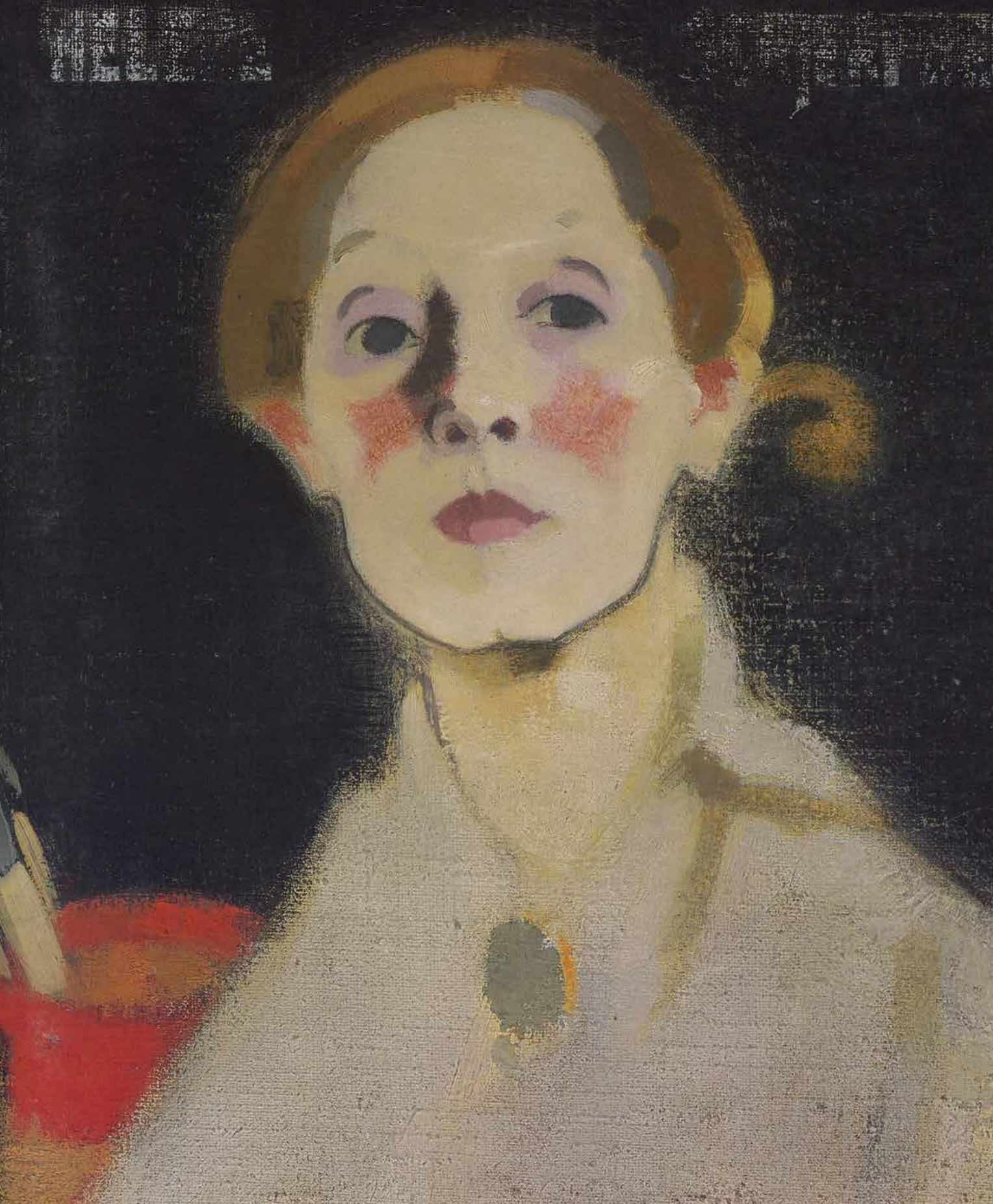


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THE ART OF REMEDIOS VARO

Issues of Gender Ambiguity and Religious Meaning

By Deborah J. Haynes

Spanish by origin, Remedios Varo (1908-63) lived most of her adult life in Mexico.¹ Her exquisite images, mostly painted on masonite, are of a size that one can easily embrace. Her works are intimate, but their meanings transcend the personal; indeed, they cross the divide between the intimate and the ultimate, moving toward the mysterious and mystical.

During my long study of Varo's paintings, I detected an analogous process in her representation of gender (mostly ambiguous) and in her use of "religious" (hermetic/occult) imagery. In both cases she seemed to break standard stereotypes in her quest to represent the nature of creation and transformation—physical, psychological, and spiritual.

