

MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLES

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Transitionality, Memory and Creative Transmutation in Fiona Perry's *Alchemy* (2020)

Abstract: This essay examines Fiona Perry's *début* collection of free verse, *Alchemy* (2020), from the perspective of archetypal psychology and attachment theory. It argues that alchemical symbolism, specifically *nigredo* imagery, serves to poetically explore the critical notions of change and transition as pedagogical spaces for developing a deeper understanding of life through memory, trauma, loss, and displacement. This process of *learning through transitionality* is also mediated by the widespread and expressively intensified occurrences of many symbolic, mnestically-loaded and affectively-biased objects of everyday use exerting the function, like Winnicott's transitional objects, of psychic organisers and developmental facilitators in the most critical stages of the speaker's process of personal growth. Moreover, they open up a transitional third space of experience, where the *mundus imaginis* and the playful, poetic uses of verbal language act therapeutically as metaphysical intermediaries in the dialogue between conscious and unconscious, matter and spirit, time and eternity, the trivial and the sacred.

Keywords: Transitional objects. Transitional (third) space. Alchemy. Contemporary poetry. Memory. Mourning. Attachment theory.

Fiona Perry is a relatively little-known yet remarkably talented author. Originally from Northern Ireland, she is now an Oxford-based poet and fiction writer; she has lived in Australia and New Zealand and previously worked as an environmentalist in a unitary authority. She is now a teacher, editor, and proofreader. Her short story "Sea Change", a beautifully written and mysterious dream-focussed tale about family loss and return from the dead, was awarded the first prize in the 15th Bath Flash Fiction Award in June 2020. Her short fiction was shortlisted in the Australian Morrison Mentoring Prize in 2014 and 2015. She contributed poetry to the *Label Lit* project for National Poetry Day (Ireland) in 2019. Her first collection of verse, *Alchemy* (2020), was a Silver Medal winner in the Poetry Book Awards 2021.

1. *Alchemy*

*Alchemy*¹ includes 36 poems in free verse on several heterogeneous subjects. First, there is the theme, reminiscent of Alice Munro's work, of memory retrieval through the storytelling of collective and autobiographical experiences. This issue is central in

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¹ F. PERRY, *Alchemy*, Dublin, Turas Press, 2020. All quotations from the poems will refer to this edition.

the poignant "A History of the World", a poem set during the British experience of World War II. Here, the syntropic imagery, showing the affective bonds and intergenerational care of daily family life ("pad into the kitchen, / wrap custard creams in tissue paper", ll. 6-7), is interpolated at regular intervals with the sudden, entropic intrusions of air bomb announcements ("*Get Out. Bomb*", ll. 2, 21), conveyed by the symbolic figure of a young soldier knocking at the door. Autobiographical memory emerges in the reminiscence of the strong emotional connection with the beloved dead, such as the author's father, as in the recollection of family life through long, detailed lists of everyday memory objects, used by Perry in the poignantly autobiographical "Memory Box" to connect with and make sense of the past.

Many environmental issues also permeate the collection, such as the human-landscape relationships, in both the natural and urban contexts of Australia, New Zealand, England and Ireland which can be detected in the many detailed references to wild and garden plants, insects, birds, fish and wild animals, and serve to unveil the secret correspondences between the different realms of biological life. This can be detected in the almost hypnotical and clairvoyant vision of the "cross-stitch of tui whistles" beheld by the speaker on a "confectionery-pink / cherry blossom" ("*Spellbound*", ll. 1, 4-5), where the beautiful song of these native New Zealand birds shares the same poetic space with a plant, the cherry tree, which is of a relatively more recent acquisition in that country. This coexistence can be made on the basis of the metaphysical connection between the sensory qualities they convey: acoustically, the contrasting combination of sudden, sometimes soulful tui's calls, made of bellbird-like notes with clicks, coughs and more rough wheezing sounds corresponds, on the tactile plane, to the regular/irregular shape and surface texture of the cherry branches, this latter being straight-grained, with a satiny and smooth texture, but at the same time interspersed with brown pith flecks and small gum pockets. Moreover, the tui's characteristic white throat tufts, visible on their dark blue, green, and bronze-coloured throats, chromatically stand out as a very light shade of pink-red, then is chromatically similar to the cherry blossoms on the dark brown branches of this tree.

Related to these issues are also the political and social problems of cultural displacement and the identity crisis afflicting ethnic and gender outsiders in contemporary urban and suburban landscapes. This theme is compellingly personified by the transhistorical figure of the "Jesus Woman", protagonist of the eponymous poem, whose twelve female disciples emblematically represent all classes of history's oppressed women, such as a working-class single mother who delivers her stillborn baby "into a storm drain on Good Friday and ran away" (l. 16), itself reminiscent of Christ's crucifixion and death at Calvary, or a young "schoolgirl", victim of forced marriage in an "unfamiliar country" (ll. 13, 14). The theme is also present in the autotelic and collective narrative voice of the "ape men" (l. 1), the Māori warriors of "Heroes", who show, in the double-layered context of the nineteenth-century New Zealand Wars and the de-humanising and degrading conditions of life suffered by contemporary aboriginals in today's suburbia, the inconsistency of the difference between morality and the need for survival, the former being "a luxury for the privileged" (l. 26), because "survivors" (l. 26), once drawn out the epic plot of historical narrative, "cannot afford to be heroes" (l. 27).

The themes of disease, death, mourning and rebirth, the economy of human life cycles (birth, childhood, adulthood and old age), the visionary contemplation of the metaphysical breaches from one state of existence to another, the emotional and heightened perception of the thresholds between the visible and the invisible world, the intermingling of everyday trivia with the numinous of the sacred, religious and magical domains, the pairing of political consciousness and spiritual awareness are widely distributed in all poems of the collection. They testify of this author's fundamentally religious, magical, and Irish sensibility, especially when she merges pre-colonial Gaelic oral traditions and legends, "prayer, family myths and song lyrics",² into a series of autodiegetic narratives whose protagonists are always caught from the privileged observation point of being on the brink between life and death, reality and imagination, matter and spirit. This is the case, for instance, of the fascinating storytelling provided by the famous three-day-old Irish baby saint who tells his story in "St Rumbold's Well". During the brief span of his short life, the intimate, holistic connection between the protagonist and the Irish natural landscape is condensed to the extent that the human and the natural gradually merge into each other in a series of diegetic literalised metaphors ("I become a pebble by virtue of my swaddling / clothes", ll. 6-7), in the clairvoyant and prophetic vision of this threshold character, who lives on the brink between life and death and is thus able to behold their indissoluble coexistence and potential transcendence (see the prophetic image of "water locked / underground gleaming like mercury near / [his] future burial site", ll. 23-25), and in the implied author's unyielding political engagement against the Catholic child abuse cases related to the Tuam Babies.³ The poem's closure shows the latter with visionary poignancy when the baby saint becomes the champion of the Tuam victims by "Solemnly" (l. 35) pronouncing a sort of magical injunction, a performative speech act meant to exert the apotropaic effect of defending all children (his "tiny brothers", l. 35) from future abuse by infusing in them the cathartic energies of nature and the communal sharing of collective memory ("our stories have been infused in / raindrops", ll. 36-37), an uncompromised determination in waiting for retributive justice to punish the guilty adults ("sit tight as unexploded bombs in / still water", ll. 38-39), and the certainty of the relentless might of their mothers' grief, which "will right all wrongs" like a cathartic "tsunami of / [...] tears" (ll. 40, 39-40).

