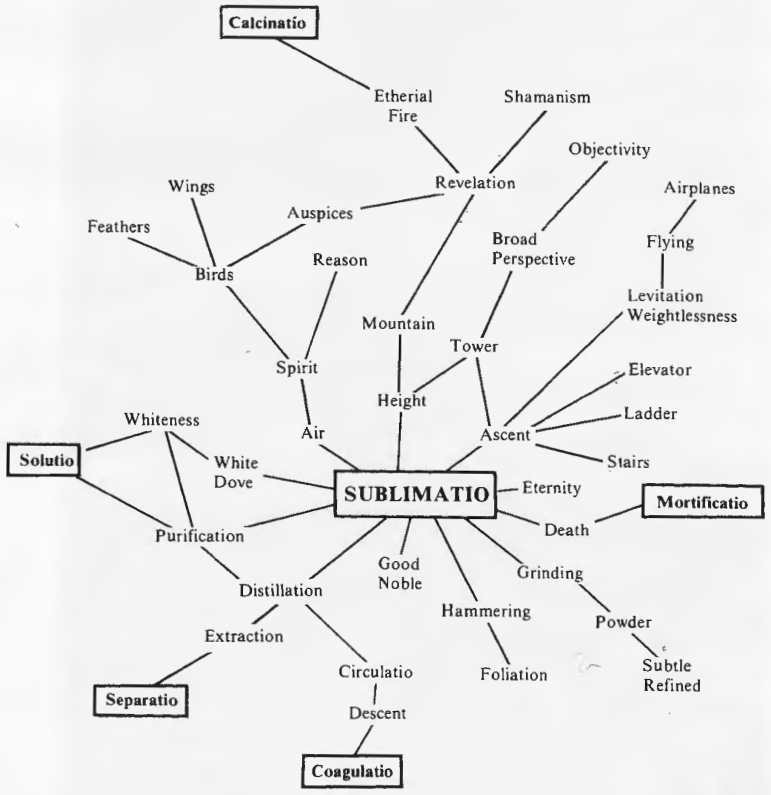

5 *Sublimatio*

JUST AS *CALCINATIO* PERTAINS TO FIRE, *solutio* to water, and *coagulatio* to earth, so *sublimatio* is the operation pertaining to air. It turns the material into air by volatilizing and elevating it. The image derives from the chemical process of sublimation in which a solid, when heated, passes directly into a gaseous state and ascends to the top of the vessel, where it resolidifies on the upper, cooler region. Distillation is a similar process, in which a liquid vaporizes on heating and condenses again in a cooler area.

The term "sublimation" derives from the Latin *sublimis*, meaning "high." This indicates that the crucial feature of *sublimatio* is an elevating process whereby a low substance is translated into a higher form by an ascending movement. Earth is transformed into air; a fixed body is volatilized; that which is inferior is changed into something superior (*inferus*, below; *superus*, above). All images that refer to upward movement—ladders, stairs, elevators, climbing, mountains, flying, and so forth—belong to *sublimatio* symbolism, as do all the psychological and value connotations associated with being high rather than low. An alchemical text says, "The spirit, therefore, by the help of the water and the soul, is drawn forth from the bodies themselves, and the body thereby is made spiritual; for that at the same instant of time, the spirit, with the soul of the bodies, ascend on high to the superior part, which is the perfection of the stone, and is called sublimation."[1]

According to this text, the body is "made perfect" by spiritualizing it. Psychologically, this corresponds to a way of dealing with a concrete problem. One gets "above" it by seeing it objectively. We abstract a general meaning from it and see it as a particular example of a larger issue. Just to find suitable words or concepts for a psychic state may be sufficient for a person to get out of it enough to look down on it from

[1] *The Lives of the Alchemystical Philosophers,* p. 138.

above. For instance, to label a resentful mood an "anima possession" may release the grip of the mood. To identify a man's reaction to his wife as an example of his mother problem, or a reaction to his boss as part of a father complex, conceptualizes the experience and helps him to get above it. A striking example of such word power is that of a priest who had anxiety while celebrating the Eucharist. He experienced a definite alleviation of symptoms upon learning that he had a well-known condition called performance anxiety.

