

An Alchemical Take on the Film *Black Swan*
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“The factors which come together in the coniunctio are conceived as opposites, either confronting one another in enmity or attracting one another in love” (Edinger, 1995, p. 22)

Leda And The Swan

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
 How can those terrified vague fingers push
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
 A shudder in the loins engenders there
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
 And Agamemnon dead.
 Being so caught up,
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (Butler Yeats, 1923)

For millennia, the practice of alchemy has provided knowledge of visible creation, nature, and God, as well as insight into the soul and psyche of humanity (Linden, 2003). Three ancient civilizations all lay claim to the origins of alchemy: Egypt, with the ancient beginnings of metallurgy, goldsmithing, dyeing, and glassmaking along with the original personage of Hermes Trismegistus who is credited with writing *The Emerald Tablet*; China, with its Taoist-inspired beliefs including the quest for immortality, chemical processes for making artificial gold, and the unceasing search for elixirs and cures; and India, with the long-enduring tradition of tantric alchemy resulting in the goal to perfect spiritual, body, and metallic aspects. In later centuries, the Greeks added theory and astrological influences to the practice (Linden, 2003).

Western alchemy emerged in the fourth-through-seventh centuries by transforming the God-image into a fiery all-encompassing divine unity that replaced the polytheistic pantheon of the gods and goddesses, rendering them mere symbols of that unified force (von Franz, 1988). As

the perception of separation increased, base matter, including the planets, certain metals like gold, silver, copper, and lead, and even the body organs and its emotions, came to be represented by the various deities and imbued with certain assigned traits. The idea that God had fallen from the divine cosmos into physical matter and lost his sacredness required a process in which he could become divine again, undergoing the work of being washed, purified, and raised up in to ever more liberating stages of divinity and perfection.

The goal of alchemy then, was to bring light to darkness, whether by turning lead into gold or shining the light of consciousness into the human mind. For the author of the *Splendor Solis*, a centuries-old alchemical text, the study of alchemy was a healing practice that led to the transformation of the soul (Henderson & Sherwood, 2003). C.G. Jung likened it to his theory of individuation, a circular and continuous effort requiring each individual to come into relationship with parts of ourselves that have become repressed, numbed, split-off, or disowned (Sharp, 1991).

In the recent film *Black Swan* (Aronofsky, 2010) we see a compelling example of the alchemical process in a contemporary setting. Nina Sayers (played by Natalie Portman) is a struggling dancer who has been passed over a number of times for a lead role in her ballet company. The film opens with a dream sequence in which Nina, in the lead role of the Swan Queen in Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake," dances beautifully while interacting with a demonic counterpart. Nina awakens abruptly to the reality of her overwhelming desire to be chosen for the lead role of Swan Queen in the upcoming production her company is about to undertake.

The ballet begins when Prince Siegfried, ordered to choose a bride before his 21st birthday, happens on a lake while hunting where he encounters a beautiful white swan with a crown on her head. The swan transforms into a stunning young woman, revealing that an evil sorcerer has cursed her. The Swan Queen must remain a swan under the spell until a man who is pure of heart confesses his love for her. Though the prince is about to do just that, he is interrupted by his

mentor who happens to be the sorcerer himself. Later, the sorcerer passes off his own daughter in the guise of the enchanting Swan Queen, and once the prince has professed his love, insists the prince must marry his daughter even after the prince realizes the deceit. However, back at the lake, the prince insists he would rather die with the Swan Queen than live and marry the sorcerer's daughter. Together the two would-be lovers jump into the lake to their deaths (West, 2006).

The symbolism of the swan in alchemy is significant, appearing at least as far back as ancient Greece. In alchemy, birds represent the ability to mediate between heaven and earth. They are the dynamic capacity of the soul that undergoes transformation, flying free of corporal and sensual restraints but returning again and again in the alchemical process of distillation and new growth (McLean, 1979). Certainly the swan is one of the ultimate symbols of transformation as anyone who knows the fairy tale of the “ugly duckling” can attest.