In "Róisín Raharui", perhaps the most intriguing and technically accomplished poem of the collection, these issues reach a higher level of expressive and thematic refinement when the dogmatic narrowness of a Catholic priest, who coldly relegates an unbaptised dead child, half Irish and half Aboriginal, to the "no man's / land of limbo – a frozen room / for the nameless" (ll. 2-4), is ruthlessly faced with the proud determination of her father, who resolves to dig a grave near her mother's tomb, to

² Author's self-presentation at: <https://www.writing.ie/resources/writing-poetry-alchemy-by-fiona-perry/> (last accessed on 21 May 2023).

³ The "Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home" was an Irish Catholic maternity home for unmarried women and their children; it was active between 1925 and 1961. From 2012 to 2020, the institute was at the centre of controversies and investigations on suspected cases of illegal adoptions and premature death among resident children.

grant his daughter a burial in “consecrated / ground” (ll. 9-10). The detached, almost anafective poetic voice which dominates in ll. 1-12 then leaves place to that of the father, who, through a series of juxtaposed poignant and determined affirmative clauses traces, in a climactic *crescendo*, the child’s path through death, renewal and eternal life. He describes her as a polymorphic living being, who first assumes all forms of natural life (“bird’s / shadow”, “marram-grass”, “seafowl howls”, ll. 15-16, 19, 22), then gleams in transcendent supernatural beauty “leaping like a flame!”, “back arched, limbs air-swaddled” (ll. 24, 25), and later grows elder until she lives her life perpetually, in a triumphant transfiguration of natural life into embodied eternity. This event occurs emblematically in the Māori *otherworld* of Te Reinga, the place where the spirits of the dead climb the pōhutukawa tree to live forever, and in the “curragh to Tech Duinn” (l. 40), a name for the Irish *otherworld* where the child will carry an emblem of her aboriginal origins (the valued carved “pounamu” stone, l. 43). Here, her perpetual existence will be protected by her family bonds (“my / ancestors”, ll. 47-48) and not by what has been proved as spiritually sterile cultural conventions, such as the Catholic religious dogma which initially relegated her to the limbo (“The angels / wouldn’t have me”, ll. 46-47). The formerly unnamed child, discriminated against because of her premature death, becomes at the end of the poem the enunciative voice who culturally and ontologically reappropriates her name and identity in this new existential dimension. She does so by breaking the barriers between life and death, the emptiness of religion and the fullness of spiritual experience, through the direct address to her mother and the sudden revelation that the Irish/Aboriginal name she has now, “*Róisín Rabarubi*” (l. 50), is the same she had received by the latter before her birth, thus before the setting of any religious dogma.

2. *Change, Transitionality, and Alchemy*

All these issues (memory; life, death, and rebirth; existential separation-metaphysical relatedness; cultural and geographical localisation-displacement; magic, supernaturalism, and the mysticism of everyday life) pinpoint the critical notions of *change*, i.e. the modifying act or punctual event through which something becomes different or is altered from its previous state of existence, and *transition*, i.e. the diachronic transformative process of passing from a previous change event to a subsequent one, affecting individuals on the physical, emotional, and psychological levels to make them *other*. It is, therefore, easy to understand the author’s choice for the symbol of alchemy as the unifying image and title of the collection, as this ancient discipline’s central end goal, the gradual and systematic transmutation of physical matter and the adept’s psyche from base chemical states and elementary psychic processes towards higher and more refined ones, is directly concerned with the archetypes of Change (what it is, how it can be reached) and Transition (through which stages and with what results).

“Distillation” and “Transmutations” are the only poems in the collection explicitly referring to alchemical procedures in their titles. Still, they condense this symbolic core as a key to understanding the other poems also, in direct connection with the

overall notions of *change* and *transition*. “Distillation” refers to the laboratory process of alchemical purification, consisting in boiling a liquid to rapid evaporation and condensation as vapour (*distillatio*), itself a metaphor for the conversion of an element of the compound into another, to form, through subsequent sublimation, a perfect unity (the fifth element).⁴ The image serves to convey the notion of *transformation* as a metaphysical process in which any change of existential state, from health to disease, from death to mourning, leaves something behind as the rest of a modification now happened and ended (the “puddle / wax of a thousand / blessed candles burnt / in a kitchen shrine”, ll. 1-4; the memory of injections to morphine mixed with the cries of pain of the sick and the empathy of relatives, who share the suffering: “sinewy / morphine cries [...] / muted transmissions / of constant sorrow”, ll. 7-10). At the same time, this transformation guides the process to its necessary development into perfection and purification of matter and psyche, that is, towards a new start. In the end, disease and collectively shared family grief are transfigured into archetypal elements of transmutation leading from death to renewed life since the memory of the lost beloved ones is the *rest* which testifies to the accomplishment of the refinement produced on individual conscience, whose durability is similar to the olfactive, metaphysical and almost mystical lastingness of the “scent of jasmine” (l. 15). This image is reminiscent of the alchemical process of stone purification, where long-term work over matter ends up by showing the compost’s essential purity (“Just essence / of the thing, / crystalline”, ll. 12-14), but is not exempt from grief and suffering (as a commonplace for the philosophical *distillatio*, the beads of liquid which accumulate in the sides of the vessel are often metaphorised, in alchemical literature, as “tears”).⁵ In the poem’s closure, a new distillation process, this time conclusive, unfolds under the eyes of the speaker. Still, with a significant difference: now it is a minute incident of everyday life, in the form of a “tea bud unfurling, / water-wakened, / in a cup” (ll. 16-18), which functions as a vehicle for a new distillation metaphor, whose triviality closes the circle around the punctual traumatic events of death and mourning, therefore taking the alchemical process of transmutation back to the habitual, repetitive and consequently change-resistant behaviours of everyday life.

