

Concerning My Poetry
and Its Place in My Creative Activity
by Dane Rudhyar

The crises of growth, which in my life took the form of the breakdowns of my first and second marriages, released inner realizations and a power of creative formation which in turn took form in a number of poems. The process of poetic formulation that is an integral and significant part of my total destiny had started many years before when I deliberately severed all connections with my ancestral and cultural past. I believe this process should be understood in a way that most present day poetry seems to make irrelevant and fanciful. I have often stated that my music and paintings should be approached in a non-traditional way. By dealing more specifically with my poetry, further light may be shed on the all-inclusive character of the creative impulses that have been operating, and still operate, in my life. To do this seems important today, if only to help people who read my published poetry not to approach it with false or inadequate expectations.

The first point I wish to make refers to the basic and traditional meaning of the words, poet and poetry. Each period of a culture gives these words a somewhat different meaning, and the poems of each period tend to assume a specific form, express a particular quality of human experience, and fill a specific social and cultural need. Yet I believe that poetry is essentially a means of communication. It conveys to the people of the poet's culture, in their own language, heightened experiences of the meaning and power of human life. Its images evoke in the consciousness or imagination of a poem's reader (or hearer) feelings, emotions, or moods — or in rarer cases, spiritual experiences or philosophical realizations. Poetic images are evoked through the use of words. Words are meaningful symbols defining or suggesting human experiences that have an at least relatively common character. They also have power as vocal tones with definite vibratory energy, and the sequence of the words-tones may be given either a definite, traditional rhythm, or they may simply reflect the poet's more personal quality of vibration and power (as in free verse or even poetic prose).

In the early stages of a culture's development, poetry always has an essentially magical, epic or sacred character. Mantrams and magical or theurgic formulas are the initial sources of what later becomes epic and religious poetry. Even lullabies and love songs are intended to "work magic" on the hearer. Tones are intoned and chanted long before they are written down; poetry and music are hardly distinguishable: in ancient Greek the word **musike** includes what later becomes two arts most often evolving separately. Dramatic gestures too are included at first when poems are intoned by the "bard" who fulfills a definite function in the community. By narrating stories of the lives of heroic personages, or the Creation-myth revealing the actions of the creative gods, the bard plays a powerful role in helping to build, and later to keep in a dynamic and vibrant state, the collective psychism of the culture he serves.

Only when a culture reaches what we can broadly call the Romantic phase of its development and the development of its poetry does the poet act fully as an "individualized person" for whom poetry becomes a means for what then is called "self-expression." Instead of narrating the lives and deeds of long-dead or legendary heroes, the poet himself or herself may become the central figure whose life, passions, sufferings and joys poems reveal to the sensitive reader — for poetry then is far more read than listened to. Through it the poet seeks to communicate what he or she feels, experiences, mentally realizes or understands in a special way. Through the poems the poet's personality and inner states of consciousness are more or less successfully exteriorized. This is "self-expression" through words and through the imagery words may evoke in the reader's mind and feeling-nature. Self-expression, however, also means, sometimes more importantly, **self-revelation**. A self-expressive poem releases an emotional energy "pressing outward"; it also "unveils" in symbolic forms what the poet has either experienced or — this is an important point — **is unable to act out.**

The majority of my poems have exteriorized in symbolic words and images what in me had been unable to find manifestation in concrete everyday living and actual interpersonal relationships. They reveal potentialities whose actualization was but too often made impossible by the outer circumstances and/or inner pressures of my life. They reveal a level of my inner life which could be made concrete only in symbols rather than in actual physical happenings.

The reason for this is far more basic than one initially might think. It can be stated superficially by asking, "What would be the use of singing passionate words of love to the Beloved, if this love had been enacted fully and its intensity communicated to the loved one by effectual and self-evident actions?" Wagner was moved to create **Tristan and Isolde** because of his at least relatively unfulfilled love for Mathilda Wesendonck. His love for and marriage to Cosima Liszt did not inspire a love-drama, even though it sustained him as he wrote the **Ring of the Niebelungen**. If Dante had married the young Beatrice, **The Divine Comedy** might not have been written — for lack of an inner Woman-Image to lead him to Paradise.

A deeper interpretation of the creative process emerges from the realization that existence — either cosmic or individualized in a human organism — results from and is energized by the cyclically evolving **tension** between two opposite and complementary principles or forces. In metaphysical terms these two dynamic principles can be called the Principle of Unity and the Principle of Multiplicity.(1) At the sociocultural level, one speaks of the individual versus the collective; at the biological level, of male and female polarities; and at the cosmic level, presumably of electricity and magnetism.(2)

What we call "love" (in most instances imprecisely and often most ambiguously) is an attempt to resolve the tension between the two principles at whatever level they operate, though at the cosmic level one probably should speak of the mysterious process of gravitation. At any level, any solution to the tension created by the polarized energies can be only incomplete and temporary. What we call a human life is one form taken by the attempt to resolve the tension. Freud spoke of the conflict between Eros and Thanatos, the urge for living and the pull toward death. In a more general sense, existence is the state in which a new set of potentialities of being (spirit) interact with past tendencies to resist transformation and greater inclusion (matter, and in another sense, **karma**). Any cycle of existence — from "birth" to "death" — ends in a particular balance of what might be called "success" in the process of actualizing the initial birth-potential and the "failure" to do so. This is the balance between **dharma** (the new potentiality) and **karma** (the ghosts, habits and automatisms of the past).

