Her "Symbols of the Desert": An Emerging Alchemical Impression in the Bone Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe

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Abstract: Employing C. G. Jung's theories of the transformative nature of the unconscious in collaboration with his understanding of alchemy, this paper analyzes a number of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings featuring bones that were created during a 15-year period following her introduction to northern New Mexico. The analysis circulates among events from O'Keeffe's life, the works of art themselves, and potential associations to alchemical concepts. The intention is to illuminate and deepen not only an appreciation of the artist's visionary work but also an understanding of what alchemy has in common with Jung's theories regarding psychological transformation. More broadly, the paper suggests that an ongoing engagement with art-making is a practice that can also function as an alchemical transmitter "of unconscious contents that are seeking expression" (Jung, 1938/1967, p. 82). Put another way, an attentiveness to creating works of art has the potential to enable the emergence of symbolic manifestations from the unconscious that evoke and facilitate psychological development

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When interviewed at the age of 89, the American modernist painter Georgia O'Keeffe said of northern New Mexico, "As soon as I saw it that was my country. I'd never seen anything like it before but it fitted to me exactly" (Adato, 2003). It was 1929 when she first saw "her country." Art historian Jan Garden Castro (1985) remarked that as a result of O'Keeffe's affinity for New Mexico her "paintings of the next ten years were unprecedented in the history of art. Her representations of hills, bones, crosses and adobe churches were an original infusion into the still-life and Post-Impressionist traditions that O'Keeffe had studied" (p. 83). One of O'Keeffe's biographers, Roxana Robinson (1989), emphasized that "in the vast sweep of the New Mexican views" O'Keeffe found the sense of "limitlessness" as well as the artistic and emotional liberation she was craving. This discovery in turn "allowed her sense of self to expand infinitely, independent yet attached to something larger than the self." The vastness of the landscape, its brilliant colors and the freedom and solitude it inspired, offered the painter "a supreme sense of transcendence . . . [that] would remain thereafter the central source of elemental strength" (p. 361). Apparently, O'Keeffe's introduction to New Mexico was a catalyst that transformed and shaped the rest of her work and life.

When such a monumental shift occurs in an artist, a transformation that touches both life and work, does the art-making itself contribute to the development? In other words, how might O'Keeffe's artistic evolution, including content choices and

implementation, have informed her psychological development and vice versa? This paper will respond to these questions from the perspective of C. G. Jung's theories of the transformative nature of the unconscious in collaboration with his understanding of alchemy. Its focus is on the content and depiction of images, the visual aspects of the paintings, rather than the process of painting itself. Accordingly, a number of O'Keeffe's paintings featuring bones, and created during a 15-year period following her introduction to northern New Mexico, are analyzed. The analysis circulates among events from O'Keeffe's life, the works of art themselves, and potential associations to alchemical concepts. The intention is to illuminate and deepen not only an appreciation of the artist's visionary work but also an understanding of what alchemy has in common with Jung's theories regarding psychological transformation. More broadly, the paper suggests that an ongoing engagement with art-making is a practice that can also function as an alchemical transmitter "of unconscious contents that are seeking expression" (Jung, 1938/1967b, p. 82). Put another way, an attentiveness to creating works of art has the potential to enable the emergence of symbolic manifestations from the unconscious that evoke and facilitate psychological development.

A Brief Introduction to Jung and Alchemy

For Jung, alchemy was more than an archaic precursor to chemistry. Essentially, he saw in the alchemists' elaborate material operations a metaphorical enactment of unconscious principles and attitudes that arise during a psychological transformative experience. Central to understanding Jung's theories, including those concerning alchemy, is the idea that the unconscious consists of both personal and collective or universal elements. He said that "the alchemist projected what I have called the process of individuation into the phenomena of chemical change" (Jung, 1944/1968b, p. 482). In other words, when the alchemists were performing and observing their complicated experiments—an effort intended to redeem the spirit held within the material substance in order to produce the sought for gold/*lapis*/philosophers' stone—they were at the same time working upon "an interior or psychic life that was [their] own" (p. 245). This idea is important because integral to Jung's (1939/1968a) notion of the process of *individuation*—his term for an attentive engagement with psychological development—is establishing a connection between consciousness and the unconscious. Crucially, the individuation process entails developing a relationship, dialogue, or reckoning with the presence of things unknown, repressed, or somehow forgotten (p. 279). That said, the degree to which individuation is conscious may vary, since Jung understood that a goal-oriented urge to psychologically develop is ubiquitous and inherent to the autonomous nature of the unconscious. He emphasized that individuation is a process within the psyche that "seeks its own goal independently of external factors" (Jung, 1944/1968b, p. 5). Put another way, individuation occurs due to a unifying impulse within us that forges a relationship between consciousness and the unconscious in order for psyche to know itself better.