In “Transmutations”, the image of the Stowe Gardens’ Temple of Ancient Virtues, with its well-known sculptural figures (Epaminondas, Lycurgus, Socrates, Homer) embodying a series of enlightened ideals (prudence, virtue, wisdom, and honour), functions as a special vehicle for the subject’s capacity to trespass the apparent limits separating time and space, life and death, past and present, old and young. This experience occurs through the production and relative fruition of the mathematical, Pythagorean perfection of a sudden, spontaneously uttered child song. This song, emitted by the poetic I’s daughter, is described as a sort of pre-conscious kind of music emerging to consciousness. The speaker perceives it as “molecular scales, before / notes” (ll. 8-9),

⁴ See the corresponding entries in L. ABRAHAM, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, Cambridge, CUP, 1998.

⁵ Instances of this can be observed, among many others, in John Frederick Houppregh’s *Aurifontina chymica* (1680, p. 26), Sir George Ripley’s “Cantilena” (1450?, stanza 188), and John Cleveland’s “On the Arch-Bishop of Canterbury” (1647, l. 38).

then as an unexpected, phonetically sounding intimation of alchemical perfection, “unadulterated as gold ingots” (l. 9). These latter, like the potable, cathartic *aurum* of the alchemists, ascending from the innermost depths of matter and psyche, and passing through the mouth (the vehicle of the communication of virtue, both in ancient oration and in poetry), elevate the listening adept-mother to the symbolic status of kingship (spiritual perfection), characteristic of the *rubedo* stage, that is, the final major transmutative step in the *magnum opus*: “glide / from her mouth up into the vault / fanning out, ribboning towards / to anoint the crown of her head” (ll. 9-12; my emphasis). Analogously as in the *rubedo* stage, the poem’s closure shows how the alchemical perfection attained by virtue manifests a powerful environmental force as a “reverberation” (l. 13) spreading all around the child, affecting her attentively listening speaker by infusing new life force in her “veins” (l. 13) and penetrating in her “opened throat” (l. 14), as in an intimate reversed bird’s feeding from baby-bird/child to mother. This reverberation echoes the latter’s cathartic, life-giving effects in a more subtle and spiritual plane, now physically inaudible and transpersonal, transhistorical, where “a multitude of suspended fossils / in the masonry” (ll. 16-17) of this monumental memorial object, are suddenly revived and brought back into existence (“creak and burst into life”, l. 17). Thus, change and transformation become, as in an alchemical *opus*, the privileged *loci* of transmutation, places where the heightened perception of sudden, epiphanic intimations of essential transcendence breaches the entropic process of historical transience.

Perry has recently clarified the close relationship existing between the transhistorical and collective dimension of change and transition, related to the alchemical archetype, and the minutest events characterising what she terms as the “ebb and flow of everyday life as it is lived”⁶ and instead related to the personal experience and family history of individuals. As she stated recently, *Alchemy* is meant to “provide a glimpse into how life events, ancestry, nature, political landscape, and culture gradually alter or influence a person’s inner chemistry or ‘break the heart open’”.⁷ The final quotation is a rewording of the closure of Mary Oliver’s “Lead”,⁸ whose poignantly ecstatic speaker, but at the same time, a practically aware and unobtrusive knower of the natural world as one of predators and prey, life and death, eternity and transience, warns the reader against human’s inattentiveness to the sacredness and beauteousness available in every passing moment of ordinary nature’s life-cycles. Hence, the loon’s song, coming out from its “elegant beak” (l. 11) and crying out “in the long, sweet savouring of its life / which, if you have heard it, / you know is a sacred thing” (ll. 12-14), as well as its “speckled” and “iridescent” (ll. 21, 22) beauty are inevitably destined, in Mary’s Olivers’ vision, to decay and death. The intersection between the human and the natural world evidences the limits of human consciousness and language in grasping such an encounter. This is due to our unheeding lack of awareness of the sacredness which inheres in the unexpected confrontation with the living *other*. The last five lines of the

⁶ See her already quoted self-presentation at: <https://www.writing.ie/resources/writing-poetry-alchemy-by-fiona-perry/> (last accessed on 21 May 2023).

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ M. OLIVER, *New and Selected Poems*, 2 vols, Boston, Beacon Press, 2005, Vol. I, p. 54.

poem (“I tell you this / to break your heart, / by which I mean only / that it break open and never close again / to the rest of the world”, ll. 26-30) have been inserted in the epigraph of *Alchemy*, and constitute, as Perry herself has declared, “a personal mission statement”⁹ setting the intention of the book: that of exploring the very essence of the human condition as a process of relentless transition from one moment of change to the next, a process interspersed with passing but, at the same time, self-transmuting moments of heightened perception of transcendence, whose perfect Pythagorean *ratio* and cosmologic scope is nevertheless essentially unknowable by the human mind. Furthermore, the “lead” of Oliver’s title also implicitly provides Perry with the starting point of this process. This becomes evident for two reasons. In the alchemical *opus*, the *prima materia*, that is, the raw material, both physical and psychological, out of which philosophical gold will become manifest in the final *rubedo* phase, is properly lead. Secondly, this metal symbolises, in the Western Esoteric worldview as well in archetypal psychology, the Saturnian frame of mind of the initially unaware and depressed individual-adept who copes with the inevitability of death, loss and decay in life during the *nigredo* stage, that is, the incipital phase of the alchemical process.¹⁰

3. *Life as an Alchemical Laboratory*

In the human lifelong process of growth, where the “ebbs and flows of life as it is lived” are integral, not incidental, parts of the individual and collective path to wisdom, the phenomenon of *learning through transitionality*, that is, the acquisition of new knowledge and self-awareness during peculiar moments of passage from one existential state to another, is crucial to gain a thorough understanding of the originality and freshness of Perry’s application of the alchemical symbolism to the minutest incidents of everyday life.

In alchemy, specifically in the esoteric one, the *magnum opus* has to be intended as a process of psychological development through which any change occurring in the alembic serves as an externalised metaphor for a corresponding passage of state, in the adept’s psyche, from baser and more elementary to higher and more conscious emotional and cognitive processes, and it is for this reason that Jung equals it to the process of individuation, i.e. the lifelong psychological growth towards the full awareness of one’s *Self*, evolving as a constant dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious parts on the psyche.¹¹ Moreover, during this process, the perception of death, loss and decay, which are distinctive of material life as transience and loss and felt as potentially insurmountable obstacles in the depressive blackness of the *nigredo* stage, are destined to be overcome by the clarity of vision and enlightenment of insightful whiteness of the *albedo*,¹² which immediately precedes *rubedo*, the final goal stage. To the esoteric

⁹ AA. VV., *Celebrating Fiona Perry’s Début Collection of Poetry*, Alchemy, Turas Press YouTube Channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow3bKnikeME&t=307s> [minute 18:43 to 19:10].