Sublimatio is an ascent that raises us above the confining entanglements of immediate, earthy existence and its concrete, personal particulars. The higher we go the grander and more comprehensive is our perspective, but also the more remote we become from actual life and the less able we will be to have an effect on what we perceive. We become magnificent but impotent spectators (see figure 5-1). Heaven is the abode of the eternal Platonic forms, the universals, the archetypal images. Hence, whenever a dream or life situation is interpreted from the archetypal standpoint, it is promoting *sublimatio*. The success of such interpretations may be expressed in dreams by the escape or release of caged birds or some other auspicious upward movement.

It should be stated at the outset that the symbolism of the alchemical *sublimatio* has nothing to do with Freudian theory of sublimation. According to Hinsie and Campbell's *Psychiatric Dictionary*, the term "sublimation" as used in psychoanalysis is defined as, "...the process of modifying an instinctual impulse in such a way as to conform to the demands of society. Sublimation is a substitute activity which gives some measure of gratification to the infantile impulse which has been repudiated in its original form.... Unlike the usual defenses, in sublimation the ego is not acting in opposition to the id; on the contrary, it is helping the id to gain external expression. Sublimation, in other words, does not involve repression."[2]

Jung distinguishes Freudian sublimation from the alchemical *sublimatio* in this passage from his letters: "*Sublimatio* is part of the royal art where the true gold is made. Of this Freud knows nothing, worse still, he barricades all the paths that could lead to the true *sublimatio*. This is just about the opposite of what Freud understands by sublimation. It is not a *voluntary and forcible* channeling of instinct into a spurious field of application, but an *alchymical transformation* for which *fire* and the black *prima materia* are needed. *Sublimatio* is a great mystery. Freud has appropriated this concept and usurped it for the sphere of the will and the bourgeois, rationalistic ethos."[3]

[2]Hinsie and Campbell, *Psychiatric Dictionary*, pp. 699f.

[3]Jung, *Letters*, 1:171.

FIGURE 5 - 1
Satellite Photograph of Cape Cod and Vicinity (*Photo Atlas of the United States.*)

For the alchemist, the process of sublimation was experienced in symbolic images. He, for example, might see a bird flying up from the matter in the lower part of the vessel to the upper regions. The alchemical vessel was equated with the macrocosm, its lower part being the earth and its upper part, heaven. The sublimate flees earth and is transported to heaven. A text says, "At the end of the sublimation there germinates through the mediation of the spirit, a shining white soul [*anima candida*] which flies up to heaven with the spirit. This is clearly and manifestly the stone"[4] (see figure 5-2).

This "white soul" is often represented by a white bird being released from the material being heated. One picture shows a man being cooked in a water bath with a white bird emerging from his head (see figure 5-3). A parallel to this picture occurred in the case of a young woman who was enduring an intense and painful activation of the unconscious. She dreamed,

FIGURE 5 - 2
Sublimatio. (*Sapentia veterum philosophorum sive doctrina eorundum de summa et universali medicina,* 18th century. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS. 974. Reprinted in Derola, *The Secret Art of Alchemy.*)

[4]Quoted in Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy, CW* 12, par. 462.

