

selected writings by

JAMES
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author of *The Soul's Code*

A Blue Fire



*Introduced and edited by Thomas Moore,
author of Care of the Soul*

"James Hillman is the most lively and original psychologist we have
had in America since William James. I honor him, and read
something in his work almost every day."

—ROBERT BLY

what in the world is going on in the psyche that this delusional system can so take hold? I think one has fallen to the archetype of spirit.

("On Soul and Spirit," 10)

ALCHEMICAL SOLUTIONS

Salt is the mineral substance or objective ground of personal experience making experience possible. No salt, no experiencing—merely a running on and running through of events without psychic body. Thus salt makes events sensed and felt, giving us each a sense of the personal—my tears, my sweat and blood, my taste and value. The entire alchemical opus hangs on the ability to experience subjectively. Hence it is said in *The Golden Tract*: "He who works without salt will never raise dead bodies." The matters are only macrocosmic and chemical, out there, dead unless one works with salt. These intensely personal experiences which give taste and flavor to events are nonetheless common to all—both mine and yet common as blood, as urine, as salt. In other words, salt acts like the ground of subjectivity ("That which is left at the bottom of our distilling vessel is our salt—that is to say our earth."). It makes possible what psychology calls felt experience. So, we must turn to this same ground to mine our salt.

Felt experience takes on a radically altered meaning in the light of alchemical salt. We may imagine our deep hurts not merely as wounds to be healed but as salt mines from which we gain a precious essence and without which the soul cannot live. The fact that we return to these deep hurts, in remorse and regret, in repentance and atonement, indicates a psychic need beyond a mere mechanical repetition and compulsion. Instead, the soul has a drive to remember; it is like an animal that returns to its salt licks; the soul licks at its own wounds to derive sustenance therefrom. We make salt in our suffering and, by working through our sufferings, we gain salt, healing the soul of its salt-deficiency. . . .

Salt requires a pinch, feeling the pinch of the event that stings; and seems to require time, waiting it through. What results from the

salt cure is a new sense of what happened, a new appreciation of its virtue for soul. . . .

Salt may also be mined from whatever is stable. As the principle of stability whose alchemical sign was a square, salt can be mined from the rocks of concrete experience, those fixities which mark our lives with defined positions. These places are not merely solid facts—my degree, my property, my car accident, my war record, my divorce; these are also places where psychic body is salted away and stored. These rocks, when recognized and owned, belong to the history of my soul, where it has been salted down by the fixities of experience, giving a certain crystallization to my nature and keeping me from inflammations and volatilizations. . . .

Though we do not make it by fire, we do make salt by means of dissolutions. Salt is soluble. Weeping, bleeding, sweating, urinating bring salt out of its interior underground mines. It appears in our moistures, which are the flow of salt to the surface. "During the work the salt assumes the appearance of blood" (*CW* 14, §337). Moments of dissolution are not mere collapses; they release a sense of personal human value from the encrustations of habit. "I too am a human being worth my salt"—hence my blood, sweat, and tears. . . .

Viewed from the perspective of salt, early traumas are moments of initiation into the sense of being a *me* with a subjective personal interior. We tend to fixate on *what* was done to us and *who* did it: resentment, revenge. But what psychologically matters is *that* it was done: the blow, the blood, the betrayal. Like the ashes which are rubbed into the wounds at initiation rites to purify and scarify, the soul is marked by its trauma. Salt still is touched to the body in Christian Baptism, and eaten still at Jewish Pessach in ritual remembrance of trauma. A trauma is a salt mine; it is a fixed place for reflection about the nature and value of my personal being, where memory originates and personal history begins. These traumatic events initiate in the soul a sense of its embodiment as a vulnerable experiencing subject.

The paradigmatic story of "looking back" is that of Lot's wife. (Lot and Lot's wife were even used as alchemical terms for salt—*Johnson's Dictionary*.) Because Lot's wife could not refrain from looking back at the destruction of Sodom from which they had been saved, she was turned to a pillar of salt. Jewish commentators on the tale say that her mother-love made her look behind to see whether her married daughters were following; and Christian comments on

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The danger here is always fixation, whether in recollection, childhood trauma, or in a literalized and personalized notion of experience itself: “I am what I have experienced.” Paracelsus defined salt as the principle of fixation (II:366). (“Salt,” 117–120)