Although Varo's work is often associated with Surrealism, the trajectory of her painting between 1935 and 1963 moved in a direction radically different from that of her Surrealist contemporaries. In general, Surrealism was not a rational or static theory of art but a point of view that was anti-definitive and antiexplanatory. Opposed both to the "bondage of realism" and the "snob monopoly of abstract painting," Surrealists sought to explore what they called the "more real than real world behind the real."² Committed to Freud's theory of the unconscious, to the life of dreams, and to the power of the irrational over the rational mind, they saw the artist as a "recording instrument," as the agent for making the unconscious conscious. Surrealists introduced a number of new artistic techniques: paranoic-critical method, frottage, decalcomania, psychic automatism—all of which relied on chance and the operation of the unconscious.

But Surrealism also had a gendered agenda. Male artists such as René Magritte, Hans Bellmer, Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst typically created images of broken, torn, dismembered, mutilated, violated, and punctured female bodies, basing their images on traditional patriarchal and misogynist attitudes about women. In fact, as Rudolf E. Kuenzli summarized in a recent essay:

Surrealist art and poetry are addressed to men; women are only means to bring about these works. Woman is seen by the male Surrealists only in terms of what she can do for them. She is their muse.... Women are to the male Surrealists, as in the longstanding traditions of patriarchy, servants, helpers in the forms of child muse, virgin, femme-enfant, angel, celestial creature who is their salvation, or erotic object, model, doll—or she may be the threat of castration.³

For example, René Magritte's *Threatened Assassin* (1927; Museum of Modern Art, New York) tells a macabre story. Although it may be explained as inspired by a melodramatic scene in the 1913 French film *Fantômas*, the painting is actually a chilling representation of the murder of a woman. Two bowler-hatted men carry implements of capture and torture; three other men look on, while a sixth listens to a victrola. Other paintings, such as *Titanic Days* (1928; Private Collection) and *The Rape* (1934; Menil Collection, Houston) may similarly be analyzed in terms of specific violence against women. In *Titanic Days*, a naked woman's body is partially covered by a clothed man: the "embrace" is actually an assault. She struggles to get away; he grips her. *The Rape* depicts the face of a female whose identity has been erased. Eyes have become breasts, the nose, a navel, and the lips, the pubis and genitals.⁴

Or consider Hans Bellmer's *Rose Opens the Night* (1935-36; Collection H. Parisot), from the Undressing series of lithographs.⁵ Here the interior cavity of a young prepubescent girl's body is open for the (implied) male viewer's pleasure. Internal organs, including the skeleton and breasts, are on display. Bellmer's figures "embody the nightmare of mechanization," but even more, they are about violation, transgression, mutilation. As Sidra Stich continues, in this work the "fabricated, imagined, exoticized, objectified, and fetishized body replaces and assaults the natural body."⁶

These approaches are consistent with Surrealist ideology. André Breton expounded the best known of the new

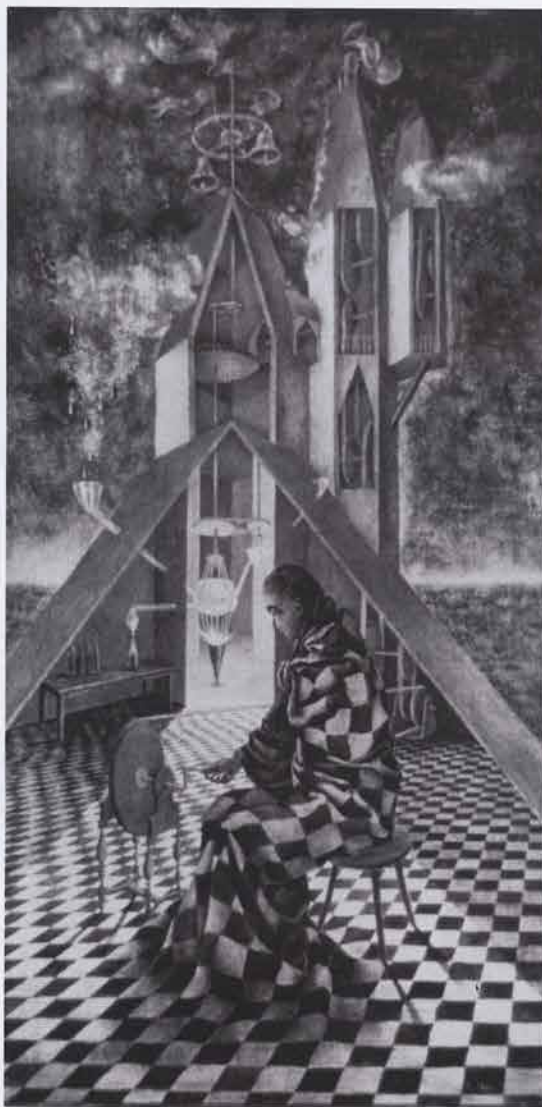


Fig. 1. Remedios Varo, *The Useless Science or the Alchemist* (1955), oil on masonite, 41 1/4" x 21 1/4". Private Collection.