¹⁰ See J. HILLMAN, *Alchemical Psychology*, Thompson, CT, Spring Publications, 2010 (2021), pp. 82-94.

¹¹ C.G. JUNG, *Psychology and Alchemy*, London, Routledge, (1944) 2008, pp. 3, 35, 346, 475-83. See also M.-L. VON FRANZ, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology*, Toronto, Inner City Books, 1980, p. 76.

¹² J. HILLMAN, *Alchemical Psychology*, pp. 124-201.

adept, life is a laboratory,¹³ a unique opportunity to refine the understanding of one's spiritual essence and transmuting potential through the meticulous and meaningful observation of these privileged moments dominated by change and transitionality.

Analogously, to Fiona Perry, life possesses a strong pedagogical force. It is a special place of learning in which individuals, family groups, and even entire Nations act as ever-moving subjects, in an incessant transit from unawareness to awareness, through passing moments of keen apprehension of the secret relationships between the inner and outer realities, past and present, matter and spirit; moments that are always incomplete, yet revelatory, as temporary steps in a lifelong process of progressive growth and becoming.

In *Alchemy*, this pedagogical force emerges in particular conditions that threaten or potentially threaten to sever our innate capacity to maintain a perceived continuity in our personal identity over time, to be safely alone within ourselves, and at the same time, force us to develop a nearly supernatural, if not divine, capacity to creatively evolve in line with the titanic, exogenous forces that unremittently subject us to change, loss and the inevitability of psychologic development. These traumatic or potentially traumatic experiences, both personal and collective, are those that Perry calls "life's milestones",¹⁴ such as birth and death, war, and disease.

In "Postpartum", for instance, life begins as a "naked" and "bloodied wake of birth" (ll. 1, 12). Here, the images of the "universe" with "too many doors" (l. 4) and that of the dreamed "terrifying flower / unfurled overnight" (ll. 4-5) give a mother the clairvoyant vision that her new-born baby is both a threshold to an unimagined potential of personal growth and the foundation of an unfamiliar new world, where old parameters are about to be irrevocably replaced with new ones ("Everything / is unfastening around me", ll. 12-13) and where she is imperatively called upon to find new meanings to this experience, to "allow the stars to realign" (l. 15). In "Transmutations", the regenerating force of the daughter's song even crushes ("creak and burst", l. 17) the deadly *inertia* of the fossils' timelessly suspended existence, in the between and in the meanwhile of life and history, then exerting more powerful energy now, to bring them into life again, than what was necessary for getting them to death and stamping their traces in stone, millions of years ago. In both poems, birth is an evolution-inducing moment, working abruptly and distressfully, leading through trauma or potential trauma to a clearer understanding of life and its secret dynamics.

On the other side of the existential *spectrum*, death is an *Ananke* endowed with feral and, at the same time, aesthetic ineluctability, as it occurs in "Panthera", where the regal elegance of a sinuous feline body coexists with the animal's belonging to a "shifting / legion inclined / to swallow a child" (ll. 26-28). Formally, death befalls suddenly in the text, as a presupposition tacitly assumed beforehand at the beginning of the speaker's lyrical monologues and then revealed to the reader without any or few indications of the context of this event. This phenomenon takes, for instance,

¹³ S.J. LINDEN, *Darke Hieroglyphics. Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, (1996) 2008, pp. 8-9.

¹⁴ AA. VV., *Celebrating Fiona Perry's Début Collection of Poetry*, Alchemy [minute 18:33].

the form of the abrupt image of a baby in a coffin ("The Incorruptible"), to which the reader has not been prepared in advance, whose "hair was spread over sateen / in her resting place" (ll. 11-12), and stands out in sharp contrast with the preceding metaphoric description of her energy, when she was still alive, as a "steady archer / taking aim in a forest" (ll. 3-4). In "Unburden", similarly as it occurs in the already mentioned "Róisín Raharuhi", death becomes the occasion of a metaphysical, mutual-aid relationality between the dead and the living, and it manifests itself as a fatal event, already occurred before the *zero* point of narration. In this case, this expressive effect is conveyed through the paradigmatic juxtaposition of a series of verbal instructions and remembered moments of family life given by the dead to those who are still alive, with the intent of accompanying them step by step to their departure, as if the dead were the loving sentinels of the living, monitoring and protecting their beloved ones for the rest of the time they still have to live ("Talk to the / uniformed boy at your bedside", "Demand / that it is noted in the coroner's / report what a handful I was", "Describe how you carried me / over the threshold / [...] on our wedding day", "Now ask the nurse / for stronger medicine, my love", ll. 6-7, 12-14, 16-17 and 18, 24-25). Death reveals its alchemical transmuting potential by acting on the subject through trauma and distress to display the cathartic force of the *nigredo* phases of existence. In "Panthera, this potential is inscribed in the feline's "patient amber / eyes" (ll. 21-22), where the inspired speaker can "decipher" (l. 22) the animal's transindividual, archetypal significance ("you / are more black hole / than substance", ll. 22-24), as well as numinous nature, like a Blakean tiger, elusive to intellect yet irresistibly charming and awe-inspiring ("a moveable trap door", l. 25).

In "A History of the World", another emblematic life's milestone, war, bursts into a British family's everyday life spreading its disintegrating effects on the people's bodies and minds ("dismembered by bombs, skewered by shrapnel", l. 13). Then it propagates as a devastating cultural epidemic which makes the victims learn and then communicate violence in turn ("raped and taught to kill", l. 14); finally, it ends up perverting all family bonds, under the sign of the terrible and irretrievable bereavement of a deadly embrace indistinctly involving the living and the dead, old and new generations ("They've thrown us half-alive on our mothers' / corpses in open graves", ll. 15-16). Similarly, in "Misfirings", *Alzheimer's* disease advances despite the loving care of the patient's family, eroding personal memories and affection with the mechanistic irreversibility of an aseptic plethora of medical terms spreading over the closing lines as memory loss devastates the human brain, wearing-out meanings through senseless formal redundancy: "a short circuit to the neuronal / loop running from the orbital frontal / cortex to the cingulate gyrus, / striatum, globus pallidus, thalamus and back / to the frontal cortex" (ll. 26-30). Yet, in both cases, trauma becomes the litmus paper which makes emotional bonds emerge and strengthen. In "A History of the World", the framed iteration of the five verses on the bombing alert at the beginning and end of the poem is overcome by the central part of the text, where homeless people on the run still maintain the solidity of daily family life, under the silent, but at the same time, eloquent and overarching presence of eternity ("The stars shouting silently", l. 9). In "Misfirings", the progression of the disease is similarly overcome by a sudden intrusion in the

observers' consciousness, of an analogous form of timeless wisdom and a metaphysical apprehension of the absolute plane of existence when the speaker finally realises that "We are not the authors of our / own thoughts" (ll. 24-25) and that the patient's brain, "even when broken, is a miniature / universe. A wonder" (ll. 31-32).