Jung (1961/1989) collected information about alchemy throughout his adult life. However, his research on the subject did not become a focus until after 1928 when he received a copy of an ancient Chinese alchemical treatise, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, from his friend the sinologist Richard Wilhelm (p. 204). At that time, Jung was still developing *The Red Book*, his creative manuscript corpus consisting of texts and paintings representing what he described as a "confrontation with the unconscious" (p. 170). Since

1912, this imaginal work had facilitated Jung's exploration of the deep reaches of his own psyche and seeded many of his theories including those concerned with spirituality, creativity, and individuation. In *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, Jung recognized a stark similarity to his own individuating experiences recorded through *The Red Book* (pp. 170–199). This recognition led Jung to understand that alchemists' operations personified and imaginally addressed unconscious contents in order to phenomenologically make real a transformative experience of the psyche. He further concluded that the alchemical texts documenting these efforts, which spanned over 1700 years of history, were full of *symbols*—imaginal portals representing communication from the unconscious in its effort to relate what is unknowable. Effectively, the texts portrayed recurring motifs and ancient patterns related to psychological development.

After he made the connection between alchemy and psychology, Jung (1961/1989, 2009) stopped work on *The Red Book* and set himself to unpacking alchemy's history and its relationship to his ideas. As a result, he produced two books on the subject, *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944/1968b) and *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (1955–56/1970), as well as a number of essays that eventually became volume 13 of *The Collected Works*, titled *Alchemical Studies* (1967). At the end of *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, his "last great work . . . [that] gives a final account of his lengthy researches into alchemy" (Read, Fordham, Adler, & McGuire, 1970, p. v), Jung (1955–56/1970) asserted that alchemy had "performed for [him] the great and invaluable service of providing material in which [his] experience could find sufficient room" thus enabling him to describe more fully the essential nature of the process of individuation (p. 556). In essence, alchemy—due to its historical presence, imaginative and symbolic contents, and spiritual associations—was integral to his development of a psychology that values the *experience* of phenomena (be they inner or outer manifestations) and the unconscious impulse to find purpose and meaning in life.

Following Jung, analytical psychologist and scholar Edward F. Edinger (1994) explained that "alchemical writings are complex, confused, and even chaotic," which suggests that even the recording of the work or *opus* had a hand to play in the process. Despite this, he concluded that "the basic scheme of the *opus* is quite simple," and he summarized it as follows:

> The purpose is to create a transcendent, miraculous substance, which is variously symbolized as the Philosophers' Stone, The Elixir of Life, or the universal medicine. The procedure is, first, to find the suitable material, the so-called *prima materia*, and then to subject it to a series of operations that will turn it into the Philosophers' Stone. (p. 9)

The alchemical transformative process, then, is generally one of manifesting a mysterious superior/perfected substance from some base material through a series of prescribed complex procedures. Whereas alchemists tend to follow this larger pattern, the details of their "operations" are ultimately as unique as the individual.

Prima Materia

It is often difficult to identify how the work of alchemy begins since "the alchemists reiterate that the *opus* proceeds from the one and leads back to the one" (Jung, 1944/1968b, p. 293). In other words, the "one" at the beginning, known as the *prima materia*, is integral to and essentially the same as the end result (philosophers' stone/gold/lapis). Throughout

the process, it is the substance or form that the alchemists' work focused on. Ancient alchemical texts refer to the *prima materia* as ubiquitous, of great inward value, yet at the same time vile, despised, and rejected; both multiple and singular, finite and infinite, without definite boundaries, limits or form (Edinger, 1994, p. 12). Effectively, it is "impossible" to be specific about what this base material is, "because the projection emanates from the individual and is consequently different in each case" (Jung, 1944/1968b, p. 317). That is, the *prima materia* is unique in each case because the matter being worked represents something attributable to the alchemist's life. Psychologically speaking, the *prima materia* is whatever the psyche brings, an essential unconscious element that seeks attention and conscious integration in order for a sense of unity to be born and prevail.