Fig. 2. Remedios Varo, *The Creation of the Birds* (1958), oil on masonite, 20 1/2" x 24 1/2". Private Collection.

artistic processes, psychic automatism, which would show "the actual functioning of thought...dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern." Breton is saying that the artist working from the unconscious should not be compelled to represent beauty, human dignity, or goodness. But this dictum places an unusual and even distorted burden on the unconscious, as if it were not also characterized by attitudes of joy or love or transformative activity.

Some female Surrealists shared these attitudes and used the new techniques defined by their male colleagues. But many, Kay Sage, Leonora Carrington, Léonor Fini, Dorothea Tanning, Gisele Prassinos, and Joyce Mansour among them, also developed strategies through which they subtly subverted traditional models of gender relationships. Varo's paintings, in particular, may be interpreted as a form of "gender masquerade."

Gender masquerade does not refer here to cross-dressing or transsexualism. The masquerade, the masking of gender, often takes another, more subtle form: that of gender ambiguity, the active blurring rather than the undifferentiated expression of gendered identity. Gender ambiguity may function as a powerful "glitch" in the social system that produces traditional dichotomies of self and other through race, class, gender, and other distinctions. As Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub have written, "The gender-ambiguous subject is recuperated from Otherness to be positioned as that which gives the lie to supposedly natural and inflexible sex/gender systems."⁸ It was just this supposedly natural and inflexible sex/gender system that male Surrealist writers and artists such as Magritte and Bellmer relied upon in their work. And it is this same sex/gender system that Remedios Varo's paintings confound.

Varo's work is not only about the issue of gender, however. In both her art and her life she confronted and confounded traditional patriarchal religion. She went to a convent school run by strict Catholic nuns. But in 1924, at age 15, she enrolled in the prestigious Academia de San Fernando in Madrid, where she was able to escape her Catholic confines through her alliances with male Surrealists. In *The Escape* (1962), also titled *Flight*, she depicts her successful getaway. A young man and woman ride in a small hairy boat toward a mountain cave. The golden ground seems to be composed of leaves. Mountains hang in the left background of the painting. She holds the rudder, which is rather like a shell; he holds seven strings that appear to hold up the body of the vessel.

His action constructs the boat; she steers. Their eyes convey a sense of anticipation, yet a subtle threat is implied by small bunches of pebbles falling into the boat. The origin of the pebbles is unclear. One of the most curious features of the painting is that each of the figures has one hand. The man's right hand seems to be under the woman's dark blue dress; her left hand may be behind him. Indeed, this is an autobiographical painting, for Varo's escape from her confining surroundings happened in 1930, when, at age 21, she married Gerardo Lizarraga, also a student at the Academia. No longer living at home, she was freed from the authoritarian structures that had bound her.⁹

Varo was unusual among the Surrealists for her explicit and persistent interest in religion, albeit not the Catholicism that had been "thrown at her since childhood."¹⁰ In fact, her paintings raise many questions about the nature of religion and religious belief. From the perspective of Catholic mysticism, religion is what one does in solitude, although the solitude of prayer and ascetic practices is usually sustained by community. This is certainly part of the personal and cultural heritage on which Varo drew. The importance of solitude is evident in her work, for it played a major role in both her artistic practice and in the imagery she created. But religion is also a shared system of symbols and rituals through which human beings create order. This is an apt description of the social dimension of religion, especially the role of sacraments such as baptism and the eucharist in Catholic traditions. We might say



Fig. 3. Remedios Varo, *Solar Music* (1955), oil on masonite, 35 1/2" x 24". Private Collection.



Fig. 4. Remedios Varo, *Harmony* (1956), oil on masonite, 29 1/8" x 36 3/8". Private Collection.

that Varo was very Catholic as she engaged in the process of creating order through the use of religious symbols, but not in the way one expects.

In trying to resolve broadly religious questions, Varo turned to the esoteric and hermetic traditions. Her eclecticism might well be compared with 20th-century Sufism, the mystical path within Islam that draws on and acknowledges various spiritual paths. Varo's religious eclecticism was evident in her library, which contained an astonishing range of books: Russian mystic George Gurdjieff and his followers Peotr Ouspensky and Maurice Nicoll, theosophists such as Madame Blavatsky, the complete works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, materials reflecting Hindu and Buddhist spirituality by writers such as Tibetan traveler Alexandra David-Neel, the yogi Paramahansa Yogananda, and Zen Buddhist teacher D. T. Suzuki. Even 20th-century Christian mystics such as Simone Weil had a place in Varo's embracing intellect. Her library also contained books on alchemy, Pythagorean ideas, numerology and sacred geometry, and Platonic philosophy.¹¹ Many of her paintings, especially those from the 1950s until her death in 1963, reflect her interests in the latter forms of esoterica.