A great many human beings (at least during certain historical eras) succeed relatively well in actualizing their birth-potential, because the latter fits rather smoothly into the collective framework of family, culture and religion into which they were born. In times of transition between historical cycles, and under special circumstances affecting their personal lives and, in general, their "personhood," other individuals are born with a far vaster potential of being than can be actualized at the time and in the place they were born. We say that they are "ahead of their times," pioneers of a future type of consciousness and interpersonal relationship. The result is that they face the near-impossibility of actualizing their inner potential — their **dharma**, their essential being. As they are so often unable to resolve the tension of the polar forces within their total personality in terms of actual and fulfilling experiences, they are driven by an inner power to produce a liberating solution at the symbolic level of literature or of another, artistic or concept-formulating activity.

A culture having reached the last stage of its development **needs** such individuals. In a very real sense, their frustrations and apparent failures at the level of actual sociocultural happenings are the very roots of their spiritual successes as transformative agents. Through their attempts to provide concrete existential solutions to their actually insoluble inner tensions (often caused by illness or special events in youth) they create poems, music, paintings, etc., giving symbolic forms to future sociocultural processes. They thus release

seeds of futurity — archetypes that eventually will become the paradigms of a new society and/or culture.

In a more personal and limited sense, writing poetry may be for the poet the means through which the more mature, deeper or archetypal part of his or her total being seeks to convey to the everyday mind and/or personal ego intimations of ways of feeling and relating to reality that transcend those of his or her family and culture. The poet reveals to himself or herself, and to other people in broadly similar circumstances, the character, quality and greater intensity of what lies ahead in their evolution. The poems use what already is known as symbols for what is yet unknown or, in many instances, what is yet un-lived; the unknown or un-lived may be more fully and meaningfully experienced in this way. Indeed great art is always a revelation of unactualized potentiality, or at least a restatement of an original quality and archetypal form of existence that has been forgotten, banalized or devalued. If a poem is descriptive, it should be so for the sake of revealing in what is described an intensity of being and a profound vital meaning which few, if any, persons had been able to experience. If the described object, situation or inner feeling has a negative character — which is so often the case today — the poet, novelist or artist should be able to make the description **evoke by implication** another order of sociocultural existence. Poetry legitimately can assume a cathartic function; but the great poet never forgets that catharsis, or in broader terms, deconditioning and severance from a binding past or habit, includes the promise of radical renewal. Such a kind of poetry, literature or art, at least potentially, releases an "alchemical" process — a process of **transformation through crises**.

Such a process is characterized by the motto that came to my consciousness during the "dark night of the soul" experienced in Philadelphia through the fall-winter 1918-1919: **Per igne ad lucem** (Through Fire unto Light). It came to me as the symbol of my whole life: and truly my life can be best understood as a process of combustion, at times rapid as a crackling fire throwing out burning sparks, more often as a calm yet poignant process of oxidation and transformation.

My first French poems were written during the period of intensive psychic transformation that followed my reaching the New World in the confusion of a World War. To a very young man, long subjected to the experience of illness and mental-emotional isolation, these poems revealed a tumultuous cathartic power at work in his inner being in which also a war was raging. It often felt as if a very old being within the soul was opening strangely confusing doors through which light poured; but the light also made more visible the decaying remains of a personal and cultural past. Tragedy blended with exhortations to a new kind of living and a compassion for all beings.

My first book of English poetry, **Toward Man**, gathered poems written mainly during 1922 and 1923, thus after I came to California and while I was still living with my friend, Aryel Darma. My whole life has been a "**toward**" and a "**through**" — toward the realization of my archetypal destiny, through often renewed periods of cathartic crises culminating in some inner revelatory experience. In the book, **Toward Man**, one poem often arouses a strong response in people who hear me recite it. (I often have recited some of my poems before playing my music in informal lecture-recitals in order to create a mood of emotional attunement in the audience.) It was first printed in Peerly Poore Sheehan's book, **Hollywood as a World-City** (1924). I am reproducing the poem here because it is representative of feelings that were both very strong within me at the time and have a timeless significance.

The Chant of the Tree-Soul

They have cut me.

They have butchered me, the men!
They dragged me like fools
athwart my home, my sunlighted home.
All my brothers bowed their branches
and wept — because they knew.
They have torn the grove.
They have killed all shadows, all silences;
and they dragged me amidst the hiccoughs
of their beast, the machine,
spitting at me, the bound one, the tormented!
They have thrown me into the stream
and I have drifted and rotted for days
tossed by waves, lacerated by rocks,
til now all is dark, dark and wet,
and memory is gone . . . all memories.