In a last emblematic poem ("Breakers"), which is worth mentioning, these "life's milestones" acquire the archetypal status of existential breakers, "heavy ocean-wave[s] which break [...] violently into foam against a rocky coast or in passing over reefs or shallows" (*OED*, "breaker", n.¹, 5). Here the author metaphorically relates them to "foaming diamonds / released from saltwater" (ll. 13-14), alluding to those unexpected moments of revelation during which the unusual, unfamiliar components of life with all their crushing, overwhelming and even distressing load and at the same time, evolution-inducing potential, suddenly break through our otherwise repetitive and customary existences. Hence, the reference to "saltwater" and "foaming diamonds" as double-layered alchemical symbols of dynamic renewal (water, foam), and at the same time, of the inevitability of suffering (salt)¹⁵ reminds us of the essential function of "life's milestones" as soteriological means to perfection (diamond) and purification (water), during individuation and psychological growth.

As in the blackest depths of the *nigredo* stage, where purification necessitates a passage into *mortificatio*, the metaphorical 'killing' of one's Ego-centredness by physical and psychological asceticism, penance, and abstinence, also in these poems, transcendence is caught through the experience of transience in all its different and potentially painful, distressing forms. As we have seen, this effect is reached, in the collection, at the actantial plane, when the characters of these poetical narrations face off these "life's milestones" and then break the barriers between time and eternity to gain access to the absolute, which is beyond historical time and space, and allows them to collect the noetic knowledge which is necessary to evolve through trauma and loss, "knowing full well a permanent transmutation has taken place" through sorrow ("Psychopomp", l. 20).

Perry uses two other devices to convey this crucial symbolic core, itself consistent with the notion of learning through transitionality and symbolically reminiscent of the positive, cathartic aspects of alchemical *nigredo*. The first device is the insertion, throughout the collection, of recurring objects of everyday use having the function of transitional objects; the second device is the recourse to figurative language, more specifically, metaphor, simile, and synecdoche in connection with the paradigms of change, memory and the overcoming of loss during the already mentioned "life's milestones".

4. *Transitional Objects and Figurative Language*

With the term 'transitional object', I refer to D.W. Winnicott's studies on specific soft toys or blankets to which young children develop intense and persistent attachments during the first phases of their cognitive and emotional development.¹⁶ According to

¹⁵ J. HILLMAN, *Alchemical Psychology*, pp. 54-81.

¹⁶ D.W. WINNICOTT, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", in ID., *Playing and Reality*,

Winnicott, in the case of a satisfying and 'good-enough' mother-child relationship, the child can safely and serenely transfer the essential properties of the mother (keeping safe, nurturing) to the object and, through this latter, mature the capacity for self-soothing, which is, in turn, fundamental in any healthy process of psychological growth and emotional autonomy development, without experiencing any traumatic sense of loss.¹⁷ Winnicott began to study the phenomenon of transitionality when he served as a consultant paediatrician to the children's evacuation programme during the Second World War, and he formulated his ideas through direct observation of children who had been separated from their mothers during perhaps the most traumatic situation ever.¹⁸ He discovered that this attachment is a crucial phase of Ego development, when the child establishes a sense of self, distinct from all other parts of the external environment and grows as an independent young adult, overcoming the emotional stress implied in the inevitable separation from the mother.¹⁹ Moreover, this attachment testifies to the insurgence of the mental process of reality-testing, that is, the capacity to objectively evaluate an emotion or thought against real life and to distinguish one's inner world of thoughts and feelings from the external world.²⁰ Transitional objects, then, are essential tools in the process of learning through everchanging experiences and a form of spontaneous self-healing in case of trauma or potential trauma. Moreover, they facilitate the transition from emotional dependence to independence.

In Perry's collection, household objects of everyday use abound, from the "stroking glassy-eyed china cats" ("Freedom", l. 11) to the "wrap(ped) custard creams in tissue paper" (l. 7) of "A History of the World", from the "heirloom tea set" of "Unburden" (l. 12) to the "covered / mixing bowl of bread dough" mentioned in "Small Comforts" (ll. 1-2). For a series of reasons which will be examined now, they regularly display the essential qualities of Winnicott's transitional objects: emotional attachment; close connection with past experience and memory; insurgence in critical moments of change; function of developmental facilitators during the individual's growth process.²¹

First of all, the speaker has developed a form of persistent emotional attachment to them, to the extent that she even assumes rights over them, as in the case of the objects left by the deceased father in the family house of "Timepiece", that shuffle in the poetic I's mind as juxtaposed lexemes, jumbled in the textual space in a desperate try to keep in touch with him, through them ("old biscuit tins, the mouth of / figurines, cracks between floorboards, / teacups, U-bends", ll. 29-31). Secondly, like Winnicott's transitional objects, Perry's are mnestically loaded, as they are closely related to the

London and New York, Routledge, 1989, p. 1; originally published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34, 1953, pp. 89-97.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ E. ELLSWORTH, *Places of Learning. Media, Architecture, Pedagogy*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 59.

¹⁹ C.J. LITT, "Theories of Transitional Object Attachment: An Overview", *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 9, 1986, p. 384.

²⁰ D.W. WINNICOTT, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", pp. 11-13.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 5, 15. See also D. METCALF and R. SPITZ, "The Transitional Object: Critical Developmental Period and Organiser of the Psyche", in S.A. GROLNICK et al. (eds), *Between Reality and Fantasy*, New York, Jason Aronson, 1978, p. 105.

speaker's happy past, where care, presence, and soothing were regularly experienced and exchanged. An example is the eight remnants of her family life, meticulously listed in "Memory Box" ("a Sutton Seed Packet", "Thomas à Kempis' Imitation of Christ", "a crochet needle", "a wage slip", "a photo of Sloan Street", "a CD of Puccini's Gianni Schicchi", "a pigeon's life ring", "a family bible", ll. 1, 4, 8, 11, 15, 18, 22 and 25). In other instances, the affective link is to the Nation's collective past, as in the flashing reminiscences of Māori's heroism during the New Zealand Wars, and here mediated by reference to the "tomahawk" ("Heroes", l. 11).