To suggest that there is an emerging alchemical impression in Georgia O'Keeffe's work in connection with New Mexico requires, then, the identification of her *prima materia*. Going forward, I propose that it arose out of O'Keeffe's desire to pursue artistic independence coupled with tension from maintaining a close relationship with her husband.

By 1929, 42-year-old O'Keeffe had tried several roles: artist, artist model, mistress, wife, nurse, gardener, designer, and gallery assistant (Castro, 1985, p. 74). Though her paintings were beginning to garner strong public support, she was still dependent on her husband—the well-known photographer and gallery owner, Alfred Stieglitz—for financial and emotional support. Her first extended visit to the desert country of northern New Mexico was in April 1929 at the invitation of Mabel Dodge Luhan—a wealthy patron of the arts who lived near the artist community of Taos, New Mexico. For the previous eleven years O'Keeffe had spent her summers in upstate New York at Lake George, Stieglitz's family's summer home. Though she was initially captivated by the low, rolling, perpetually green mountains surrounding Lake George, that view now felt oppressive and creatively dull (Robinson, 1989, p. 326).

When she first arrived in Taos, O'Keeffe was immediately enamored with the vast, bright, and evocative landscape. In a letter to her sister Catherine, she wrote, "I am West again and it is as fine as I remember it—maybe finer—there is nothing to say about it except the fact that for me it is the only place" (Robinson, 1989, p. 326). On this initial trip, she remained for four months at Mabel's Taos ranch exploring and painting. She stayed there again the following summer. Initially intrigued and invigorated by Mabel and her social entourage, O'Keeffe later realized that in order to paint she required more solitude and less distraction than the artist community at Taos afforded. Therefore, in the summer of 1931 she rented a small cottage for herself in the Rio Grande valley west of Taos in the quiet village of Alcalde.

From the beginning, an attraction to and curiosity about the northern New Mexico desert influenced O'Keeffe's work. She began exploring new motifs that reflected New Mexico's cultural traditions and slowly felt her way into depicting the essence of the landscape (Benke, 1995, p. 56). During the summer of 1929 her creative process included roaming the countryside and picking up artifacts—feathers, stones, fossilized sea shells, and bones. She also learned how to drive and bought her first Ford, which enabled her to explore the territory on her own as well as sketch and paint the landscape in situ (Castro, 1985, p. 82).

However, despite the invigoration she felt during her initial summer visits to New Mexico, this time period also marked a sharp decline in relations with her husband. Though

they shared the same passion for art, they differed in how they fueled that artistic expression. Stieglitz thrived in the comfort of his New York social circle, boxy urban spaces, and a fixed familiar routine. In contrast, O'Keeffe sought wide-open spaces, solitude, and the opportunity for spontaneous exploration. In addition, she was beginning to be recognized as an artist in her own right, apart from the reputation of her well-known husband. As a result, she became more independent and started making her own decisions about where to show her work and for whom she wanted to paint. This newfound autonomy left Stieglitz out of the process more and more, which was apparently unsettling since he was used to being seen as the benevolent mentor, advisor, and publicist (Lisle, 1980/1986, p. 211). Just prior to O'Keeffe's first trip to New Mexico, Stieglitz developed an intimate relationship with Dorothy Norman—a wealthy and significantly younger[1] married woman who eventually helped finance and run his gallery (Robinson, 1989, pp. 318–319). Reputedly, O'Keeffe was not happy with the Stieglitz/Norman relationship and soon became "restless and uninspired" (Castro, 1985, p. 90). Whereas it was evident that she deeply loved her husband and felt committed to him as a wife, Stieglitz's affair with Norman, coupled with a growing desire for creative independence, fostered a gnawing conflict within O'Keeffe (Lisle 1980/1986; Castro, 1985; Robinson, 1989). Ultimately, as the emotional landscape in New York became more tense, "Georgia set out to find a new physical one" (Robinson, 1989, p. 319).

O'Keeffe started making bone paintings after her introduction to New Mexico. She called the sun-bleached bones she collected when rambling the high-desert landscape her "symbols of the desert." She said:

> To me they are as beautiful as anything I know. . . . The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho' it is vast and empty and untouchable—and knows no kindness with all its beauty. (Bry & Calloway, 1989, p. 3)

Apparently for O'Keeffe, the bones represented both the allure and beauty of the wide-open liberating spaces of the New Mexican desert as well as its contrasting sense of desolation and wildness. In addition, I propose that another way to view the bones is as an embodiment of O'Keeffe's *prima materia*—objects that assumed the projection of her inner state. Applying this Jungian perspective, we can read the bone paintings as portraying stages of her psychological development as well as demonstrating, in effect, a form of alchemical work.