In alchemy, there are four core progressive stages that make up the transformation of the *prima materia*, the base beginning substance, into gold. These stages associated with color date to the earliest beginnings of the field (Henderson & Sherwood, 2003). Various birds symbolically correlate with the progressive stages of the alchemical process. The blackness of *nigredo*, the initial phase, manifests as a dark existence that encompasses dread, depression, and destruction and is often imaged as a death process (McLean, 2010). In the alchemical blackness, the distinguishing characteristics of the material being worked are minimal, perhaps a result of a fusion of the metals lead, tin, copper and iron. In the alchemist's lab, this black alloy could be heated with silver and then mercury or tin in order to effect a whitening, the antithesis to counteract the blackened state. The white swan signified the stage of *albedo*, the whitening which involved purification and illumination. Albedo gives way to a yellowing termed *citrinatis* when sulfur or gold is introduced. The ultimate stage, the fourth and final step, with the addition of mercury and sulfur or cinnabar, transitions to blood red that is called *rubedo* (Henderson &

Sherwood, 2003).

This progression of black, white, and red in particular is significant in *Black Swan*. As the film begins, Nina finds herself in her initial encounter with inner work in the nigredo stage. Presumably in her twenties, yet still sleeping in her girlhood bed with pink quilts and a chorus of giant stuffed toys suffocating the room, Nina has never deflected the ministrations of her narcissistic and neurotic mother Erica (played by Barbara Hershey) who gave up her own questionable future career as a ballerina in a dance corps in order to give birth to Nina. Erica's only reason for existing, it appears, is to live her unlived life through her daughter, and she has ensured that she is her daughter's closest and only friend even while Nina exists in a constant low-level state of depression and despair, mottled by neurotic behaviors and thoughts.

Exemplary of the nigredo state, Nina is also undergoing *putrifactio*, a transitory and symbolic rotting process as she reveals a nasty lesion on her shoulder where her skin seems to be decomposing in a mass of bloody, rotting flesh. Meanwhile, Nina has bought into her mother's manipulations and has dedicated her whole life to dance. She is desperate for perfection and to land the lead role in "Swan Lake." Thomas (played by Vincent Cassel), the aggressive, demanding company director, is hesitant to put his faith in Nina because the lead must dance both the White Swan and the Black one. Though he admits Nina can dance the role of White Swan to perfection, he finds her too emotionally guarded and controlled to access the eroticism and charisma required to effectively portray the elegant and beguiling Black Swan. However, when Thomas goads Nina into an emotional response by abruptly trying to kiss her, Nina defensively bites him, surprising him and intriguing him enough to hand her the role.

C.G. Jung observed that opposites tend to show up in pairs or in a *quaternity*, particularly in alchemy (Edinger, 1995). While Nina initially appears rather immature and uninitiated, though not the untouched white of pure unworked innocence, there is a whiteness to Nina's persona that

allows her to dance the part of the White Swan to near-perfection. She has seen little of the world, been exposed to too few of the alchemical processes and agents which would blacken her and give her the patina she needs to differentiate. However, this whitened state is where Nina is challenged is in the role of the Black Swan. Ironically, though Nina shows up as archetypally “white” in her day-to-day self, she is unconsciously leading her life in a dramatic *blackened* alchemical state of nigredo, and what is needed to play the *Black Swan* is the *whitening* process of albedo, thereby creating the perfect paradoxical quaternity.

