



Review by Lucy Davey

“The black sun, an ages-old image of darkness, has not been treated hospitably in the modern world. Modern psychology has seen darkness primarily as a negative force, something to move through and beyond, but it actually has an intrinsic importance to the human psyche...”

(front dust-jacket *The Black Sun*).

The Black Sun

STANTON MARLAN *THE BLACK SUN: THE*

THIS RICH and challenging work contains material for those seeking depth in the inner life. Marlan approaches the role of depression in psychic life, by reflecting on an image, the *sol niger* – the black sun, “linked to the deepest issues of our mortality and to both tragic and ecstatic possibilities” (p. 3). For Marlan this image, given some attention in Jung’s work, needs further exploration associated as it is with the descent into the unconscious. His discussion concentrates on the alchemical dimensions of the image, and on ways it has been analysed and interpreted.

Marlan’s work begins with a consideration of the “dark side of light” (p. 9). While Jung saw the move into soul work as marked by melancholy and a “struggle with the shadow” (p. 10), Marlan proposes that experience of this darkness forms part of the “condition of any humanness”. In alchemical terms, the *nigredo*, the blackness, contains the treasure we seek when working towards integration.

Energy’s identification with light and sun leads to Marlan’s claim of a “devaluation of the dark side of psychic life” (p. 15). He asserts its value as intrinsic to an engagement with the instinctual side of the psyche. An encounter with destruction and death, often indicated by images of dragons, toads and poison, is necessary, pointing to the dangerous elements of this process at whatever stage these concerns emerge.

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Marlan continues his discussion by moving into the “burnt out place of the soul” (p. 26) the locus of the black sun. Marlan places his comments in the context of other writings both literary and professional. There are numerous references to Marlan’s own work with analysands, and illustrations by them are used to enrich his comments. Von Franz’s comments on the “shadow side of the Sun”, taking the source of light and life as a hostile force, give further breadth to the view that there is real hostility emanating from the inner world. Issues with illness and mortality for individuals arise as a mark of the struggle to find access to this inner world.

The work by Julia Kristeva, *Soleil Noir* (“Black Sun”), was published almost two decades before Marlan’s study. Kristeva’s view of the black sun aligns with depression and melancholy, marking an impenetrable loss. As Marlan comments, the melancholy is “transformed into an attachment to an inexpressible affect” (p. 44). Only after reading later chapters did I appreciate Marlan’s words, since he emphasises the creative power he sees associated with depression.

The image of the sun as “cold” and “totally uncaring” links it to death, and the sense that “in life’s vital signs [lies] the immanent abyss of death” (p. 61 citing Cioran). Literature, philosophy and art can express the many profound facets of this experience. Thus for Lacan the psyche’s energy is directed against the ego and pushes it towards the

“feared unthinkable... the core of its voidness” (p. 73). Marlan points out that analysts work with analysands through such a death process to overcome sterility and self-defensive reactions.

Artists such as Matisse, Calder and Rothko each attempt to convey the paradox of the black sun – “lightless light”. A number of these works are reproduced in grey-scale in Marlan’s text, though one feels that in many cases the power of the original is only partly conveyed. The quality of sixteen colour reproductions included in the edition I read emphasises what would be gained by seeing all the figures in colour. Figure 3.12 – Janet Towbin’s work *The Seduction of the Black* – conveys her effort to “capture the luminous paradox at the heart of blackness itself” (p. 95), but the subtle tones elude reproduction.

In the exploration of what Jung calls the “light of darkness itself” (Marlan’s title for Chapter 4) attention focuses on the nature of the *albedo* – the whiteness which emerges from the blackness of the *nigredo*. Rather than a move from one opposite to the other, it allows the perception of an illuminative quality intrinsic in the blackness. Marlan’s exposition here ranges over Platonic and neo-Platonic views, alchemical and Kabbalistic writers, and the concept of chakras. The scope of the discussion widens with Marlan’s references to Chinese thinking about the subtle body.