Nigredo

O'Keeffe spoke about the bones as her "symbols of the desert" in 1939, ten years after the discovery of *her country*. Although she created paintings during that first trip to northern New Mexico, the first bone paintings were actually produced back in Lake George, New York. They are studio pieces that feature bones she shipped back during her initial New Mexico visits. In these paintings, the bones figure prominently against an ambiguous abstract background of geometric panels of color, often with details that suggest fabric. One of the first bone paintings, *Thigh Bone with Black Stripe* (Figure 1), is dated 1930. Three others follow in 1931: *Horse's Skull with White Rose*, *Cow's Skull with Calico Roses*, as well as the "splendid and monumental" (Robinson, 1989, p. 366) *Cow's Skull—Red, White, and Blue* (Figure 2).

The center background in these paintings features a narrow black vertical band. Robinson (1989) reported that, "as early as 1919, O'Keeffe had used the image of a fissure in the center of the painting, a narrow crack of vulnerability that splits the composition centrally" (p. 456). In each of these bone paintings, O'Keeffe's symbol of the desert appears to be spanning this vulnerability, as if to transcend the apparent darkness or not be pulled into its depths. *Cow's Skull—Red, White, and Blue* in particular has a very dynamic and charged feel, as if resisting the dark fissure. Whereas the other three bone paintings feature only shades of black, white, and grey, this painting has the bleached cow skull set against a blue receding background framed on either side by vertical red bands.

Figure 1. *Thigh Bone with Black Stripe*, 1930, oil on canvas, 30 x 16 inches, private collection.
Figure 2. *Cow's Skull—Red, White, and Blue*, 1931, oil on canvas, 39 7/8 x 35 7/8 inches, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

From an alchemical perspective, the center black bands suggest the presence of a *nigredo* element. The *nigredo* or blackness is generally encountered in the initial phase of an alchemical *opus*. According to the alchemists' texts, it may already be present "as a quality in the *prima materia*" or is produced by the practitioner's operations (Jung, 1944/1968b, p. 230). Psychologically speaking, this blackening phase is tied to the "dark realm of the unknown" (p. 336), one's unconscious aspects. Jung likened it to the hero's descent into Hades (pp. 335–336). Classically, hero myths portray a male figure choosing a perilous journey to combat and overcome obstacles. That said, if we take Robinson's view, then the black bands in O'Keeffe's paintings symbolize vulnerability. This interpretation implies a defensive energy associated with the susceptibility to being harmed—subjected to rather than provoking an attack. Therefore, I propose that O'Keeffe's *nigredo* bands mythically bring to mind not the hero's journey but rather

Persephone's forced descent to the underworld. According to that myth, Persephone, a female goddess figure, is taken against her will by Hades to the realm of the dead. There, she becomes Hades bride and queen of the underworld. This myth suggests a relational quality in the *nigredo*.

As in ancient texts where often a combination of alchemical ideas is represented at once (Edinger, 1994, p. 51), the stark white skulls in the above paintings also suggest a *mortificatio* operation and the *albedo* phase. As an alchemical operation, a *mortificatio* or deadening event is literally associated with killing. It is a death experience that is undertaken in the *nigredo* phase and importantly leads to rebirth (p. 147). Yet, psychologically, it is often "experienced as defeat and failure" (p. 172). *Albedo* is the whitening stage in alchemy that usually follows *nigredo*—a transformation of the blackness through some sort of purification process (p. 26). Psychologically, these alchemical ideas describe a process of becoming aware of, dealing with, and then releasing negative qualities. The process is facilitated through a conscious differentiation of emerging unconscious prompts and images. If this perspective is applied to the above paintings, then it appears that O'Keeffe's psyche was attempting to mark and thereby communicate that her outer experience of New Mexico was significant for negotiating and transforming her current inner turmoil.