One alchemically-inspired image by turn-of-the-twentieth-century Swedish painter Hilma af Klint depicts two swans, a white and a black, intertwined in a powerful visual representation of the two-in-opposition (Henderson & Sherwood, 2003). The way the two swans double back on each other suggests a moving back and forth between the stages of nigredo and albedo in a constant process of distillation and change. One of the original plates from the alchemical text, *Splendor Solis*, depicts three birds, black, white, and red, entangled at the bottom of a vessel. The black bird is on its back in a supine position, claws up, even as it is overpowered by the white and red birds that are working together against it. This plate is highly symbolic of Nina’s plight as the movie advances. Once Nina is awarded the role and begins striving toward the Black Swan, the process of albedo--the purification of consciousness and moving toward the light with its promise of the redness of rubedo--is introduced, but she is continually pulled back into darkness and despair.

Just as she is pulled between trying to dance the role of both the White Swan and the Black Swan, she is also caught up in a mad dance between the nigredo and the albedo. The more she personifies the White Swan, the more she appears to be stuck in blackness of nigredo, flat on her back in a defensive mode, unable to break open, progress, and move out of her neurotic thoughts, fixations, and depression. However, the more she drives herself while rehearsing to portray the

Black Swan, the more she moves into the albedo stage. But like a ballerina's pas-de-deux (step of two), she moves back and forth between the two in a mad and chaotic dance.

Being caught up in the drama of the opposites requires a dynamic move, being repelled by one and attracted to the other or vice versa. However, Edward Edinger (1995) points out that awareness can staunch the unconscious ping-pong effect and allow the desperate tug-of-war to abate. The more conscious we become of the opposites and their effect on us, the closer we come to *coniunctio*, the unification of opposing forces. Jung asserted that individuation requires every ego to eventually confront the split off or rejected parts of itself. Repeatedly in the film, Nina glimpses dark aspects of herself as she rides the subway, and she alternately pursues the shadowy figure or flees her dreamlike doppelganger in fear. Facing these aspects that seem so foreign and "otherly," holding the tension between the known and the unknown as frightening as it may be, is the only way to allow something new to emerge. In Nina's case, as she glimpses the dark side of herself more and more frequently, her ability to contain the opposites appears increasingly fragile.

Nina has been asked to "lose herself" to play the Black Swan, and progressively, she does. Alone at night, stifled by the hideous stuffed caricatures—including a giant pink rabbit ostentatiously guarding her window and the only potential route of escape—something deep within Nina's unconscious is stirring, willing itself to transform. In the deep nigredo state she is already in, the prima materia engulfed in darkness is beckoned by the whitening of albedo. However, Nina's resistance and unreadiness to transform in the face of the increasing tension leads her down a dangerous path. Gradually Nina begins to perceive the extent to which she is trapped and becomes proportionately aggressive as her mother's manipulations gradually fail to support the force that is burgeoning and threatening to break forth inside the young woman. While Thomas broods over his decision to cast her in the lead and sends confusing signals through his coaching and his sexual advances, Nina spirals into ever-deeper distress over her need for

perfection and her seeming inability to shed her need for control and her “good girl” image to come into contact with her artistic and sexual persona, the dramatic and passionate femininity of her anima. Her nightmares erupt into “daymares” as waking visions and hallucinations emerge more strongly.

James Hillman (1980) describes albedo as a silvering process, a required stage that must precede the gold. Silvering is related to the moon, *luna*, and therefore to lunacy and thus alchemy is critical in psychopathology. Insanity is a *necessity* for soul-making. Red comes from the white, the sun from the moon, therefore brighter awareness—or illumination—from lunacy. In the silvering of the albedo stage, purification takes place, a distillation of the materia being worked, morphing it into something essential and durable. The silvering process of albedo is what will evolve Nina from the frozen little girl persona she wears and light her on fire, connecting her with her womanhood and her profound sexuality. Only once she has fully known the silvery moon can she then be joined with the brilliance of the sun in the ultimate coniunctio that will allow her true whole self to emerge. There is no coincidence in the fact that the role Nina longs to dance—and the one she is ultimately rewarded—is that of the queen. In alchemy, the white queen is a significant figure who engages with the red king in a sacred marriage of opposites that leads to rebirth. If only Nina can embrace her dark shadowy self, the split off and unaccepted parts of herself, and truly move into the silver white fullness of albedo alchemically represented by the symbol of the queen, she will be in a position of readiness to alchemically unite with the other side of her personality.