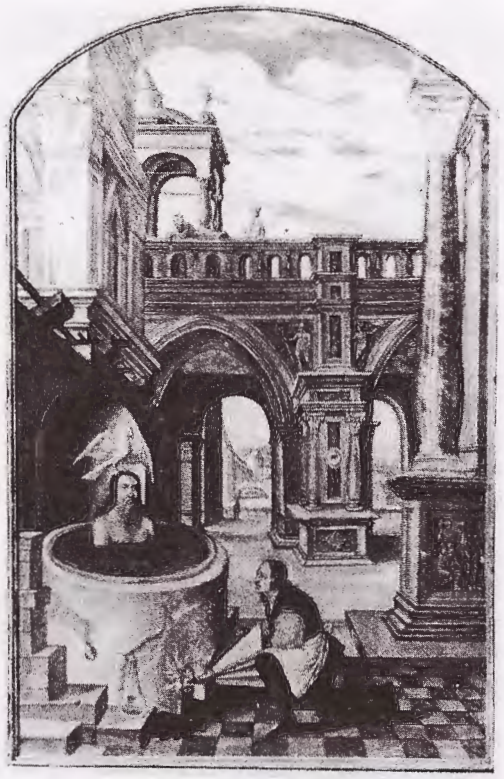

FIGURE 5 - 3
Extraction of the White Dove (Trismosin, *Splendor Solis,* 1582.)

> *I am in a hospital, pregnant but not quite ready for birth. I go to sleep and when I wake up it is very dark. I feel something pressing on my ribs very hard and it seems as if this unseen exterior pressure is forcing me to give birth. A voice says, "How would you like to have a son?" As I woke up the imagery continued. I saw a girl like the one in Munch's lithograph, "The Cry." Her mouth is a circular opening. She is in a white circle surrounded by more circles of black lines. Out of her mouth comes a horde of doves or white pigeons* (see figure 5-4).

This dream informs the patient that the anxiety she is enduring is part of a larger transformation process, in which the ego is heated by

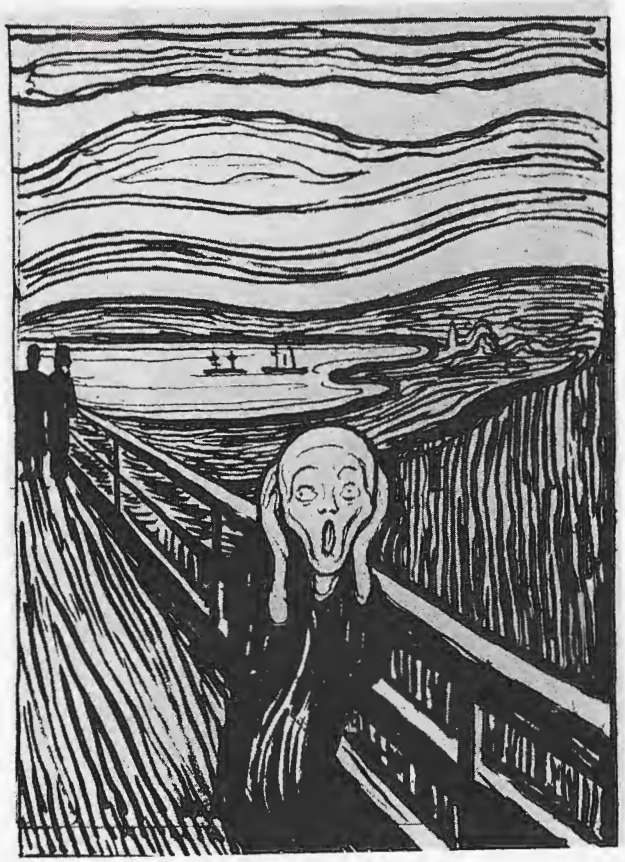

FIGURE 5 - 4
The Cry (Munch, 1895. Oslo, National Museum. Reprinted in *Graphic Works of Edvard Munch.*)

horror in order to bring forth a new birth, the "sublimate," represented by the flock of doves. Dreams of birds generally refer to *sublimatio*, and bird phobias may indicate fear of a necessary *sublimatio*. They are also often connected with a fear of death, death being the ultimate *sublimatio* whereby the soul is separated from the body.

