

Review of *Alchemy, Jung, and Remedios Varo: Cultural Complexes and the Redemptive Power of the Abjected Feminine* by Dennis and Rebecca Pottenger

Pottenger, Dennis. *Alchemy, Jung, and Remedios Varo: Cultural Complexes and the Redemptive Power of the Abjected Feminine*. Edited and Introduced by Rebecca Livingston Pottenger. Routledge, 2021. 246 pp. ISBN: 9780367704216 (hardcover) / 9781003146230 (e-book). \$136.00 (hardcover), \$36.00 (e-book).

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The depth psychological study of Spanish Surrealist artist, Remedios Varo (1908-1963) *Alchemy, Jung, and Remedios Varo: Cultural Complexes and the Redemptive Power of the Abjected Feminine*—a collaborative volume written by Dennis Pottenger, edited and introduced by Rebecca Livingston Pottenger—is a rich and deep “alchemical work” in which they “experience and reflect upon the processes of transformation in the artist’s life and work” (p. 23). Through the transformative nature of the writing and inquiry that winds through the book, a methodology not unlike one of Varo’s own painted labyrinths and winding corridors, the Pottengers “follow Varo’s work through an alchemical process that finds within personal trauma cultural pathologies inflicted by the patriarchy—a process of transformation that points to the redemptive power of the disavowed and abjected feminine” (p. 22).

The “abjected feminine” here is primarily the female psyche as it was experienced by Varo within the destructive misogynistic patriarchy of her own time—thrown away, brought low, cast down, and humiliated. Although readers in the year 2023 may consider patriarchy to be a somewhat stereotypical and outdated way to understand the forces at work in our world, the Pottengers remind us of its stunning contemporary relevance in their definition of it as “an androcentric system of power and privilege . . . that perpetuates a dynamic driven by the will to dominate and control that which is considered ‘other,’ from women, to people of color, to environmental resources” (p. xiii).

They suggest that Varo’s experiences within patriarchy formed the alchemical “raw dark matter of suffering” (p. 15), or alchemical *prima materia*—the first or primary matter—of the artist’s life and work. This includes her experience as a female artist within the Freudian-influenced and largely masculine movement of Surrealism (p. 57); her experience of civilian violence in Spain before the Spanish Civil War (p. 41); her arrest and imprisonment in a French concentration camp, of which she never spoke or wrote (p. 42); and her exile in Mexico from her beloved Spain for the rest of her life. The Pottengers contend that Varo’s suffering became the redemptive force of the archetypal feminine that we see in her paintings that deepened her personal growth (p. 6) and redemption (p. 15).

The intention for this three-part work is a “circumambulation” (p. 7) and “amplification” of the “images and symbols” (p. 28) in Varo’s “visual alchemy” (p. 207) as the artist struggled with the forces of patriarchy. Part I of the book is a deep inquiry and dialogue between one of Varo’s last recorded dreams in her published but undated dream diary, “The dream of the executioner” (pp. 1-2)—a dream of her death that also contains a dangerous secret—and over “three dozen” (p. 66) of Varo’s paintings. Included is an in-depth analysis of two paintings, *Embroidering the Earth’s Mantle* and *Dead Leaves*.

Also explored in Part I, are the potential complexes at work in Varo’s psyche—a “trauma complex” (p. 49) and a “patriarchal power complex” (p. 95). There is a particular focus on gaining a deeper understanding of “the role psychological trauma played in her production of her paintings” (p. 50), and how she seemed to have worked on her complexes—and how they worked on her—in her art (pp. 92-97). The Pottengers want to know if “Varo’s paintings . . . may support our ability to successfully address trauma and cultural complexes . . . related to patriarchal misogyny” (pp. 20-21) and if “Varo’s paintings [can] help shift the harmful impacts of patriarchy” (p. 141).

This inquiry continues in Part II in a brief analysis of the life and art of Leonora Carrington, the British-Mexican Surrealist and Varo’s *soror mystica* and closest friend for over twenty years. It examines ways in which the women’s relationship and artistic work served as a combined feminist Surrealist manifesto that wrestled with the roles in which patriarchy had cast them as women—and how they used their painting to subvert that narrative by envisioning women protagonists at the very center of the creation of life and the discovery of strange new worlds of feminine experience. The depth of the first two parts of the book is followed by Part III, entitled “Symbols of Transformation,” which is six pages long, and brings the work to a redemptive depth psychological conclusion.

For students and teachers of alchemy who have lamented that no good books on women’s alchemical process exist, take heart. The Pottengers have produced such a book. As they show, Varo’s paintings form a series of unique alchemical emblems created from the feminine perspective. The authors challenge depth psychologists and researchers to consider that a feminine form of alchemy does not look like the masculine form of alchemy as we have tried to understand it primarily through the works of Jung. Women participated in classical alchemy; however, in traditional alchemical images, they did so largely from the male perspective. Even Marie-Louise von Franz, Jung’s closest collaborator in his alchemical studies, noted in her biography of him, *C.G. Jung: His Myth in our Time* (1972), that he only “took up the rejected masculine-spiritual half of the hermaphrodite” (p. 235).

Although the feminine side of things deeply influenced Jung’s character, life, and work, his study of alchemy is missing a deeper analysis of the female experience of it. The Pottengers considered Varo to be “a female alchemical adept” (p. 29) who “read and studied Jungian psychology” (p. 6) and alchemy—as the influences of alchemy can be clearly seen in her paintings. The authors have now taken up the rejected feminine-spiritual half of the hermaphrodite and have made a major contribution to the study of the female experience of alchemy and alchemical transformation in the psyche.

The book also provides us with knowledge about Varo’s initiatory and metaphysical (p. 62) quest to weave (p. 7) and birth (p. 35) healing forces out of the darkness of her own deep and harrowing trauma into this world through her art, not only for herself, but also for the collective (p. 66)—a main argument of the book. The book explores “art as a mode of deep inquiry” (p. 9) that understands painting as both the vessel

of alchemy (p. 11) and the alchemical process itself. It is also a deep study of the mystery of transformation as it takes place in the warp and woof of trauma and art, an initiatory weaving that may deepen throughout life and catalyze the deep purpose of soul. The study also shows that transformation is a lifelong, ongoing process of working with the forces of light and shadow within life and the soul that, as for Varo (p. 46), may never be completed, but only continuously given birth.

The Pottengers have distilled their collective learnings of Jung, alchemy, depth psychology, and the life and extraordinary paintings of Remedios Varo into a new formulation of Jung's ideas on the alchemy of transformation. *Alchemy, Jung, and Remedios Varo* allows us to experience not only Jung's understandings of alchemy from a new perspective, but to also view Varo's paintings within the context of Jungian and alchemical psychology. Here, alchemy's work of squaring the circle turns towards the new and necessary work of circling the square.

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References

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