While I found the first part of Chapter 4 extremely challenging, the latter part with its emphasis

‘...the black sun as an image of a non-Self has helped me to reimagine my understanding of the Self as Jung has described it. . .’ *page 147*

on the work with one of Marlan’s analysands acted as an effective clarification of the more theoretical exposition. The analysand, in this case an artist, permitted Marlan the use of select images she drew and painted at different stages of the analysis. For those who, like myself, find such material with added commentary helpful in absorbing the implications of a theoretical presentation, this section of the work is particularly valuable.

The centre point of the development in the individual at this stage of the process is the solar plexus. This is both a physical point and very often a site of intense awareness of dynamic energy and discomfort. In the Taoist tradition it is referred to as the “elixir field” (p. 112) from which emerges the newly rejuvenated life. This section of Marlan’s commentary not only utilises earlier material, but also refers to diverse concepts which linked to his central concerns.

Marlan states his ultimate aim as the “reimagination of [his] understanding of the Self as Jung described it” (p. 147). Jung’s theories about the Self and integration have, in Marlan’s view, been assimilated in such a way that the “enormity of the struggle involved in any engagement with... the darkness of the unconscious” has been lost (page 150). The power and demands of the process are essential in any consideration of the

process: there are conflicts lying beyond a “simple rational mastery”, creating enormous tension. Marlan stresses that the monstrous is essential to this experience, not to be passed over in “idealized transcendence”, but to be negotiated. We are faced not with the natural, reasonable or normal, but with realities which demand effort to ensure that the struggle will be fruitful.

Marlan maintains the need to be aware that confrontation with the life of the psyche results both in defeat and in transformation. The threat to the ego can be related to Kristeva’s view that the black sun is a metaphor marking an impenetrable loss. Death within the psyche or soul brings confrontation with paradox, involving the terrifying and monstrous. Marlan cites a dream in which an alchemist figure advises the dreamer to “see the silence”. In this segment his reference to the colour illustration (Plate 14) which reproduces the “figure of Mercurius” indicates that this is a monstrous image, closely linked to the alchemical tradition. Not only the “three extra heads” Marlan mentions, but other details contribute to the monstrousness and to the symbolic force of the figure.

The final chapter of this work requires careful and repeated reading. Marlan considers mystical theology, the Self and the No-Self, concepts of the soul, and negativity of being. He relies in

many areas of his discussion on Hillman's writings on alchemy, but he provides illustrations in an attempt to clarify (a paradox!) his exposition of the dark elements of this process. Invoking Eastern and Western traditions, he attempts not so much a synthesis as a wider, more complex view. His focus ensures the "colours of psychological experience [and] differentiated impelling images" are not flattened and depleted by "categories of exclusion" (p.191), avoiding entrapment in a "linear, historical progression" along fixed phases.

For me the impelling image reproduced in a work which presents a wealth of illustrations is Figure 4.7, a Chinese ink rubbing entitled "Inner Circulation". This image of the "subtle body" employs the precision of the Chinese calligraphy, with the details of the symbolic anatomical structure which flows down the page. Every segment of the illustration presents miniature images within the central image. The inner world is presented as closely linked to the body, the source of "the vital force though whose sublimation the spiritual, immortal man is born" (p. 109 – citing the work of Rousselle).

One aspect of the presentation and format of the text of this work is in my view less than ideal: the footnotes are grouped together after the main text. For a conscientious reader this has the effect of distracting from the thrust of the particular point being made. In one case, a lengthy footnote (#94 pp. 231-233) presents a vital excursus about major elements of Marlan's thinking in the light of theoretical positions held by Lévinas and Hillman. It would be helpful to have this and other

lengthy comments closer to the particular point of reference.

The concerns of this work include both practice and theory, and it presents a wealth of analysis and comment which leads one beyond this book, as well as inviting repeated and closer reading. As Marlan declares in his final paragraph, darkness is "the Other that likewise shines", and this work allows us a clearer view of this complex and, in many ways, disquieting reality of the world of the psyche.