One aspect of *sublimatio* overlaps with *separatio* symbolism—namely, its use as an extraction procedure. For instance, mercury can be extracted from certain compounds by heating. It vaporizes, sublimates, and reappears on the cooler portion of the vessel. An early text alludes to this process: "Go to the waters of the Nile and there you will find a stone that has a spirit (*pneuma*). Take this, divide it, thrust in your hand and draw out its heart: for its soul (*psyche*) is in its heart. [An interpolator

adds:] There, he says you will find this stone that has a spirit, which refers to the expulsion of the quicksilver (*exhydrargyrosis*)."[5]

This "expulsion of the quicksilver" is done by *sublimatio*, which releases the spirit hidden in matter. In the largest sense, this refers psychologically to the redemption of the Self from its original unconscious state. The expulsion of the quicksilver can also be experienced in lesser ways as the extraction of *meaning* from heavy moods, from concrete events, or from the factuality of nature (see figure 5-5).

Berthelot points out that the Greek word that the Latin alchemists translated as "*sublimatio*" was *rhinisma*, which originally meant "filings." This expressed the idea of the extreme attenuation of matter. The same idea was attached later to the term "alcoolisation" which signifies reduction to the state of an impalpable powder.[6] A text says, "If you do not make the bodies subtle, so that they may be impalpable to touch, you will not gain your end. If they have not been ground, repeat your operation, and see that they are ground and subtilized."[7]

Thus, *sublimatio* can mean "grinding" or "hammering" to bring about an attenuation of the material. Very fine powder approaches a gas in its consistency. Note also that the symbolism of grinding contains the moral categories of good and bad. Powder made up of small particles is called "fine," that with large particles is "coarse." To be good is to be well pulverized. Encounter with the *numinosum* may have a pulverizing effect, as indicated by the saying, "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small." "Foliation" has the same implication. A recipe mentioned earlier reads, "Sow your gold in white foliated earth"—that is, in sublimated earth. Foliation is done by hammering. These lines by Rilke can thus be considered as announcing an impending *sublimatio*:

> What locks itself in endurance grows rigid; sheltered
> in unassuming greyness, does it feel safe?
> Wait, from the distance hardness is menaced
> by something still harder.
> Alas—: a remote hammer is poised to strike.[8]

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, as Enobarbus commits suicide in remorse for his defection from Antony, this image of *sublimatio* by pulverization is wrung from him. He is speaking to the moon.

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[5]Ibid., par. 405.

[6]Berthelot, *Collection des Anciens Alchemistes Grecs*, 1:210.

[7]Kelly, *The Alchemical Writings of Edward Kelly*, p. 34.

[8]Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, pt. 2, sonnet 12. (I have not been able to locate the source of this translation, but see *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre, cited in the Bibliography.)