Varo developed her religious/mystical/spiritual/occult themes using figures whose gender is ambiguous. In paintings such as *The Useless Science or the Alchemist* (1955; Fig. 1), *The Creation of the Birds* (1958; Fig. 2), *Solar Music* (1955; Fig. 3), *Harmony* (1956; Fig. 4), *The Flutist* (1955; Fig. 5), *The Call* (1961; Fig. 6), and *Ascension to Mount Analogue* (1960; Fig. 7), we may, perhaps, "read" the human figures as female, even though traditional markers of feminine identity are missing.

In *The Useless Science or the Alchemist*, the solitary figure sitting on a stool in the foreground is wrapped in a black-and-white checkerboard that arises from the ground to cover its body. Does the pattern end on this person's head, or does it emerge from the head? The figure turns a crank connected to a pulley on the edge of the floor to the right. This pulley in turn is connected to a series of pulleys that climb to the top of the towers and connect with a horn and wheel. Liquid (ether?) is collected from the atmosphere and flows into an alembic, an alchemical vessel, at the bottom of the left tower.

Generally, alchemical vessels were of two kinds, with or without a beak, depending upon their function. A beaked or curved

alembic would transmit vapors into the receiving vessel by way of a channel or curved neck. The second kind, without such a channel, would be used in "sublimations"—the process of making substances more precious. In Varo's painting, to the left of the figure's head an alembic of the latter type sits over a fire in an inverted cone. But whereas in alchemy sublimation meant improving the quality and virtue of the material,¹² perhaps Varo thought that this process was not so efficacious, as the title of the painting suggests.

After being stirred and heated through a complex system of gears driven by the wind and bells, this liquid is then transferred to waiting bottles that sit on a small bench. A cloudy, foggy background is broken only by the greenish shaft of light on the horizon, but the chamber holding the fire and alembic emits a warm yellowish glow that encompasses the alchemist. All the parts of this painting are interconnected, but with little effect of human agency. The profound sense of solitude and even isolation—here as in nearly all of her paintings—may be linked to Varo's own experience of exile. Varo escaped fascist Spain to live most of her life as an exile in Mexico. But there is more here, for this is an alchemical image that deals with transformation and the connection of all things.

The Creation of the Birds (1958) is another image about alchemy that demonstrates the interconnectedness of all things. An owl-like figure with a kind, heart-shaped face is rendered exquisitely with fine brush strokes. This figure sits at a small table; around its neck is an instrument with three strings. In the ancient Greek mysteries and according to Pythagoras, "the lyre was regarded as the secret symbol of the human constitution, the body of the instrument representing the physical form, the strings the nerves, and the musician the spirit."¹³ Though this is not a lyre as used in the ancient Greek context, it might well be interpreted as a complex symbol of the physical body, the nervous system, and the spirit.

In the figure's left hand is a triangular prism that refracts the light from a distant star/moon, and in its right a paintbrush emanating from the stringed instrument produces birds that come to life. (Allusions are perhaps presented here to the story of the painter Zeuxis and the birds that pecked at his drawn grapes, thinking they were real, or to the story of Galatea and Pygmalion, where the artist's sculpture comes to life. This latter image was vividly painted by Jean Léon Gérôme in 1890.) Through the round



Fig. 5. Remedios Varo, *The Flutist* (1955), oil on masonite with mother-of-pearl inlay, 29 1/2" x 36 3/8". Private Collection.

opening on the wall on the upper-left side of the painting, ethereal energy is transformed in two egg-shaped vessels. This time the energy flows from three tubes as the primary colors, which are daubed on the palette set on the table. On the floor behind this contraption, a small bird pecks at seeds. The checkerboard floor has subtle gradations of brown and green, and the figure's legs are aligned to the central axis. Finally, two "communicating vessels" grace the back corner of the room, and an antique chest, perhaps another alchemical vessel, sits quietly against the wall. Varo's use of communicating vessels perhaps refers to Breton's book of that name.¹⁴

According to Mary Ann Caws, the image of these communicating vessels "is taken from a scientific [alchemical?] experiment of the same name: in vessels joined by a tube, a gas or liquid passing from one to the other rises to the same level in each, whatever the form of the vessel."¹⁵ In Surrealist thought and in Breton's book, these vessels were metaphors for the interaction of sleeping and waking consciousness, of inner vision and external reality. They vividly demonstrate the possibility of a link between modes of consciousness.