Just as events in life shift us back and forth, the alchemical process is not linear either. The various stages may also alternate back forth. Sometimes it seems as if multiple stages descend all at once, working their magic on the prima materia that presents itself in readiness for transformation, an ongoing series of *solutio* or dissolving, then *coagulatio*—a coming together—

over and over as the prima materia is continually worked and distilled.

Indeed, the lines between reality and fantasy begin to blur in the silver of the mirrors that constantly surround Nina as she rehearses for the Black Swan. In the *Splendor Solis*, the plate which follows the three birds entangled reveals a single white bird with three heads, representing conflicting forces, the paralysis of confusion, and the fear of madness (Henderson & Sherwood, 2003). This internal conflict results from facing the shadow side of life and, with it, the reality of death. It is notable that the vessel in the image has become quite black. In the alchemical process, blackness must be turned on its head, inundated by the processes of albedo and rubedo in order for the alchemical magic to succeed. If Nina's emerging-conflicting-regressing-emerging whiteness of albedo can be contained by the blackness, she will be safely transformed—but if the container ruptures, trouble seeps in.

Through her incessant thinking and analyzing and her insistent striving for perfection, Nina becomes too airy to hold the images being offered to her and they pass through her without having the effect that is sought. She cannot hold them, and they cannot do their work. She becomes increasingly tormented by the visions and hallucinations she sees, but there is nothing there for them to grasp, the silvering is not focused. Silver, according to Hillman (1980) can stir up the sulfur of quicksilver. Thus lunacy can quicken and animate Mercury, the ultimate agent of change.

In alchemy, the figure of Mercurius presides over the alchemical opus, serving as the uniting force that allows the tension of opposites to give way to a transcendent stage. Mercury, or quicksilver, is the only liquid metal found in nature, an agent of transformation that bonds with silver or gold to form a soft amalgam (ibn Umail, 2009). Mercurius is known as a pointer of the way and a revealer of divine secrets and a collective projection of the individuation process (Jung, 1967). He is associated with water, the moon, and Venus, and described as a hermaphrodite, many-sided, deceitful, a transmutable silvery substance and a light bringer. Ultimately, Mercury

represents the divine mystery (Jung, 1967).

Things really become constellated for Nina when newcomer, Lily (played by Mila Kunis), shows up. Nina immediately feels a fascination for this open, charismatic dancer who seems to have no rules, a character that embodies the changeable mystery of Mercurius. Nina first interacts with Lily one-on-one when Lily shows up in the studio as Nina reaches a new low. Devastated by her inability to please Thomas with either her dancing or her response to his coaching, Nina has abandoned herself to tears, her make-up streaked as she huddles in a corner of the empty studio. Though the encounter between Nina and Lily is short-lived, it is the catalyst that initiates a transformation where Nina begins to let go, crossing boundaries where she has not been before.

As the agent of change, Lily is easy target of all Nina's projections. She is the one who takes on the face of the shadowy and disturbing "other" that Nina must confront from the depths of the nigredo. And true to mercurial aspect, Lily ultimately exhibits opposing sides, alternating between being sweet and supportive, then competitive and undermining. The images that begin to emerge for Nina once under the Lily's spell are dark, shadowy, demonic, erotic, and destructive, all the parts of Nina's own persona that have lay unconscious throughout her life. But once the flood has been unleashed, it is clear there will be no stopping it until the alchemical work is done. Reality and fantasy increasingly merge and Nina finds more and more difficulty in trying to sort out what is real and what is not.