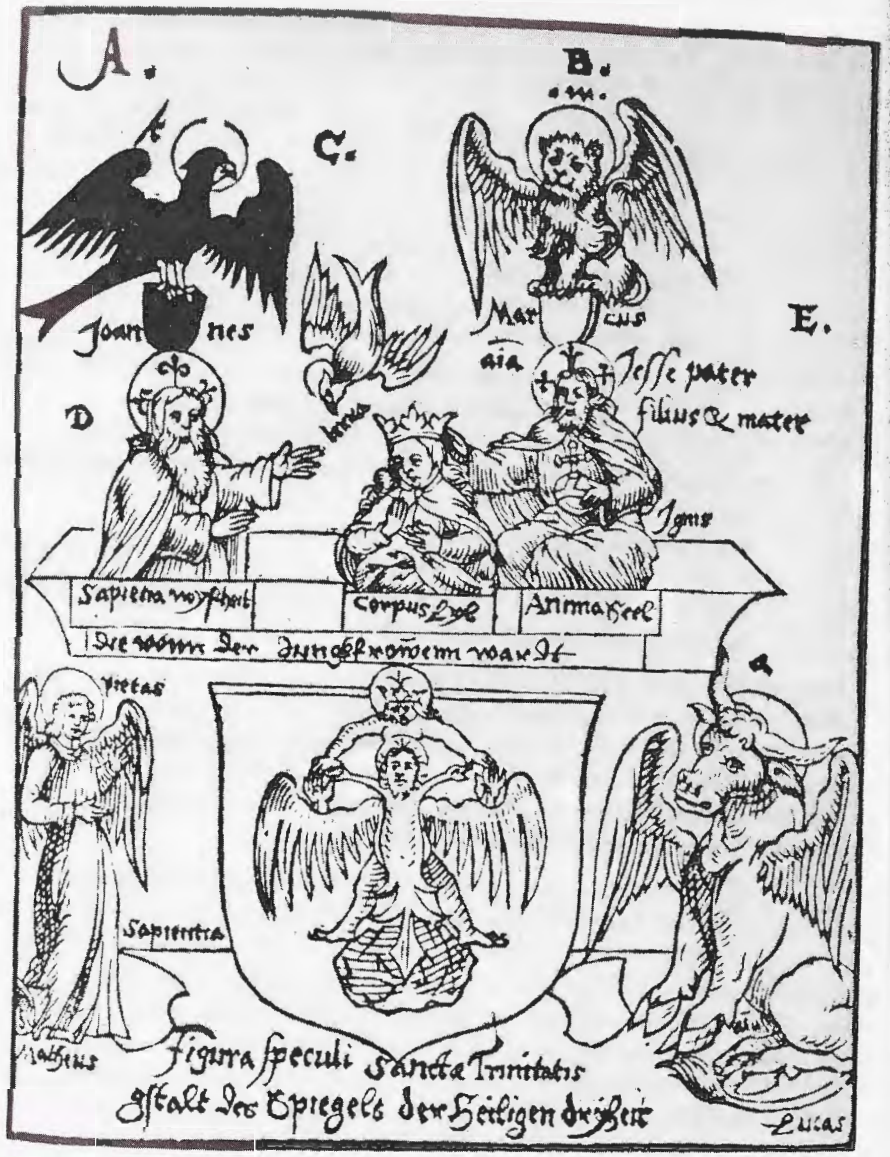

FIGURE 5 – 5
Extraction of Mercurius and Coronation of the Virgin. Lower Level: Mercurius (Represented as a Monstrosity) Being Extracted from the *Prima Materia*. Upper Level: Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin, Transforming the Trinity into a Quaternity (*Speculum trinitatis* from Reusner, *Pandora*, 1588. Reprinted in Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*.)

O sovereign mistress of true melancholy,
The poisonous damp of night disponge upon me,
That life, a very rebel to my will,
May hang no longer on me; throw my heart
Against the flint and hardness of my fault,
Which, being dried with grief, will break to powder,
And finish all foul thoughts.

(Act 4, sc. 9, lines 12–18)

A text from Paracelsus says, "For, as from all phlegmatic and watery objects, water ascends in distillation, and is separated from its body, so, in the process of sublimation, in dry substances such as minerals, the spiritual is raised from the corporeal, subtilised, and the pure separated from the impure."[9]

Here *sublimatio* is described as a purification. When matter and spirit are intermixed in a state of unconscious contamination, they must be purified by separation. In this impure state, the spirit must first seek its own purity and will see all that pertains to flesh and matter—the concrete, the personal, the desire-laden—as the enemy to be overcome. The whole history of cultural evolution can be seen as a great *sublimatio* process in which human beings learn how to see themselves and their world objectively. Stoic philosophy was one vast effort to teach humans how to achieve the Stoic goal of *apathia* by getting above the passions that tie them to the earth. Similarly, Plato's idealism, as well as all later idealistic systems, strive to present life in terms of eternal forms and universal ideas in order to overcome the galling human bondage to the contingencies of matter. Reason, which gives people a standpoint outside their personal likes and dislikes, becomes an indispensable agent of *sublimatio* by teaching them how to be reflective spectators of themselves. Schopenhauer puts it beautifully:

> [It is] indeed wonderful to see, how man, besides his life in the concrete, always lives a second life in the abstract. In the former he is abandoned to all the storms of reality and to the influence of the present; he must struggle, suffer, and die like the animal. But his life in the abstract, as it stands before his rational consciousness, is the calm reflection of his life in the concrete, and of the world in which he lives.... Here in the sphere of calm deliberation, what previously possessed him completely and moved him intensely appears to him cold, colorless, and, for the moment, foreign and strange; he is a mere spectator and observer. In respect of this withdrawal into reflection, he is like an actor who has played his part in one scene, and takes his place in the audience until he must appear again. In the audience he quietly looks on at whatever may happen, even though it be the preparation for his own death [in the play]; but then he goes on the stage, and acts and suffers as he must.[10]

[9]Paracelsus, *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus*, 1:152.