We have stopped. I heard the men talking.
It is here . . . Soon all will be ended.
I hear the shrieking of the mills,
the poor wooden souls that shriek
because they fear to die.
I shall not cry . . . I shall be brave;
for I know . . . I know that yonder,
far amid the plains, little children sob
because they are cold and shelterless.

Oh! what a beautiful home my body,
my torn body, will make for them!

The majority of the poems in **Toward Man** sound such a poignant if not tragic tone; but the book ends with a song of peace and serenity:

Order is joy. Order is beauty.
From order to order I progress,
striding serenely across disorders
in which I can feel the pulse of a new god.

The next book of poems, **Resonances**, reflects a more relaxed and objective quality of being and consciousness. It was written between 1924 and 1929 but remains unpublished as a whole. Parts of it are reprinted in the anthology, **Of Vibrancy and Peace**, which contains a selection from all my books of poems written since 1916; it was published in 1967 and is now in its second edition, the first having been printed in Pondicherry, India at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. **The Iron City** is also of the same period. It includes poems written during weeks of oppressive city heat, "New York Summer." **White Thunder** was written mainly during summers I passed alone in New Mexico and also when I stayed in the desert near Palm Springs. The limited and signed edition of that book, beautifully printed and bound by a well-known art-binder, Hazel Dreis, was soon exhausted, but it was reprinted recently in facsimile edition. A number of its poems have an epic character, especially the somewhat long first one, "Paeon to the Great Thunder." I often have recited publicly the most intense of these poems, which require almost a kind of chanting. A cassette tape of my recitation of some of them is now available.(3)

Then came **Years of Crisis**, still unpublished as a whole. It was written during the critical years when my first marriage was breaking up. These are poems of emotional restlessness and love, at a time of profound disappointment with human beings and their egocentric ambitions and deceptions — a time of longing for psychically free relationships.

After the breakup of my second marriage in 1954, I began to write poetry attuned to the inner experiences sparked by my wife's departure. Their character is quite different from earlier poems, in a sense devotional, yet not in the usual religious way. The book, **Resurgence** is also unpublished as a whole, but a number of poems from it are included in **Of Vibrancy and Peace**. The second part of **Resurgence** was written just before and after a tragically aborted relationship with the young woman in San Jose (summer-fall 1957; **Resurgence** was completed in 1958). The few critics of poetry who have read these poems prefer them to all my earlier ones, perhaps because of their intensity and uncommon words and metaphors.

In Paris in 1959 and on my subsequent return to California I again wrote a few poems in French. A short series, **Une Reconte**, has deeply moved the few French people who read them at my California home. Once again a profound emotional experience which was totally frustrated had to find in them a purely imaginative and symbolic concreteness. The French language is beautiful for poetry, even if quite inadequate for dealing with new psychological realizations and metaphysical ideas. Someday, perhaps, a book may be published gathering the most significant of my French poems. Some can be heard on a cassette tape on which I recited them.

In my poetry, and in a different way in my piano music, the more personal aspect of my being finds its most direct expression. Yet to speak of personal expression is only a superficial way of considering these manifestations of a creative and, especially, a transformative impulse which has pervaded my whole being, and which required crucial events to be released and embodied in concrete images, words and tones. The most significant of these manifestations should be considered transpersonal rather than personal; for the personal events and crises were but lenses to bring to a focus the release of feelings, thoughts and spiritual realizations which were in fact necessary in the accomplishment of my destiny.

It has been said that the potential existence of **Tristan and Isolde** in Wagner's destiny forced him to meet and fall in love with Mathilda Wesendonck. In individuals in and through whom a destiny fulfills itself, all great crises are but unavoidable means for creative resolution into symbolic works of art. I have spoken of "transcrete" art because **through (trans)** these artistic-literary forms a spiritual life-energy **grows (creto)** and unfolds its power of existential transformation.

In the Christian religion — wherever its sacred and ritualistic character has not been supplanted by a rationalistic and atomistic individualism — the power of transcrete acts is symbolized by the transubstantiation of the sacred Host during the Mass and the worldwide ritual of the perpetual Adoration. In every great work of art, whatever the substance or form it uses, the transubstantiation of an Archetype into Art is witnessed. Art, when true to its inherent spiritual destiny, is (as I stated in an early book) a "release of power." Every great poem is essentially a **mantram**, a form of power. Art is magic or theurgy. It focuses into existential activity the power of elemental forces or god-revealing experiences.

-
1. This concept is fully developed in my 1979-80 book, **The Rhythm of Wholeness**.
 2. Cf. "**Eureka**" the little known, but quite remarkable essay by Edgar Allen Poe (1848). In 1915 it started me thinking in metaphysical terms — during World War I in Paris.
 3. The cassette recording is available at the **Big Sur Recordings** website.