That the catalyzing mercurial element would be named "Lily" is significant. In later depictions of the vision of ibn Umail (2009), the *Aurora Consurgens* (House of Wisdom) is topped by a golden lily, symbolic of the goal of the alchemical work. The lily, which lies dormant in winter, may be compared to a lifeless stone whose latent life force can be extracted through alchemical work. In alchemy, the philosopher's stone, the ultimate stage of the work, represents transcendence and utter transformation. The lily, the representational unfolding of the stone, points

to the *quinta essentia* of the individual, the fifth thing that surpasses the sum of the four elements. It sits atop the sanctuary as an all-uniting symbol. In fact, ibn Umail referred to flowers in alchemy as “daughters of fire,” symbols of the female spirit and of transformation of a “fiery possessive passion with the help of the symbolic insights that come from the water of the female spirit of the unconscious, the result being a contained life-and-meaning-giving divine energy” (p. 174).

Flowers, he wrote, emerged in the thirsty white earth at the time the reddening began to take place.

Hillman (1980) pointed out that “the power of gold remains charlatan, a red without white, blood without mind...truth without fineness” (p. 29). Indeed, until she engages with Lily, it seems that Nina is stalled in the silvering process, unable to achieve the distillation she needs to move her fully into and through the albedo stage so she can emerge on the other side. When one is too cool, too detached, it is possible to be seized by the innate sulfur of an image as if from the outside. There is a danger that potential of the silvery image, the fantasy, the mirrored reflection can be burned up by the sulfur blackened by sudden scorching of passion rather than the genuine love from within. Indeed, Nina continually rejects Lily’s overtures at friendship, turning a cold shoulder and a cool persona, until the night that Nina constrictive hold explodes.

In the meantime, the more Nina struggles for normality, the more her confusion becomes intolerable. The things that used to make sense no longer do. Marie-Louise von Franz (as cited in Henderson & Sherwood, 2003) commented that “the great effort and trouble continues from the nigredo to the albedo; that is said to be the hard part and afterwards everything becomes easier” (p. 167). She offers the example of washing cloth and laying it out in the sun, an ongoing process of solutio and *solificatio* (exposure to the sun) that must be done over and over again, reflecting the alchemical individuation process in which our complexes arise time as time again as well requiring us to do the hard work on them in order that they be transformed. The metaphor of washing the cloth also includes the concepts of distillation and sublimation. Each time the material

is inundated and laid out to dry, the water evaporates into air, then is deluged again when the dew returns at night. In alchemy, water is symbolic of a return to the primal source, to renewal and rebirth.

In the image of the white bird with three heads, though each looks a different direction indicating the confusion, the three can lead to four. They appear to be expecting something more, looking for it in fact. A fourth element here would lead to wholeness. In alchemy, the number three refers to feminine receptivity for something “above” to come through and unite, thus it is a powerful threshold for breakthrough. Additionally, in this image, each of the white bird heads wears a crown—just like the Swan Queen in the original ballet—signifying that in spite of what may seem like a curse, the process itself is still a “kingly art” (Henderson & Sherwood, 2003).

What becomes clear to Nina, finally, is that her relationship with her mother is not sustainable. As Nina begins to break through the boundaries that have kept her engulfed in her White Swan ways, her relationship with her neurotic mother must also transform. Nina purposely takes steps to make changes by defying her mother, tossing out the stuffed animals, and barring the door to her room. She begins to see the value of opening to womanhood, of getting in touch with her seductive side, of laying the “good little girl” who has tried so hard to please to rest—though knowing it and doing it are not quite in sync.

An alchemically-related parable recounted by Friedrich Nietzsche explains, “Of three metamorphoses of the spirit I tell you: how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child” (Kaufmann, 1976, p. 137). The camel signifies the act of going out into the desert to suffer for transformation and might be correlated with undergoing the transformation of the nigredo. The lion, however, represents the right to new views, the embracing of the ability to renounce, the opening of the way to freedom with an aggressive and sacred “no.” One of the manifestations of Mercurius is the lion (Jung, 1967). For Nina to break through the bounds of

what was once sacred, of the “thou shalt” of her mother who endlessly manipulates and commands her, the spirit of the lion is required for her to make prey of the freedom her soul so desperately seeks. But the lion must then give over again to innocence and forgetting, “a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes’,” insists Kaufmann. The sacred “Yes” is needed so that the individual who was lost to the world can conquer the world.