Further, in part two of Breton's three-part book is an extended meditation on love. "I persist," he wrote, "in considering the workings of love as the most serious of all...I am careful not to forget that, always from the same materialistic point of view, 'it is their own essence that people seek in the other.'"¹⁶ Thus, we might also take the communicating vessels as an image for love, where two persons find a degree of identity in the other, just as liquid in actual connecting vessels rises to identical levels.

Clearly, both *Creation of the Birds* and *The Alchemist* refer to alchemy. Known in Chinese, Indian, Hellenistic, Arabic, and later Western forms, alchemy is the art of transmutation. But the alchemical creative process is not straightforward and rationally describable. Instead, it can be summarized by several enigmatic axioms, the first being that "nothing from nothing comes." As Manly Hall has explained, "Alchemy is not the process of making something from nothing; it is the process of increasing and improving that which already exists."¹⁷ Thus, the alchemist was a transformer rather than a creator ex-nihilo. In both images, the solitary figures draw from cosmic or etheric energy—ether. Both are engaged in transforming "what is" into something new.

A second axiom, "within everything is the seed of everything,"¹⁸ is related to the first. For the alchemist the macrocosmic universe is reflected in the microcosm of the human being, as well as in a seed, a drop of water, or a particle of dust. These seeds then come to fruition either through natural processes or through the alchemist's art. Within the ether in *Creation of the Birds* is the seed of everything: the birds, the colors, everything that the owl-like figure creates.

Another axiom brings attention to the role of mystery and the



Fig. 6. Remedios Varo, *The Call* (1961), oil on masonite, 39% x 26%. Private Collection.

unknown. Alchemy can be understood as an attempt to grapple with the underlying mystery that pervades all things and experience. Theologians and mystics have long interpreted that mystery in terms of negative theologies (saying what God is not because it is impossible to say positively what God is). Alchemists sought to explain the essentially unknown by projecting another mystery. Hence the axiom, *obscurum per obscurius; ignotum per ignotius*: "The obscure is to be explained by the more obscure—the unknown by the more unknown."¹⁹ This is perhaps the most obvious of the axioms in relation to Varo's work. Are we really explaining this mysterious process of transformation in either painting by referring to the fact that cosmic energy or ether is fundamentally changed? How does this change occur? We simply cannot say, except by possibly acknowledging the role of mystery and the unknown. The nature of cosmic energy is unknown to us; how it is transformed is also unknown. True to the inherent secrecy of alchemy, Varo's paintings make direct references to alchemical processes, but they do not actually explain them.

In alchemy, a spherical glass vessel called "the philosopher's egg" was used as the vessel for transformation or transmutation. In this alembic, three stages of the alchemical process would be carried out, the goal of which was to unite the elements to produce the "philosopher's stone."²⁰ These three stages corresponded respectively to blackening (*nigredo*), whitening (*albedo*), and reddening (*rubedo*); to black, white, and red birds (as in *Creation of the Birds*); body, soul, and spirit; darkness, light, and water; and mercury, sulphur, and salt. The science, or art, of alchemy was based on the idea of the underlying unity of the universe. Certainly this sense of interconnectedness is obvious in Varo's paintings. Just as the human body contains the soul or spirit, so the material world is permeated by a universal spirit.

Ultimately, however, the vagueness and obscurity of these ideas are not adequate to explain Varo's alchemical references, which rely on gendered—female—imagery: metaphorical eggs, fallopian tubes, a uterus, an umbilical cord, and the magic of hidden generativity. In keeping with the end purpose of alchemy, which is the union of male and female, the figures themselves are gender-ambiguous, often androgynous. Nevertheless, the surrounding imagery can be interpreted as directly related to the female body and reproduction.

Varo's use of the principles of numerology, of sacred numbers, introduces another dimension of her religious interest. The idea of the power of numbers comes from Pythagoras, about whom little is known. But we do know that a primary tenet of Pythagorean doctrine was "the belief that numbers are the ultimate constituents of reality."²¹

One is the number for the unity of all things, the indefinable,

the unknowable. Varo gives us one figure, one music box, one round window for the ether to enter, and a solitary bird eating seeds. The number two signifies matter, duality, dialogic connection. Varo paints two windows, two communicating vessels, an alembic of two egg-shaped forms. The number three is not necessarily a reference to the trinity but to the prime, the triangular; it is the number of the whole. There are three birds, three colors, three rays of light, three strings on the instrument, a three-legged stand for the alembic. As medieval numerologists long ago articulated, the underlying unity and completeness of the universe is reflected not through duality or polarity, but through the powers of three.²²

In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle vehemently condemned Pythagorean ideas, and from him we know that Pythagoreans essentially believed that numbers provide the principles of order in a seemingly chaotic cosmos. As he put it:

The so-called Pythagoreans applied themselves to mathematics, and were the first to develop this science; and through studying it they came to believe that its principles are the principles of everything. And since numbers are by nature first among these principles, and they fancied that they could detect in numbers, to a greater extent than in fire and earth and water, many analogues of what is and comes into being...and since they saw further that the properties and ratios of the musical scales are based on numbers, and since it seemed clear that all other things have their whole nature modelled upon numbers, and that numbers are the ultimate things in the whole physical universe, they assumed the elements of numbers to be the elements of everything, and the whole universe to be a proportion [musical scale] or number.²³

Thus, the concept of the "music of the spheres" originated in the Pythagorean system. Pythagoras envisioned the cosmos as a huge monochord, a single string connected to heaven and absolute spirit at one end and to earth and absolute matter at the other. "The Pythagoreans believed that everything which existed had a voice and all creatures were eternally singing the praise of the Creator."²⁴ Because humans are so enmeshed in the illusion of corporeal existence, we fail to hear this music of the spheres, at least most of the time. Once we are liberated, it will again be audible.

The idea of a monochord is most vividly imaged in *Solar Music*, where a long ray of light containing four c(h)ords emanates from the distant heavens and sparkles as the seemingly lifeless ground begins to grow. The ground grows up and around the androgynous figure and begins to turn green near the c(h)ords as the figure draws a bow across them. Yet this activity, which may also describe



Fig. 7. Remedios Varo, *Ascension to Mount Analogue* (1960), oil on triplay, 26 1/2" x 12 1/4". Private Collection.

the process of photosynthesis, has further repercussions. As the sound flows out, it enlivens three birds, which are now becoming red—perhaps, like the bird that flies out the window in *Creation of the Birds*, an expression of *rubedo*, the final stage of the alchemical process. This is a thoroughly magical image, depicting the union of self and nature as a source of creative energy and generativity.

Solar Music shares its musical metaphor with *Harmony*, one of Varo's most complex paintings. Set in a chamber that resembles the room of a medieval saint or scientist-artist,²⁵ the androgynous figure is engaged in moving recognizable animate and inanimate objects on a musical staff. The figure takes a shell, a leaf, a crystal, and a turnip from an overflowing treasure chest on the floor. The room is teeming with matter, living *prima materia*. Figures emerge from the walls, a bird nests in the back of a chair, floor panels lift by invisible forces, and gauzy pieces of cloth and plants emerge from beneath the boards. Alchemical vessels, a ladder dangling from a canopied loft bed, a mysterious trunk in the far corner, a hazy hallway: all of these contribute to the sense of a world waiting to be explored and brought to life. Here, as in *Solar Music*, the activity of the solitary androgynous figure is crucial. *Harmony*, like *Solar Music*, expresses a Pythagorean vision of the music of the spheres.

From the earliest Greek mysteries to the 20th century, philosophers and artists have explored the relationship of music, sound, and form. Goethe once declared that "architecture is crystallized music."²⁶ And it is just this notion

that we see in Varo's painting *The Flutist* (1955). Here the vibrations created by sound are powerful enough to construct the three-tiered temple from fossils and stones. Clearly, Varo did not always evade the idea of human agency; yet she linked the human to natural cosmological processes.

In *The Flutist* we see a mysterious vegetal mountain, out of which the flutist emerges. In the crevices, and even across the top of the mountain, plants are growing. The flutist, like the figures in other paintings from 1955, is part of and connected to the hill, yet this musician creates the incredibly detailed structure on the left by playing the flute. Constructed of stones and fossils and based on an intricate three-dimensional technical drawing, the structure is octagonal at the top, though it is hard to tell how many sides it has at the bottom. Stairs ascend through the building's three levels, through three arches. High mountains recede in the distance; they seem to be volcanoes. The background is blown and blotted paint, the hillside built up through this process. Hidden amidst the blown lines are tiny scratch marks and painted plants. Colors vary: greens, golden browns, and earth tones, except for the face, which

is inlaid mother-of-pearl. The gender-ambiguous flutist creates with sound. The chord becomes the cord of creation. In fact, this painting is a meditation on creation. It literally demonstrates the power of the music of the spheres.

There are, finally, many possible ways to interpret the gender ambiguity of the figures in many of Varo's paintings. Varo's quest was not, like the alchemist's, a quest for gold, the traditional symbol for the "philosopher's stone." It may more accurately be described as the development of an integrated self, an image for which is, alternatively, the androgyne or the hermaphrodite.²⁷ Strictly speaking, androgyny is the reconciliation of male and female within a person without sacrificing gender identity, while hermaphroditism is the presence of both male and female sex organs and sex characteristics. But in mythology and in alchemy these two definitions were often blended. For example, Maria Prophetissa, the early-third-century "founding mother of alchemy," could say: "Join the male and female, and you will find what you seek."²⁸ Whether she meant this in physical or psychological terms, or both, is impossible to say. But alchemists and alchemical treatises refer to the goal of the alchemical process as either the androgyne or the hermaphrodite or both interchangeably.