Interestingly in 1932, when she was back in New York, and against Stieglitz's wishes, O'Keeffe applied for and was one of several artists awarded a commission to paint a mural in the new Radio City Music Hall (Castro, 1985, p. 94). Though the building was slated to open in December, the project was fraught with delays. As a result, artists were not admitted into the building to work until November. When O'Keeffe arrived to start her mural, the plaster wall was not dry enough, and her canvas would not adhere correctly. She insisted that this was a problem and chose to withdraw (Robinson, 1989, pp. 378–379). Robinson suggested that O'Keeffe could not endure the idea of a public artistic failure along with the added strain that her attempt at artistic independence had put on the relationship with her husband (p. 381). Shortly after this event, O'Keeffe suffered a nervous breakdown and on February 1, 1933 was admitted to Doctors Hospital in New York for psychoneurosis (p. 385). She remained in the hospital for two months and afterward returned to Lake George, New York for the next year to recover. Though a disturbing event, this *nigredo* illness also proved to be a transformative catalyst.

By the end of 1933, as a result of much rest and long stretches of time alone, O'Keeffe's health began to return. During her convalescence she evaluated just what she needed to survive. Part of her recovery included coming to terms with her feelings toward her husband, and ultimately their relationship was put on surer footing (Robinson, 1989, p. 411). However, her strongest conviction was for herself, to take charge of attending to her own needs. In a letter to Jean Toomer, a close friend at that time, she wrote:

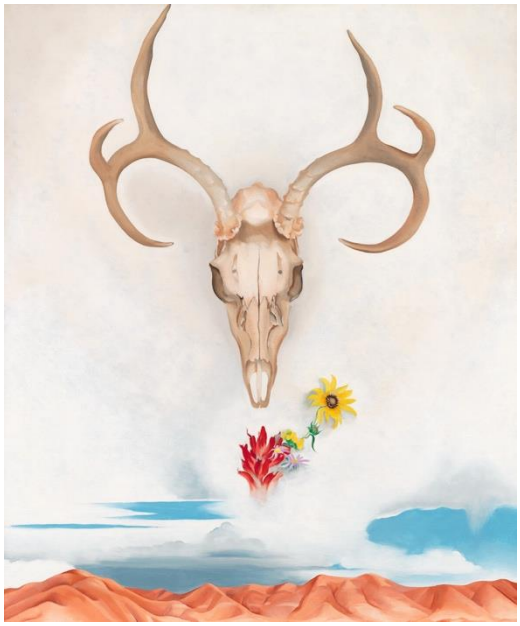
> If the past year or two has taught me anything it is that my plot of earth must be tended with absurd care—by myself first—and if second by someone else, it must be with absolute trust . . . it seems it would be very difficult for me to live were it wrecked again just now. (p. 400)

Sublimatio

In the spring of 1934 O'Keeffe was painting again, and that summer she returned to New Mexico. She arrived in June with the intention of staying once again in the village of

Alcalde. But soon after her arrival, a friend introduced her to Ghost Ranch, a dude ranch situated twelve miles north of the village of Abiquiu on the eastern edge of the Jemez Mountains. She adopted the place on sight and immediately took up residence there (Robinson, 1989, p. 408). The landscape surrounding Ghost Ranch apparently provided O'Keeffe with everything she was looking for. Robinson said that "the singing sky, the radiant cliffs, and the oblique profile of the Pedernal [mountain] all spoke to her, and the message was one she wanted to hear. It was her landscape" (p. 409). Here she began a summer routine that would last a decade, and later, after Stieglitz died, O'Keeffe chose Ghost Ranch and the village of Abiquiu as her permanent home.

O'Keeffe's return to New Mexico also provoked a change in the bone paintings. No longer a sort of abstract still life, the bones now hovered over a landscape, became an animating presence suspended against the background of a desert panorama featuring mostly sky. These paintings strongly suggest the alchemical *sublimatio*—a phase related to air. For the alchemists, it represented "an elevating process whereby a low substance is translated into a higher form by an ascending movement." Psychologically, the *sublimatio* is about gaining objectivity by getting above the problem and initiating a positive detachment from a situation. It is an energetic ascent removing one from the "confining entanglement of immediate, earthy existence and its concrete, personal particulars" (Edinger, 1994, pp. 117–118).