[10]Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 152.

The capacity to get above and see oneself objectively is the ability to dissociate. The use of this word immediately indicates the danger of *sublimatio*. Each of the alchemical operations has its own pathological symptomatology when carried to extremes, but modern individuals probably misuse *sublimatio* more than the others. The ability of the psyche to dissociate is both the source of ego consciousness and the cause of mental illness. As a single example, I recall a young man whom I saw while working at Rockland State Hospital. He was a brilliant student of mathematics. However, he had had no friends or social relations, and he did not even learn that there are anatomical differences between boys and girls until he went to college. He was unemployed and living with his mother until hospitalized following an outburst of violence at his mother for not having the television set repaired. When I asked him about his dreams, he told me the following:

> *I once dreamed that I had climbed a ladder to a high platform, and that then somebody removed the ladder so that I was left stranded on the height with no way of getting down again.*
>
> *Another time I was climbing a ladder miles above the earth's surface with something impelling me onward. I dared not to look down for fear of becoming dizzy and letting go of the rung.*
>
> *Another time I was spread-eagled on the glass floor of a wall-less elevator. There was no shaft. A hydraulic piston was pushing the floor ever upwards. I was fearfully peering over the edge of the floor, watching the earth recede in the distance.*

This young man was tragically caught in the archetypal dynamism of *sublimatio* as an autonomous process of dissociation. It impelled him further and further from personal, earthy reality until the inevitable enantiodromia sent him crashing to the ground.

A dream with similar imagery but vastly different outcome is reported by Emerson. In 1840 at the age of 37 while preparing his *Essays: First Series* for publication he dreamed:

> *I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said "This must thou eat." And I ate the world.*[11]

A dream of floating in the "great Ether" seems symbolically appropriate for the author of Emersonian transcendentalism. This dream is grand rather than grandiose. In contrast to the previous dreams, this one

[11] *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 7:525.

contains its own corrective factor. The extreme *sublimatio* is compensated by the *coagulatio* image of eating the apple of the world.

A beautiful poetic evocation of the *sublimatio* mood is found in these lines from Milton's *Il Penseroso*:

> Or let my lamp at midnight hour,
> Be seen in some high lonely Tower,
> Where I may oft out-watch the Bear,
> With thrice great Hermes, or unsphere
> The spirit of Plato to unfold
> What worlds, or what vast Regions hold
> Th' immortal mind that hath forsook
> Her mansion in this fleshly nook.

The image of the tower is a typical *sublimatio* symbol. Hexagram 20 of the *I Ching* entitled "Contemplation (View)" represents a tower and describes the same kind of contemplation of the archetypal realm as does Milton. The *I Ching* speaks of those who contemplate "the meaning underlying the workings of the universe" and "apprehend the mysterious and divine laws of life, and by means of profoundest inner concentration they give expression to these laws in their own persons."[12]

The tower image came up in a dream of mine after attending an impressive lecture on mythology. I dreamed:

> *I see a stupendously high tower. It is a broadcasting tower for a radio network. One climbs it by a ladder built on the outside. A man is there whose job it is to operate the tower. Each day he climbs to the top in the morning and descends again at night. I ask him if it isn't difficult. He says, "not at all." I realize that I would be very reluctant to climb to such a height.*

The dream pictures my reaction to the lecture. I was dazzled by its brilliance and broad perspective. Ascent to a height gives one a perspective view not available from the ground. Thus in mythological and religious imagery ascension often accompanies revelation of the divine realm. God meets humanity on the mountain—for example, Moses on Sinai. The person who is vouchsafed a revelation from God is often "lifted up" and transported to heaven. For instance, a vision of Ezekiel begins, "Then I beheld, and lo, a form that had the appearance of a man; below what appeared to be his loins it was fire, and above his loins it was like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming bronze. He put forth the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my hair; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem" (Ezek. 8:2, 3, RSV).