Thirdly, and analogously as transitional objects, which appear in the child's life during periods of relative distress and insecurity, where the sense of separateness from the mother is felt as stronger, similarly, these special objects also occur and even thicken quantitatively in the poems where "life's milestones", transitionality and change dominate the imagery. In "Memory Box", for instance, the lyrical space is saturated by the lexical presence of the already-seen memory objects related to the speaker's deceased father. In "Swimming", the reference to the "new dresses / sewn by your mother" (ll. 16-17) symbolises individual memory's power to recombine the present, in which separation is felt as real, with the happy past of relationality and togetherness, therefore recomposing the fragments of life to form a new and renewed experience heading forward to the future, as a patient seamstress makes a new dress for a young girl.

As in Winnicott's transitional objects, in *Alchemy*, these objects of everyday use not only occur in critical moments of change (birth, death, war and disease). They also facilitate the poetic I's transition from one phase of life to the next, thus acting as developmental facilitators. For instance, in "Distillation", "a thousand / blessed candles burnt / in a kitchen shrine" (ll. 2-4) to honour the memory of the deceased carry a strong emotional load – the attachment to the beloved one now disappeared – as they rekindle the memory of his "last upright / embrace cushioning [her]" (ll. 5-6). This image then evolves from transitionality to loss overcoming when the speaker's consciousness lingers on the "scent of jasmine / tea buds unfurling, / water-weakened, / in a cup" (ll. 15-18), itself a diegetic metaphor for the self-healing process of transmutation through distillation, that is the alchemical process of purification through separation of previously mixed substances, that has just taken place also in the internalised dimension of her psyche as a process of emotional differentiation from the beloved one and culminating in autonomy and independence ("Just essence / of the thing, / crystalline", ll. 12-14).

Finally, a special kind of memory object, a handful of symbolic bird tarot cards mentioned in "Bird Tarot" and left to the speaker by a now absent "you", also functions in this case as a transitional object, in the specific sense Winnicott and others ascribe to the adults' use of analogous items of self-comfort to alleviate the anxieties of life (such as mobile smartphones,²² but also objects kept from the deceased and used to cope with bereavement).²³ Here, however, tarots are used in the more profound

²² See M. SHARIF, "The 'Mastery' of the Swipe: Smartphones, Transitional Objects and Interstitial Time", *First Monday*, 21 (10), 2016, pp. 1-27; I. MACRURY and C. YATES, "Framing the Mobile Phone: The Psychopathologies of an Everyday Object", *CM: Communication and Media*, 11 (38), 2016, pp. 41-70.

²³ C. WAKENSHAW, "The Use of Winnicott's Concept of Transitional Objects in Bereavement Practice", *Bereavement Care*, 39 (3), 2020, pp. 119-23.

sense, namely to cope, through the mediation of symbol, with the unending, lifelong work of putting inner, invisible realities in dialogue with outer, visible ones. Moreover, the ornithological imagery of this deck further reinforces the connection with the domain of transitional objects, as it is very common, among children and adults, to elect a non-human animal as an item of self-comfort during periods of crisis and transition. This is the case of companion pets, who, similarly to stuffed animals but with a significant increase in the possibilities of relationality and emotional reciprocation inherent in the interaction with another living being, function as higher forms of psychic mediators within the lifelong process of personal development and individuation.²⁴

In "Bird Tarot", non-human imagery takes the form of a series of birds with strong symbolic undertones and becomes the liminal third space of experience in which the speaker negotiates and gives meaning to the sense of loss for the death of the beloved one. This goal is reached by being ready to intuitively behold the everlasting metaphysical connection between the inner reality of the psyche, where spirit transcends relative space-time bonds into sudden clairvoyant insights, eidolically breaching into the absolute, and the outer reality of everyday life, rooted in the prosaic here-and-now unawareness of a "neighbours' TV aerial [,] barbecue[s]" (l. 1), "chips" (l. 3), a "kitchen window" (l. 8), a "vanilla pancake" (l. 8), and aviaries "decorated with / web, ghouls and candles" (ll. 9-10) for the consumerist and conventional version of the eve of All Saints' Day, Halloween. This interpolation between spirit and matter, absolute and trivial reality, clairvoyant sight and objective notation of the minute particulars of everyday life are again consistent with the overall symbolism of *nigredo*, where higher and lower realities still coalesce in the compost before they are sublimated and purified. In the poem, these opposing realities can be detected in the choice of these tarot birds, as the list ranges from the lofty symbolism of the "Ibis" (l. 1), an ancient lunar symbol of occult knowledge, and the Egyptian version of Hermes as Thoth, as this latter is depicted with the head of this bird and is a tutelary deity of alchemy,²⁵ to the triviality of the pigeons, occurring two times in the text as many couples of birds ("a pigeon [...] / watched by another"; "A pair of wood pigeons", ll. 3-4 and 7).

Whereas the "Ibis" is oriented towards the vertical symbolic plane of ascent and is depicted as a mystical sentinel of the mystic otherworld of esoteric initiates since it stands as an "incumbent" (l. 1) presence watching over the pettiness of "TV aerial[s]" and garden "barbecue[s]" (l. 1), and is separated from the context as an elevated, stylised shape, similar to a "cloud", against the "sky" (l. 2), the pigeons are on the other hand located on the horizontal plane of trivial life, since they are busy at eating "chips" (l. 3), in the first case, and at copulating on a "brick wall / outside the kitchen window" (ll.

²⁴ See C. PERIN, "Dogs as Symbols in Human Development in Interrelations Between People and Pets", in B. FOGLE (ed.), *A Symposium on the Human-companion Animal Bond*, Springfield, IL, Charles C. Thomas, 1981, pp. 68-88; E.S. PAUL and J.A. SERPELL, "Childhood Pet Keeping and Humane Attitudes in Young Adulthood", *Animal Welfare*, 2, 1993, pp. 321-38; A.H. KATCHER, "The Future of Education and Research on the Human-animal Bond and Animal-assisted Therapy. Part B: Animal-assisted Therapy and the Study of Human-animal Relationships: Discipline or Bondage? Context or Transitional Object?", in A.H. FINE (ed.), *Handbook on Animal-assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice*, San Diego, Academic Press, 2000, pp. 461-73.