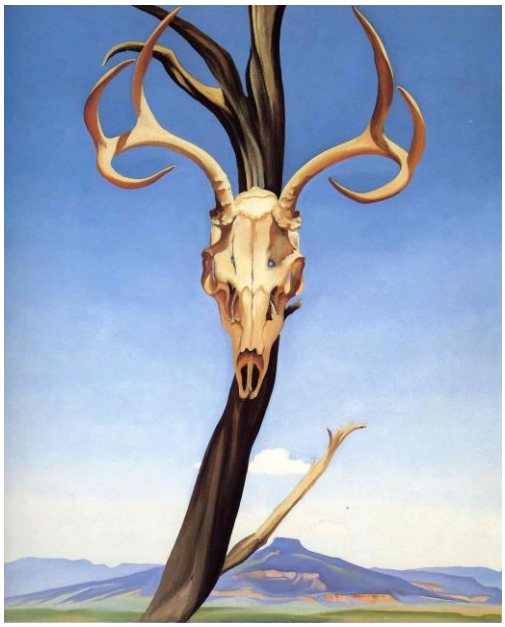


Figure 3. *Summer Days*, 1936, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches, collection of Calvin Klein.
Figure 4. *Deer's Skull with Pedernal*, 1936, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

In 1936, one such painting, Summer Days (Figure 3), features a deer skull with antlers hovering over soft red hills that resemble those near her adobe house at Ghost Ranch. Just above the hills are patches of blue sky dwarfed by a rising formation of clouds

that, in the distance, hint of a thunderstorm. Is the storm coming or receding? It is hard to tell, and yet had O'Keeffe not just come through a personal storm? Just below the skull's nose floats a small bouquet of desert wildflowers, like an offering at a shrine. Once again, the bare skull evokes the idea of death. However, here death is not associated with darkness but appears as a divine or spiritual presence ritually venerated by the bouquet. In this sense, Summer Days suggests "the ultimate sublimatio whereby the soul is separated from the body" (Edinger, 1994, p. 122). Whereas the hovering indicates the capacity of human consciousness to elevate itself above the instinctual sphere, the distinctiveness of the bare skull and flowers also reflects "the final translation into eternity of that which has been created in time" (p. 140). In other words, this image illustrates sublimatio as a transformative experience whereby the psyche gains knowledge of itself as immortal or having a timeless connection to all things and in contrast to an ego-centered perspective bound or weighted down by the strictures of material reality (pp. 128–129).

In another 1936 painting, *Deer Skull with Pedernal* (Figure 4), the same skull is featured. Represented in the lower background, painted in shades of blue, is the Pedernal, the flat-topped mesa-like mountain as viewed from the front porch of O'Keeffe's Ghost Ranch house[2]. In this painting, the deer skull appears to be hung on a large vertical blackened snag. Compared with *Summer Days*, the sun-bleached skull in *Deer Skull with Pedernal* is painted in shades of beige rather than white and therefore seems less otherworldly, more earthly than divine. The black snag brings in O'Keeffe's *nigredo* vulnerability once again—although here it is altered and perhaps even reconciled by being cast in an earthly shape. These two paintings created in the same year alchemically suggest a moving back and forth between heaven and earth, between a spirit-soul objectivity and an attachment to the embodied necessities of the physical world. They perhaps also reflect O'Keeffe's tangible and emotional movements between New Mexico and New York.

By the close of the 1930s, O'Keeffe had begun to establish herself and her professional image separate from her famous husband and his publicizing of her and her work. Her trips to New Mexico were no longer a mere retreat or vacation from life with Stieglitz in New York. She now seemed to understand that her art and her existence depended upon extended time spent on her own in the desert of northern New Mexico. The several hovering skull paintings from 1936 to 1937 were part of a period in which she gained clarity and objectivity. O'Keeffe intentionally defined who she wanted to be, how she wanted the world to see her, and where she wanted to live. Before this, she had been governed by Stieglitz's life and cultural lens. Now, "the center of Georgia's life" was no longer with him nor in the urban landscapes of New York (Robinson, 1989, p. 440).

Coniunctio

Now that O'Keeffe was spending longer stretches of time each year in New Mexico, the bone paintings evolved once again. "In the summer of 1943 O'Keeffe found a perfect [cow's] pelvis bone" (Robinson, 1989, p. 458). Soon after she began a series of striking near-abstract paintings that feature a close-up view of the pelvis with the sky peeking through the holes—as if it was held up to one's face like a mask. In contrast to what I have called the *sublimatio* bone paintings from the late 1930s in which the skulls appeared as a spiritual other floating upwards, O'Keeffe's pelvis bone paintings are intimate pieces. They essentially bring the viewer into close relationship with her "symbols of the desert." That is, in the pelvis paintings, the viewer and viewed object are brought together, united, as if

the object's mystery were one's own. Robinson (1989) suggested that the "imaginative manipulation of scale" in these pieces "was psychologically important" because it allowed O'Keeffe "to offer a visually insignificant object as one of great psychological significance. . . . The [compositional] format in its banishment of the middle ground proclaimed the dream quality of the image" (p. 459). Moreover, she said that these paintings "combine echoes of both birth and infinity" (p. 460). Such comments speak to the symbolic quality of the paintings. Overall, these works appear to symbolize a psychological recognition or celebration of the uniting of O'Keeffe's inner understanding of herself, including her creative vision, with an embodied sense of belonging to something larger, inspired by the New Mexican desert landscape.