Another way to conceive of Nina’s journey is through the lens of the elements. In alchemy, the progression from earth to water to air to fire is ancient. When Nina is first introduced to us, she is on the verge of plunging headlong into the grips of the earth element. Earth is pure emotion, and while Nina has clearly kept a cap on her unconscious rage and longing for some time, she becomes impossible to put off once she has her eye on the role of the Swan Queen. Though seemingly meek when she initially approaches Thomas about the role, her instinctive and emotional response to his provocation by biting him on the lip when he tries to kiss her places her squarely in the realm of earth. From there on, she is unstoppable, blind with desire to dance the lead, and, once it is announced that she has been awarded the role, she is consumed with doing it to perfection. While Thomas continues to goad her in an attempt to forcibly break her out of her tension and frigidity, Nina becomes increasingly blinded by her frustration at being unable to please. Devastated after an encounter with Thomas in which he inappropriately tries to tease her into sexual responsiveness, she breaks down in sobs. Here, she has truly reached bottom, appearing as the black toad at the bottom-most part of the vessel.

Later, as Nina submits to Lily’s mercurial influence and escapes from Erica’s motherly grasp, Nina succumbs to the temptation of the proffered alcohol, ecstasy, and sex as the evening ends in a final climactic scene where Nina bars her bedroom door against her mother and engages in a passionate sexual encounter with Lily. Nina awakens the next morning to find she has overslept and rushes to rehearsal only to discover she has been replaced by Lily who denies that

the encounter ever happened. Nina, her brain racing with the implications, is infuriated, marking the beginning of an intensified descent into madness. Once inflamed by the hot sulfuric urge, Hillman (1980) points out, the reflective silver aspect is darkened by flame, and the silver, gummed up and coagulated by the phlegm of its own mental activity, grows fetid and ultimately poisons.

Somehow, even as her life threatens to come crashing down in impending symbolic death, Nina must find a way to integrate the multiple and contradictory aspects of new life that are attempting to push through. The fire that finally ignites Nina's journey and transforms her comes as a surprise. Locked in her room by her mother who attempts to control and punish her for the imminent transformation, Nina physically fights her way out and arrives at the opening just in time to take back her role from her stand-in, Lily. As Nina prepares for her debut as the Swan Queen, knowing her career depends on it, and yet dangerously fragile after days and an intense night haunted by visions, chaos, and confusion, she finally comes into direct confrontation with her disturbing "other." Returning to her dressing room between acts after a rough start while dancing the opening segment as the White Swan, Nina knows the hardest part lies ahead. In spite of dancing herself to delirium in rehearsal, she has never yet managed to dance the Black Swan to perfection and still has no conscious idea of how it could happen this night. As the tension between the white and the black intensifies, the death that has been threatening must finally occur.

On arriving at her table, she finds the essence of the "other" in the form of Lily, her now arch-enemy and biggest competitor, whose coldly opportunistic ways have triggered all of Nina's aggressive defenses. Now, in front of the illuminated mirror, Lily is making preparations to replace Nina as the Black Swan. Nina's intense emotions finally boil over and she viciously tackles Lily, screaming her rage at the perceived attempt to usurp her fame and success at the very moment Nina feels she has finally deserved it. The pair crashes into the full-length mirror,

shattering it as the two opposites struggle. Before she can think twice about it, Nina plunges a shard of the mirror into Lily's abdomen, dropping her to the ground in a pool of blood. The blood streams red on the white tile floor as, in a panic, Nina drags the body to hide it in the closet before going out to dance the next act as the Black Swan. Nina has finally concretized her shadowy projection onto the other, and because she cannot integrate it, she finds she has to murder it instead.