Myths of gender-ambiguous and hermaphroditic figures exist in many religious traditions: Marjorie Leach's 1992 *Guide to the Gods* lists 106.²⁹ European cultural origins of the mythology of the hermaphrodite come from Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) and the Latin poet Ovid (43 B.C.E.-18 C.E.).

In Plato's *Symposium* a story is told by Aristophanes to explain the nature of sexual desire and love. Humans descended, he said, from three original races. Females came from the earth, males from the sun, and bisexual beings from the moon. The latter had four sets of limbs, four ears, two mouths, and two sets of genitals. But they became so uppity that the gods decided to cut them apart. Presumably, only those descended from these hermaphrodites will seek a mate of the opposite sex. Females and males descended from the original males (of the sun) and females (of the earth) will seek same-sex partners.

The story of Hermaphroditus as told by Ovid had strong resonance in medieval alchemy. In this story the son of Hermes and Aphrodite is taken to the nymphs of Mt. Ida to be raised in secret. One day while he is bathing a nymph named Salmacis sees him, falls in love, and prays that the two will never be parted. The gods grant her wish by uniting the two in one body. As a collector of pre-Columbian artifacts, Varo also would have been aware of the god Quetzalcoatl, who combines both male and female characteristics.

According to these descriptions, Varo's figures are not hermaphroditic; their gender is ambiguous, not distinguishable as female or male. In fact, as suggested above, the alchemical goal, the philosopher's stone, is sometimes visualized as the androgyne or hermaphrodite.³⁰ In alchemy, the god Mercury is depicted as a double-headed figure with the word *Rebis*, meaning "double thing." Further, in the writings of Madame Blavatsky, the androgynous god is universal; she/he/it springs from the mind. The creative power of imagination brings forth this androgynous being. In Jungian psychology, the androgynous figure is an image of psychic integration, of the union of opposites. Varo's work indicates that she was more interested in the psychological or psychic than the physical implications of hermaphroditism.

Further development of this theme is found in *The Call* and *Ascension to Mt. Analogue*. Even though the figure is clearly female, the sense of a "call," a personal journey toward wholeness and enlightenment, is clearly depicted in *The Call*. The central figure, luminous with radiating filaments of light, wearing and carrying alchemical vessels, her hand in a gesture similar to a Buddhist

mudra, leaves behind those half-awake, half-conscious people that frame her. She is bright orange, while they are dull shades of brown. She is initiated into the process of spiritual becoming, although how or why is unclear.

Like the androgynous figure in *Ascension to Mt. Analogue*, she also leaves behind the state of sleep that mystics such as Gurdjieff thought was the normal human condition. And like the hero in French Surrealist René Daumal's short novel, *Mount Analogue*,³¹ the lone figure now engages in the arduous ascent of the mountain. In Daumal's story, the goal of this quest is to find paradems, "a golden alpine flower that could be picked only if one did not want it, a flower said to be the source of spiritual purification, inner peace, and immortality."³² The philosopher's stone, the hermaphrodite, the flower: all are esoteric symbols for spiritual purification, personal transformation, and wholeness.

In conclusion, Varo rejected the Catholicism of her youth and embraced, at least in her work, the esoteric and hidden traditions of alchemy and Pythagorean science. She chose for her most powerful images of creativity and transformation figures whose gender is ambiguous. She used reproductive imagery—eggs, tubes, the womb—to refer, not to reproduction but to the process of producing, of creating the self.

Varo began to evolve her own ideas in a Surrealist artistic context where the female body was the cipher for, and object of, male violence and aggression. As a strategy for expressing female creativity—not linked to reproduction, not linked to the patriarchal tradition in which she was raised, not linked to the violent imagery of her peers—Varo evolved her own personal iconography: a subtle form of gender masquerade. She rejected traditional feminine identity and motherhood, instead articulating her creativity in these exquisitely detailed images of gender-ambiguous figures. Indeed, one could say that she broke free of the reproductive economy, both in her life and in her art. She—artist, alchemist—controlled crank, pen, flute, and wand, and she depended upon cosmic processes to support and sustain her work. Yet, not to phallic power do such devices refer but to the c(h)ord that connects all things.