Figure 5. *Pelvis IV*, 1944, oil on board, 36 x 40 inches, private collection.
Figure 6. *Pelvis Series—Red with Yellow*, 1945, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches, Geogia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe.

Several of the paintings in O'Keeffe's pelvis series feature the bleached white of the pelvis bone interrupted by a dominant, central, and egg-shaped patch of sharp blue. "The form of the pelvis, severe and stark, is at once abstract and realistic" (p. 460). In at least one painting, *Pelvis IV* (Figure 5), within the egg shape is the faint circle of a nearly full moon. The egg shape and the moon, or *Luna* figure, are symbols often found in alchemical literature and illustrations. For alchemists, the egg was associated with the *prima materia*, *Mercurius* (a mythological personification of the spirit in matter), the alchemical vessel itself, and the *anima mundi* or world soul (Jung, 1943/1967a, p. 218). The egg symbolically represented the result of the alchemists' material operations and at the same time the alchemical container (Jung, 1938/1967b, p. 87). Thus, the egg (like the figure of *Mercurius*) can paradoxically represent the transformative process, the material being transformed, and the resulting unity that emerges (Jung, 1944/1968b, p. 217). Moreover, it implies the presence of the earth mother or feminine divine as it holds the seeds of all life.

The alchemical figures of *Luna* (moon) and her counterpart *Sol* (sun) symbolically and historically represent feminine and masculine principles of consciousness—a pair of opposites. Sol, as the masculine principle, is seemingly all light, like the sun, seeking to

illuminate, see, and differentiate everything. It corresponds with the ego or light of consciousness and inherently calls forth the shadow: "light without and darkness within" (Jung, 1955–56/1970, p. 108). Luna as the feminine principle is the milder, damp, relating, cooler light of the moon, therefore naturally associated with darkness and the unconscious. Together and separately they also represent aspects of *Mercurius*. In Jungian terms the *Luna*/*Sol* pairing symbolizes the unification of psyche once a relationship is established between consciousness and the unconscious. The moon is also indicative of the water of life, the alchemical *aqua permanens* as the divine and miraculous water that prompts and promotes the dynamic of transformation (p. 99). "From Luna comes the *aqua Mercurialis* or *aqua permanens*; with her moisture, like Mercurius, she brings the slain dragon to life" (p. 140), which symbolizes the essence of alchemy's death and rebirth cycle.

When viewed in light of these alchemical principles, *Pelvis IV* suggests an unconscious representation of a *sublimatio* leading to a *unio mentalis coniunctio*—an initial spiritual union. Such a union represents a psychological standpoint occurring after the soul (consciousness) and spirit (the unconscious), having differentiated themselves from the body and instincts, come back into relationship with the physical world. Whereas spirit animates the soul, the soul animates and is called to the body. After spirit and soul are united, the arduous task of bringing the spirit-soul connection back into relationship with the body begins. Insights gained from the *unio mentalis*—in other words, the realized spirit/soul connection—must be made real in the embodied expression of everyday life. This event is the rebirth of an enlarged consciousness after the *mortificatio*, a "reanimation . . . reuniting the soul with the 'inanimate' body" (Jung, 1955–56/1970, p. 521). What emerges is a new conscious understanding of the connection between psyche and one's physical reality—the world of the body. More specifically, in Jungian terms this alchemical *coniunctio* represents the integration of unconscious elements into consciousness. It conjures an awareness of how the spirit of the unconscious moving through the organ of psyche seeks the goal of reuniting with the physical aspects of the *unus mundus*.

In 1945, the year before Stieglitz died, O'Keeffe painted the significant *Pelvis Series—Red with Yellow* (Figure 6). This painting was different from all the other pelvis pieces in that she painted the sinuous bone in scarlet-red paint, and the central egg-shaped patch that usually represented a blue sky in yellow or gold. In effect, the image looks like a sun-colored egg (or possibly a sun in the shape of an egg) surrounded by a reddened abstract contouring object seen at close range. Alchemically speaking, we appear to be looking at a symbolic expression of the *rubedo*—the reddening and often third phase of an *opus*—in conjunction with the resulting gold or *lapis philosophorum* (philosophers' stone). For the alchemists, the *lapis* paradoxically stood for both the *prima materia* and the end result of their work. Through their art, they sought the perfection of nature and the divine, what they believed was the latent or "hidden state" of the *lapis* (Jung, 1944/1968b, pp. 325–327).

