in which the protagonist is the woman who rebels against illegitimate authority (whether maternal or paternal) in the name of self-assertion and growth. Once her alter ego escapes the homogeneous collective in the tower in *Bordando el manto terrestre*, where she was surrounded by girls who all look alike (and are therefore not yet individuated), she joins a lover in the forest and the two of them embark on a journey as a couple. The promise of *eros* becomes one with the attainment of individuality and the birth of the self. This can be read as a psychological process. But, at the same time, the coming together of the male and the female – especially as we see in the depiction of the lovers in the third panel – suggests a spiritual breakthrough. The union of opposites such as male and female represents the achievement of wholeness and balance: as Jung puts it in a discussion of alchemy, ‘a wholeness that resolves all oppositions and puts an end to conflict’ (Schwartz-Salant 156). It is a sign that the desired goal is near.

In the final panel of the triptych, *La huída*, the narrative concludes as we see our heroine, in the company of her lover, headed towards her destination, a grotto in the side of a heavenly mountain. The young woman looks older than in the previous paintings, adding to the sense of narrative stretching across the three panels, and she is accompanied by a young man in reddish/golden clothing of the same colour as the fiery heavens around them. The man is using his cloak as a sail to propel the two forward in a strange surrealist vessel, which has been adapted from the female character’s fuzzy umbrella, towards a mountain in the top right of the painting. The umbrella-shaped vessel echoes the sexual symbolism of the cavern towards which the couple travels. It also reflects the coming together of the male and female, for the umbrella can be both phallic, when closed, and yonic, when opened. The use of their own clothing as a boat suggests their self-reliance and the power that has been gained at this point in their journey.

Although the man appears to be taking the lead, it is the woman who steers. Thus they each perform a task that is essential to their progress while relying on the action of the other. Whereas the young woman fixes her sights on the goal, the young man looks beyond the mountain, as if not intent on where they are bound. Despite the clear outline of the figures, it is their interdependence which is emphasised, and they have been subtly joined as one. Their differently coloured cloaks merge around their shoulders and they share a set of hands between them. Coalesced in this way, they represent an unconventional image of the Androgyne, suggesting that the male or female must incorporate their missing half as part of the spiritual quest.

Among the surrealists, the figure of the androgyne was of the utmost importance. It was the coming together of the sexes and represented a return to harmony, to the primitive unity that allowed for Sublime Love (Orenstein

15; Haynes 31). It has been argued that in surrealism the female part of this potential unity was reduced to the role of catalyst and fostered the full realisation of the male rather than the equality of lost halves (Chadwick 182; Choucha 95). The idea goes back to Plato's *Symposium* and was taken up by the Romantics and then by *modernistas*. For example, in a little-known text titled *Andrógino* (1904) by Catalan author José Antich, the protagonist Andros searches for a unity that will transcend the dualities of life/death, good/bad, and male/female. His quest is aimed at a way of being that exists beyond these dichotomies. At the beginning of his journey, he asks, '¿Dónde hallar la unidad superior que yo soñara como centro de fusión de estos principios? ¿Habían de ser eternos? ¿Dónde estaba pues el reposo?' (Antich 46). Varo's imagery suggests a preference for androgyny's spiritual significance, which is based on the coming together of opposites into a unified whole, a preference already established by Zanetta, who notes the importance of the colour gold in the painting, which 'en el proceso alquímico simboliza la iluminación y la salvación así como la unión inseparable de los principios femenino y masculino en el individuo' (*La otra cara* 176).

Mircea Eliade in *The Two and the One* writes that androgyny represents 'a symbolic restoration of "Chaos", the undifferentiated unity that preceded the Creation, and this return to the homogeneous takes the form of a supreme regeneration, a prodigious increase of power' (114).

It is significant that this union of male and female occurs at the entrance of a grotto, for, as a host of scholars since Bachofen have observed, the cave is associated with Mother Earth in its chthonic aspect. In the Upanishads, God, or 'everlasting Spirit' is said to live, 'shining yet hidden in the cavern' (Happold 147). Thus, when the lovers seek a haven inside the grotto, both sexes return to a divine ground which promises regeneration and rebirth (Gimbutas 324; Neumann 44).

In a related interpretation of the mountain as a symbol, Mircea Eliade recognises a dual significance, inasmuch as 'la cima de la montaña cósmica no solo es el punto más alto de la tierra, es el ombligo de la tierra, el punto donde dio comienzo la creación (la raíz' (cited in Cirlot 316). Cirlot sees the cave as a womb symbol and the mountain as a symbol of the soul's elevation. When taken together, this imagery represents the final stages of the heroine's quest in that it joins immanence to transcendence.

As Kaplan has observed, the triptych shows Varo's rebellion against the bonds of family and tradition which would have stymied her in Spain (18). If we were to pursue the autobiographical reading, we might see the young lovers' elopement as an allusion to Varo's early marriage to fellow artist Gerardo Lizarraga and to their embarking together on an avant-garde adventure shortly after their marriage in 1930. However, as we have shown,

the fullest reading of the hermetic symbolism in the triptych invites us to construe a narrative, retrospectively built, of spiritual quest and to see the female character as a liminar.

Beginning with the hive-like convent where one is not yet individuated and subject to oppressive control (a pseudo-matriarchy, under priestly control), and ending at the womb-like mountain, a heavenly sanctuary for the lovers, the three panels present the heroine's journey symbolically through a cycle of birth (equating this with the assertion of eros); development (her elopement with a lover); and rebirth (as they are about to cross over to another world where older selves will dissolve). In earlier paintings, Varo had reinforced the significance of all the motifs we find in her triptych, presenting a call or a vocation (*La llamada* 1959, CAT 329); a discovery of a Grail that transforms the self (*Nacer de nuevo* 1960, CAT 289); a regeneration that culminates in inner harmony (*Ermitaño* 1955, CAT 124); and finally the replacement of the self in a cosmic cycle of life, death, and regeneration (*Naturaleza muerta resucitando* 1963, CAT 361). Throughout the paintings done in the last decade of her life, Varo alluded over and over again to a lifelong process of personal transformation, wrought with the objects and experiences of everyday life, yet magically charged, with an invisible force that compels her characters to break free of their containment within womb-like spaces to seek liberation under a 'sheltering sky'. They are properly seen as liminal figures who are betwixt and between old selves and newer ones, fleeing from an unwanted, deadening past to a future of incandescent becoming.

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