²⁵ H.B. WERNESSE, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*, New York, Continuum, 2006, entry "Ibis".

7-8), in the case of the “wood pigeons” (l. 7). The ascetic loneliness of the Ibis as a single, isolated bird contrasts with the trivial togetherness of the coupled, plural wood pigeons of ll. 7-8. Whereas the Ibis stands on the houses’ rooftop, in a somewhat remote position from the context, the pigeons are instead involved in it, as they occupy more public and popular topical spaces: the clocktower of “St Michael at the North Gate” (l. 3), in central Oxford, and “a brick wall / outside the kitchen window” in the speaker’s home (ll. 7-8).

Ornithological symbolism becomes more intriguing in the other two birds mentioned in the poem. “A nesting magpie” (l. 5) introduces in the text the myth of the eternal return, as Eliade would term it,²⁶ a religious and esoteric belief common in the cultures of all times, according to which each thing on Earth corresponds to a sacred, celestial counterpart. This becomes evident in the seme of CYCLICITY, which dominates the imagery in the lines dedicated to the magpie, from its “nesting” (l. 5) activity (a seasonal occupation which may occur from June to December, related to natural lifecycles and the symbolism of the circle, due to the form of its characteristic round-shaped nest), to the fly of the bird, who “swoops towards [the speaker’s] head again and again” (l. 5), a movement which is soon mirrored by the action of the speaker and the topical place, an area of water surrounded by land, where this action occurs, as she observes the bird while she “cycle[s] / around Lake Monger” (ll. 5-6). The popular magpie’s symbolism related to witchcraft, unscrupulousness and doubleness, due to its liking for shiny objects,²⁷ is moreover redoubled through the image of the “long-necked turtles” (l. 6), the *Chelodina colliei*, which is characteristic of the habitat of Lake Monger, a large urban wetland on the Swan Coastal Plain in suburban Perth, in Western Australia, and known among experts as underwater apex predators, and opportunistic carnivores.²⁸ Again, in this image, everyday reality (“nesting”, a tourist’s “cycling” around a lake) reveals unexpected breaches into the world of symbols and soul images, as suggested by the metaphysical coalescence of different planes of reality via the common circle/cyclical imagery.

A last ornithological image closes the series of five emblematic birds in the poem with an unexpected symbolic twist that anaphorically gives additional undertones to the other ones. The “Wedgewood-blue budgie”, which “flutters around and aviary” (l. 9), can be interpreted as both a real bird with blue plumes (a small parrot, very common in many Western houses) and an artificial bird, as it may also refer to the graceful cameo-like birds which are sometimes depicted on a special kind of eighteenth-century stoneware blue pottery known as Jasperware and still sold worldwide. Here the metaphysical interpenetration between the absolute and the relative, spirit and matter, is conveyed through this imaginal ambiguity, as the bird is both a natural bird, related to transience and an artificial bird pointing to eternity, possibly with Yeatsian undertones (one thinks of the artificial golden bird of “Sailing to Byzantium”). This interpenetration can be symbolically related to the symbolic parrot’s mediating function,

²⁶ M. ELIADE, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of The Eternal Return*, Engl. trans. W.R. TRASK, New York, Bollingen, (1959) 1964, pp. 17-21.

²⁷ H.B. WERNES, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*, entry “Magpie”.

²⁸ D. MOLL and E.O. MOLL, *The Ecology, Exploitation and Conservation of River Turtles*, Oxford, OUP, 2004, p. 124.

in archetypal psychology, between conscious and unconscious.²⁹ At the same time, its “blue” colour is reminiscent of the receptive capacity of the learning mind during the transitional phases of individuation.³⁰ Furthermore, its round movement equates it to the Magpie via the seme of CYCLICITY, while its sad song (“singing plaintively”, l. 10) is reminiscent of the sacredness of this period of the year (the All Saints’ Eve) and then contrasts with the triviality of the “trick or treaters” (l. 10) who playfully and lightly celebrate Halloween. Death is then a composite image in which the sacred and the profane coexist. The parrot represents this double-layered symbolism displaying one of the most typical characteristics of the living symbols of the collective unconscious, the simultaneous coexistence, or *coniunctio*, of complementary opposites, in a perpetual, dynamic (*syzygial*) relationship.³¹

In a more general sense, in “Bird Tarot”, ornithological imagery serves Perry to convey the symbolism of the alchemical bird, or “bird of Hermes”, an image used in alchemy to indicate the phase in which the vapours of the compost ascend in the alembic during the ascensional stages of *distillatio* and *sublimatio* and the subsequent phases when they precipitate as purified, spiritualised matter.³² The coalescence of triviality and loftiness, natural life and the absoluteness of eternity, which can be perceived in these images, confirms this impression. Moreover, the recourse to the tarot symbolism adds a specific characteristic to these birds: they function as a third, mediating space of experience between life and eternity, unawareness and spiritual knowledge. In this connection, thus, they exert the same function of Corbin’s *mundus imaginalis*, the liminal frontier made up of collective, archetypal symbols, serving as an intermediary between conscious and unconscious, human and divine, matter and spirit, time and eternity,³³ during the process of individuation in which the subject learns about himself by imaginatively *reading* and interpreting, through synchronicity and symmetric logic, his life as a book of meaningful sings, leading to the centre of his personality, the Self.³⁴ As such, these birds, when read intuitively as tarots by the speaker and indirectly by the reader, and due to their close connection with personal and family memory, also function as transitional objects, psychic organisers and metaspaces of the creative negotiation between past and present awareness, presence and loss, life and bereavement, reality and imagination, internalised and externalised experience.

In this regard, Winnicott himself stressed the importance of transitional relatedness with objects within the processes of symbolisation and play, characteristic of artistic behaviour and an intermediate area of experience for the development and exercise of

²⁹ M.-L. VON FRANZ, *Individuation in Fairy Tales*, Dallas, Spring, 1977, pp. 49-50.

³⁰ J. HILLMAN, “Alchemical Blue and the *Unio Mentalis*”, in C. ESHLEMAN (ed.), *Sulfur I*, Pasadena, California Institute of Technology, 1981, pp. 33-50.

³¹ See C.G. JUNG, “The Psychological Aspects of the Kore”, in ID., *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, eds G. ADLER and R.F.C. HULL, Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., (1941) 1980, Vol. IX/1, pp. 182-203, p. 191, and *Psychological Types*, in ID., *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, eds G. ADLER and R.F.C. HULL, Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., (1921) 1976, Vol. VI, pp. 479-80.