In addition to the above qualities, we can also view *Pelvis Series—Red with Yellow* as reflecting the final alchemical stage of the *coniunctio*. Alchemists referred to this as "the union of the whole [person] with the *unus mundus* [one world]" (Jung, 1955–56/1970, p. 534). Put another way, the *coniunctio* symbolized the embodied knowledge and expression of how one's existence is simultaneously finite and infinite. It is a mystical union with "the Unknown beyond our experience," not as a *participation mystique* or a return to the primal fusion with nature, but rather as an awareness of being at once differentiated from yet

intrinsically a part of all things (p. 537). In Jungian psychological terms, it is the potential for "a synthesis of the conscious with the unconscious" (p. 539), the emergence of a new integrative and overriding perspective

After Stieglitz died in 1946, O'Keeffe spent three years settling his estate and in 1949 moved full-time to her final home in northern New Mexico. If an affinity for that desert landscape had evoked an alchemical transformative process for O'Keeffe, as I have argued, then perhaps in 1945 the approaching realization of Stieglitz's death, and with it her final separation from the life he had represented in New York, found a culminating and transformative expression in *Pelvis Series—Red with Yellow*.

Conclusion

When she was in her late eighties Georgia O'Keeffe wrote, "I find . . . I have painted my life—things happening in my life—without knowing" (Peters, 1999, p. 193). Although she refused to make a connection between her life and the images she painted at the time they were created, in retrospect it was apparent even to her that the paintings were autobiographical on some level. When introduced to northern New Mexico, O'Keeffe became fascinated by the objects she found in the desert. Soon after, she began collecting and painting the sun-bleached bones that were, for her, symbols of that landscape. In the January 18, 1936 issue of *The New Yorker*, art critic Lewis Mumford wrote about the first showing of her early bone paintings:

> Mid the throng of good shows that have opened the new year, that of Georgia O'Keeffe at An American Place stands out . . . every painting is a chapter in her autobiography, and yet the revelation is so cunningly made that it probably eludes her own conscious appraisal. As soon as one realizes that she is neither a botanist who looks at flowers through a magnifying glass nor a comparative anatomist who collects the skulls of the North American desert fauna, one is brought face to face with the real problem. What has she lived through? And what do these turkey feathers and bare hills and bleached bones convey in terms of one's own experience? (Castro, 1985, pp. 114–115)

As if to answer Mumford's questions herself, O'Keeffe's bone paintings evolved over a 15-year span, as did her ways of being and living.

In this paper I proposed that one way to view O'Keeffe's enigmatic bone paintings are as unique alchemical expressions evoking universal patterns of transformative psychological development. Although O'Keeffe and Jung were contemporaries, their lives having overlapped by 74 years[3], there is no historical evidence to suggest that they ever met[4], or that O'Keeffe had any interest in alchemy. However, by applying Jung's view of alchemy as a perspective, it seems apparent that O'Keeffe's unconscious was transformatively engaged with her art-making. Similar to Jung's assessment of alchemists' work, I charted how O'Keeffe's bone paintings evolved in apparent collaboration with unconscious projections of her psychological state. Moreover, if we take seriously Jung's theories concerning the teleological and autonomous nature of the unconscious, then the paintings not only marked but in turn promoted her individuation. Effectively, the artist's lifelong practice of engaging with the world around her through art-making helped facilitate a choice to live authentically—outwardly in communion with her inner nature.

Overall, this paper presented the idea that O'Keeffe's bone paintings demonstrate how artists, like alchemists, can "accomplish in [their] own self the same process" they "attribute to" their work (Jung, 1944/1968b, p. 267).

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Notes

[1] Norman was 41 years younger than Stieglitz and 18 years younger than O'Keeffe.
[2] The Pedernal is also where O'Keeffe's ashes were scattered after she died.
[3] Jung, born July 26, 1875, and died June 6, 1961. O'Keeffe, born November 15, 1887, and died March 6, 1986.
[4] Jung visited northern New Mexico and the Taos Pueblo in 1925, four years before O'Keeffe.

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