Varo's work challenges patriarchal religious traditions by bringing attention to the arcane, esoteric, and hermetic, just as she simultaneously "gives the lie" to our inherited sex/gender system. In other words, the representation of a gender-ambiguous subject and subjectivity in many of Varo's paintings allowed her to resist supposedly natural cultural stereotypes about female identity and to show these sexual stereotypes as constructions. I am not suggesting that Varo was fully conscious of this process, although she may have been. Rather, I have looked at the images themselves with the intention of seeing what they can tell us.

In *Communicating Vessels* Breton remarked, apropos of the vagaries of dream interpretation, that "the mind is wonderfully prompt at grasping the most tenuous relation that can exist between two objects taken at random, and poets know that they can always, without fear of being mistaken, say of one thing that it is *like* the other."³³ Breton's conviction was shared by Remedios Varo, for she made strikingly unusual connections—both literal and figurative—in her paintings. I have tried to explore here a few of these links: the links between religious meaning and gender ambiguity, between Catholic roots and alchemical and Pythagorean imagery, between traditional female identity and alchemical imagery, between reproductive and productive creativity. Remedios Varo's art documents one modern woman's search for the means to express her creativity and her interpretation of transformation. Postmodern feminists can take nourishment from the courage and fruitfulness of her search. ●

NOTES

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1. For an admirable study of Varo's life and art, see Janet Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville, 1988). I focus here on the interrelationship of gender issues and broadly religious themes rather than biography.

2. Julien Levy, *Surrealism* (New York: Black Sun, 1936), 9, 5.

3. Rudolf E. Kuenzli, "Surrealism and Misogyny," in Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, and Gwen Raaberg, eds., *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 18-19. For Mara Witzling's review, see WAJ (F94/W95). See a related interpretation in Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

4. Magritte's paintings may be found in Richard Calvocoressi, *Magritte* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979) and David Sylvester, *Magritte* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992).

5. Bellmer's lithograph is represented in Peter Webb, *Hans Bellmer* (London: Quartet Books, 1985).

6. Sidra Stich, "Surrealist Figures," *Anxious Visions: Surrealist Art* (New York: Abbeville, 1990), 51.

7. André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)," *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, trans. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969), 26.

8. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, eds., *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 18-19.

9. These details of her biography are given in Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 17, 31.

10. *Ibid.*, 16.

11. Walter Gruen listed these books in an October 1992 letter to the author.

12. Martin Ruland the Elder, *A Lexicon of Alchemy*, A. E. Waite, trans. (London: John M. Watkins, 1964), 21, 303. For more on alchemy in general, see Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy, The Secret Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1973); Jack Lindsay, *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London: Frederick Muller, 1970); Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *Alchemical Death and Resurrection, The Significance of Alchemy in the Age of Newton* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1990).

13. Manly P. Hall, *An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolic Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, 1977), LXXXI.

14. André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, Mary Ann Caws and

Geoffrey T. Harris, trans. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1990), xi.

15. Mary Ann Caws, "Introduction: Linkings and Reflections," in Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, xi. Interestingly, some of the correspondence between Freud and Breton is included at the end of this book. Breton had asked Freud to publish his interpretation of the dreams in *Communicating Vessels*, but Freud refused on the grounds that a dreamer's own associations were crucial to proper dream interpretation. Freud, in fact, was critical of the Surrealists' incomplete appropriation of his theories.

16. Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, 69. Breton is quoting Friedrich Engels here.

17. Hall, *Encyclopedic Outline*, CLIV.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Discussed in C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, R. F. C. Hull, trans. (New York: Bollingen, 1953), 233-34.

20. Richard Cavendish, et al., *Man, Myth, & Magic*, I (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1983), 98.

21. S. K. Heninger, Jr., *Touche of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1974), 71. Also see Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, Edwin L. Minar, Jr., trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1972).

22. Cavendish, *Man, Myth, & Magic*, VIII, 2026.

23. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 985b24-986a4.

24. Hall, *Encyclopedic Outline*, LXXXIII.

25. See Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 190-91, for an interesting discussion of the similarities of her painting to Antonella da Messina's *Saint Jerome in His Study* (1450-55).

26. Quoted in Hall, *Encyclopedic Outline*, LXXXIII.

27. I thank Walter Gruen for the suggestion that the hermaphrodite might be a possible connection to Varo's images, and Salomon Grimberg for his insistence on more precise definitions of these terms.

28. Discussed in Henry and Renée Kahane's article, "Hellenistic and Medieval Alchemy," in the larger article "Alchemy," in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, I (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 193, 195.

29. Marjorie Leach, in *Guide to the Gods*, Michael Owen Jones and Frances Cattermole-Tally, eds. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1992).

30. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 233.

31. René Daumal, *Mount Analogue: Authentic Narrative*, Roger Shattuck, trans. (San Francisco: City Lights, 1972).

32. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 171. Kaplan claims this is a "rare instance of a specific literary allusion" for Varo.

33. Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, 109.

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