³² L. ABRAHAM, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, entry “Bird of Hermes”.

³³ H. CORBIN, *L’imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d’Ibn Arabi*, Paris, Flammarion, 1958, p. 196.

³⁴ C.G. JUNG, “Concerning Mandala Symbolism”, in ID., *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, eds G. ADLER and R.F.C. HULL, Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., (1950) 1980, Vol. IX/1, pp. 355-84, p. 357.

creativity in adult life as means, universally shared by humans, of coping with life's difficulties.³⁵ Furthermore, other scholars, such as V.H. Rosen (1964), Susan Deri (1978), Ruth Miller (1978), and P.W. Pruyser (1983), "believe that the basis for active, creative activity in adult life is the capacity for existence in the intermediate space between reality and fantasy and that the child's attachment to an inanimate [transitional] object represents the prototype of this capacity".³⁶

In the perspective of transitionality, creative imagination is a third behavioural space mediating between the individual and the internalised-externalised planes of experience during individual psychological development. This space also corresponds to all playful and artistic uses of language, as L.S. Vygotsky puts it in a seminal work on this subject,³⁷ that is, the figurative modes of communication that go beyond the limits of conscious, rational, and Aristotelic modes of thought and communication to purposely activate the mechanisms of fantasy, symbolisation, and the myriad generalisations, substitutions, displacements, and condensations which are consistent with what Matte Blanco would term as 'symmetric logic', the non-logic of the unconscious.³⁸

In Perry's *Alchemy*, this third linguistic space of transitional relatedness, mediated by creative thinking and artistic language, dominates in all poems of the collection, through the widespread presence of metaphor, simile and synecdoche, in direct connection with the overall paradigms of change, memory and the overcoming of loss across "life's milestones". These three figures of speech emblematically point to the poeticity of language as a symbolic liminal space between reality and imagination, conscious and unconscious, similarity and difference, due to the Jakobsonian bipolarity between the metaphoric axe of similarity or substitution and the metonymic axe, where one topic suggests another via contiguity (closeness in space, time, and psychological association, including synecdoche as a contiguity-based figure of speech).³⁹ Correspondingly, in Perry, we find a profusion of extended metaphors, such as the already analysed "breakers" ("Breakers"), which point by similarity to the dominant theme of the "life's milestones", or the "brown snake" (title and l. 1), itself allusive, in "Brown Snake Awakens in the Everywhen", up to the speaker's fleeting "memories" (l. 11), these being similar to "fast-moving / currents" (ll. 11-12) which come and go in her floating mind. Furthermore, in the poem, this metaphor also syntagmatically progresses through simile ("like", l. 6) and synecdoche, as the snake is described as moving "like an embodied soundwave into the tree / shadows" (ll. 6-7), so that the image simultaneously alludes to different perceptions in one single sense impression involving sound, sight, and touch. Moreover, the symmetric logic of this unconscious-based poetic language goes further when the speaker explicitly compares the snake to the

³⁵ D.W. WINNICOTT, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", pp. 5-6.

³⁶ C.J. LITT, "Theories of Transitional Object Attachment: An Overview", p. 387.

³⁷ L.S. VYGOTSKY, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood", 1930, Engl. trans. F. SMOLUCHA, *Soviet Psychology*, 28 (1), 1990, pp. 84-96.

³⁸ I. MATTE BLANCO, *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets. An Essay in Bi-logic*, New York, Routledge, (1975) 2018, pp. 88-99.

³⁹ R. JAKOBSON, *Language in Literature*, eds K. POMORSKA and S. RUDY, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, (1969) 1987, pp. 25, 105.

“mathematical symbol for / *similar to*” (the sign “~”, ll. 2-3) through another simile (“as”, l. 2), then equating, on the plane of visual shapes (the shared sinuousness of form), the organicistic, animal domain with the abstract, graphemic plane (itself redoubled semantically through reference to the seme of LIKENESS). Finally, the expressive use of italics in “*similar to*” (l. 3) exerts the function of allowing the syntagm to stand out from the surrounding sentence in a way that is analogous to the impression given to the speaker at the snakes’ sudden emergence from the “rushes” (l. 1) and whose emotional salience is similar to the unexpected arousal of unconscious, memorial fragments from the inmost, *reptile*, then innate and automatic, depths of the human psyche.

5. Conclusions

In her poignant investigation of the overwhelming experiences of change and transition, Perry uses alchemical imagery and transitional objects to present individual growth as psychic space, a liminal dwelling on the borders between the inside and the outside, but also a zone of protection, reception and projection, where many existential binary opposites (me/not-me; past/present; life/death; unawareness/awareness; togetherness/separation) dynamically interact in the mysterious extra-rational domains of attachment and affect, along the winding path leading to psychological integration and spiritual wholeness. Evolving through symbol and intuitive imagination, the poetic text becomes a sort of extended soul-making laboratory, where the endless oscillations between adversities and moments of epiphany, incessantly tell, as sea waves “rolling in, again and again, like beautiful new beginnings” (“The Forest Fire”, l. 33), the eternal plot of the living as an embodied alchemy of the soul.

In this stunning *début* collection, then, besides revealing the assured hand of a seasoned writer, the literary treatment of alchemy is not merely conventional, as in Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* (1988) or in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books, nor unserious, as in the long tradition of alchemical satire which spans from Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue and Tale” (1387-1400) and Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1610) to Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) and Fidelis Morgan’s *Unnatural Fire* (2000).⁴⁰ Rather, Perry uses this cultural code through structural transposition, as she deeply integrates alchemical imagery, including its doctrinal assumptions and conceptual frameworks, as form and theme in her poems. To this extent, this talented and promising poetry collection can be numbered along with other “serious”⁴¹ treatments of alchemy in contemporary English literature, spanning from the outstanding examples of Yeats’ and Heaney’s alchemical verse to other more recent literary prose works using alchemy to focus, as in Perry’s writings, on the significance of life’s transitional *nigredo* processes as meaningful occasions for mental, emotional, and spiritual metamorphosis.⁴²

⁴⁰ For deeper insights into the conventional and satirical treatment of alchemy in literature, see A. LEMBERT, *The Heritage of Hermes. Alchemy in Contemporary British Literature*, Leipzig, Galda + Wilch Verlag, 2004, pp. 43-74.

⁴¹ I take this term from S.J. LINDEN, *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*, p. 99, and A. LEMBERT, *The Heritage of Hermes. Alchemy in Contemporary British Literature*, p. 53.

⁴² One thinks of, among many others, Patrick Harpur’s *Mercurius, or, The Marriage of Heaven and Earth*

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