The coolness of the image, whether of the moon or of the underworld, and the cool detachment by which we see through to the image, can become seized, as if from without, by the *calor inclusus* or innate heat of love lurking within it. So there will be within each moment of silver—creative fantasy, mental thought, mirrored reflection—a propensity to burn with sulfur. Perhaps the less activated this innate heat of love within imagining (i.e., the less manifest the copper or the more humid and viscous the sulfur), the more the silver of the psyche is subject to sudden scorching of its outer skin, by which I understand the exteriorizing and literalizing of the innate sulfur into desires which no longer can see themselves as images (the blackening of the silver). Hence the importance of recognizing, as we are trying to do in this chapter, all that silver implies. We would activate it so that it not blacken, our images not be burned by their innate vitality. (“Silver (I),” 28)

Alchemical psychology remarkably condenses the two traits of the lion heart—the conformity of its thought and its objectification—into the alchemical substance, sulfur, the principle of “com-

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bustibility," the *magna flamma*. "Where is the sulfur to be found?" asks Kramer, a fourteenth-century English Benedictine. "In all substances, all things in the world—metals, herbs, trees, animals, stones, are its ore."

Everything that suddenly lights up, draws our joy, flares with beauty—each bush a god burning: this is the alchemical sulfur, the flammable face of the world, its phlogiston, its aureole of desire, *enthymesis* everywhere. That fat of goodness we reach toward as consumers is the active image in each thing, the active imagination of the anima mundi that fires the heart and provokes it out.

At the same time that sulfur conflagrates, it also coagulates; it is that which sticks, the mucilage, "the gum," the joiner, the stickiness of attachment. Sulfur literalizes the heart's desire at the very instant that the *thymos* enthuses. Conflagration and coagulation occur together. Desire and its object become indistinguishable. What I burn with attaches me to it; I am anointed by the fat of my own desire, captive to my own enthusiasm, and thus in exile from my heart at the very moment I seem most to own it. We lose our soul in the moment of discovering it: "Sweet Helen," says Marlowe's Faustus, "make me immortal with a kiss./Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!" Hence Heraclitus had to oppose *thymos* and *psyche*: "Whatever *thymos* wishes, it buys at the expense of soul."

Psychology now calls this love in the heart of the lion compulsive projection. The alchemical basis of this kind of projection is actually the sulfur in the heart that does not recognize it is imagining. The objective *himma* is literalized into the objects of its desire. Imagination is thrown outward, ahead of itself; and the task is less to take back these kinds of projections—who takes them back and where are they put—but more to leap after the projectile reclaiming it as imagination, thereby recognizing that *himma* demands that images always be experienced as sensuous independent bodies. There are styles of projection: it is not a unitary mechanism. Cordial projection requires an equally leonine mode of consciousness: pride, magnanimity, courage. To desire and to see through desire—this is the courage that the heart requires.

As Jung says: "Sulphur represents the active substance of the sun . . . the motive factor in consciousness, on the one hand will and on the other compulsion" (*CW* 14, §151). Compulsion becomes will through courage; it is in the heart that the operations upon sulfur are performed. We shall come back to these operations in the second

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Our lion rages and our sulfur burns. Our saint is eaten by lions. We cannot let loose our aesthetic outrage in its simple form. Alchemical psychology recognized this need for work on the lion.

Alchemical psychology considered the black and red sulfurs, and the green lion, in desperate need of subliming. One well-known method cuts off the green lion's paws, depriving it of its reach into the world. Yet it stays alive as a *succus vitae* in the heart, for "green is the color of the heart and of the vitality of the heart," as we know from Corbin. The color of the himma must be green like the natural driving sulfur that is also the green/red copper goddess Venus. This ardent green has to be enlightened, the sulfur chastened: a whitening of the heart.

To make white the heart is an *opus contra naturam*. We expect the heart to be red as its natural blood, green as its hopeful desire. This heart operation originates in the dilemma presented by sulfur: the imagination captive in its sulfur that both burns and coagulates at the same instant, imagination held fused into its desire and its desire fused with its object. The himma blinded, unable to distinguish between feeling and image, image and object, object and subject, true imagining and illusion.

Alchemy often speaks of subliming to a sulfur white as snow. This is not only an operation of calming and cooling, the "Doves of Diana." In fact sublimation requires going with the fire, like curing like, raising the temperature to a white heat so as to destroy all coagulations in the intensity of the desire, so that *what* one desires no longer matters, even as it matters most, mattering now sublimed, translucent, all flame.

(*Thought of the Heart*, 7-9, 45-46)

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