Here, it seems Nina exists in a bizarre limbo state between exhilaration and pain. Something has broken loose in her in the act of killing her enemy, and she seems more compelled than ever to go take her place on the stage. Meanwhile, the physical symptoms that have been straining near the surface break through into bizarre and fitting physical manifestations of the very transformation that Nina is undergoing. In the ultimate metamorphoses into the Black Swan, Nina develops webbed feet as her legs buckle and become birdlike. Black feathers sprout through the patches of skin she has been scratching at for weeks, and, once on stage, stunning black wings erupt along her arms, making her transformation complete. She has finally attained the Black Swan and, as such, gives a performance of a lifetime. She has broken through.

In his commentary on *Corpus Alchemicum Arabicum*, Theodor Abt notes that wool, fur, or *feathers* grow out of the first body that is remains as sediment at the bottom of the vessel in the midst of transformation (ibn Umail, 2009). In this case, the fire appears to have completely incinerated Nina, creating a calcinatio that has transformed her at a cellular level. She is no longer—and will never be again—the same Nina she was before. The White Swan is no longer white, and with that, Nina is no longer in the blackened state of nigredo she has suffered so hard to emerge from. She has moved fully into the lunar albedo, and with it, the promise of rubedo and the rising sun on the horizon. She dances the part of the Black Swan in ecstasy and with great power, blowing away every expectation. Nina knows she has finally become. At the end of the scene, she

plants a passionate kiss on Thomas, then sweeps away to change costume again for the final act.

Back in her dressing room, she knows she must face the reality of Lily's dead body and the pool of blood where she lay. Throughout the film, many of the images have centered around blood as Nina continually scratches, peels, and picks at her own skin, perhaps attempting to get at whatever is inside, or to open a portal for it to break through at any cost. In alchemy, blood is related to cinnamon and saffron, which symbolically adds spice to life just as fire lights up the night. It is the color of the pharaonic sun in ancient Egypt which symbolizes new life (ibn Umail, 2009). Blood represents the *rubedo*, the final stage of liberation in which the philosopher's stone can be attained, carrying both the fiery soul *and* the divine water. The fire is "hidden inside the blood" (p. 173), ibn Umail insists, and is an element linked to humanness, aliveness, quickening, drivenness, excitement, and passions.

However, in the midst of it all, as Nina contemplates the final act—of dealing with Lily's body and the consequences of the transformation that has been wrought—there is a knock at her door. To Nina's shock and amazement, Lily stands before her, animated and unhurt, ever mercurial, complimenting Nina on her performance as the Black Swan. Nina goes to dance the White Swan once again, carrying the unconscious knowledge that, unable to succumb to symbolic death and give up the aspect of herself that demands perfection at the expense of the unworked and unintegrated parts, death has, instead, been concretized, literalized in the physical form. The alchemical process has done its work, but the container was unable to hold.

After the final scripted jump in which the Swan Queen dies at the behest of her lover, Nina herself expires in a wave of red blood that spreads over her pure white tutu. The self-inflicted wound from the shard of mirror to her abdomen has done its work of lunacy, purifying the pathological madness that gripped the prima materia and would not let go, fixating the mercurial spirit and resulting in red blood of *rubedo*—only Nina is no longer able to experience it. Like the

lion from Nietzsche's tale, Nina has grasped what she wants, but she has gone too far. In one alchemical image, two lions with one head and one mouth out of which the water of life flows signify the unified nature that has been attained (Gillabel, 2003). But what of the child that must emerge from the lion? By killing the lion, by drowning in the silvery moon, Nina has paralyzed the process, ending it with literal death.

The Silver Swan who, living, had no note,
 When death approached, unlocked her silent throat.
 Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,
 Thus sung her first and last, and sung no more:
 "Farewell, all joys! O death, come close mine eyes;
 More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise. (Gibbons, 1612)

Biography: Bonnie Bright

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