[12] Wilhelm, trans., *I Ching or Book of Changes*, p. 33.

Enoch is another figure who receives a revelation by ascension. In the pseudepigraphal *Secrets of Enoch* he is lifted up by angels and given a guided tour through the ten heavens, and finally he sees God himself. According to popular legend, Mohammad was transported bodily through the seven heavens to the presence of God for the purposes of revelation. The symbolism of shamanism also has the motif of ascent to revelation. The shaman climbs the world pillar, or the cosmic ladder, or makes a magical flight in search of a supernatural revelation.[13]

A good example of *sublimatio* symbolism is found in an ancient Mithraic ritual of initiation. This same ritual contains the image of the sun's phallus that first led Jung to the discovery of the archetypes.[14] The ritual begins with a prayer: "O Providence, O Fortune, bestow on me Thy grace—imparting these the mysteries a Father only may hand on, and that, too, to a son alone—his immortality—[a Son] initiate, worthy of this our craft, with which Sun Mithras, the Great God, commanded me to be endowed by his archangel; so that I Eagle (as I am by my own self) alone may soar to Heaven, and contemplate all things."

After further prayers, the ritual proceeds with these instructions:

> Take from the [sun-] rays breath, inhaling thrice [as deeply] as thou canst; and thou shalt see thyself being raised aloft, and soaring towards the Height, so that thou seem'st to be in midst of air. Thou shalt hear naught, nor man nor beast; nor shalt thou see aught of the sights upon the earth, in that same hour; but all things thou shalt see will be immortal. For thou shalt see, in that same day and hour, the Disposition of the Gods—the ruling Gods ascending heavenwards, the other ones descending. And through his disc—the God's, my Father's—there shall be seen the Way-of-going of the Gods accessible to sight.

This is followed by encounters with various divine figures and culminates in the apotheosis of the initiate with these words: "O Lord, being born again, I pass away in being made Great, and, having been made Great, I die. Being born from out the state of birth-and-death that giveth birth to (mortal) lives, I now, set free, pass to the state transcending birth, as Thou hast stablished it, according as Thou hast ordained and made the Mystery."[15]

This ritual was meant to bring about a revelation of the divine realm and to confer immortality on the initiate by means of an ascent to heaven. In psychological terms, it is a revelation of the archetypal psyche which releases one from a personal ego-attitude, enabling one to experience oneself as an immortal—that is, as living with archetypal

[13]Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 259ff.

[14]Jung, *The Symbolic Life*, *CW* 18, pars. 85ff.

[15]Dieterich, *A Mithraic Ritual.*

realities and making a contribution to the archetypal psyche. Similar experiences of revelation occur in modern dreams and visions. For example, Dr. Liliane Frey had been thinking deeply about death and her own myth concerning death as a transformation. She writes: "Death consists of the miracle of transformation into a new form of existence. Death is for me the gate to a new birth, and the breaking-through of the transcendental realm into our empirical existence. I am convinced that we experience a complete transformation of our being in the last moments of our life. Simultaneously with the death of body and ego-personality, something new gets born which is neither matter nor spirit but both together in an indeterminable way."[16] While developing these thoughts she had a very impressive dream in which

> *she was flying higher and higher in a plane especially constructed for her and she had a wonderful view of the Alps, all immersed in deep blue.*[17]

J. B. Priestley reported this very impressive *sublimatio*-revelation dream:

> *I dreamt that I was standing at the top of a very high tower, alone, looking down upon myriads of birds all flying in one direction; every kind of bird was there, all the birds in the world. It was a noble sight, this vast aerial river of birds. But now in some mysterious fashion the gear was changed, and time speeded up, so that I saw generations of birds, watched them break their shells, flutter into life, mate, weaken, falter, and die. Wings grew only to crumble; bodies were sleek and then, in a flash, bled and shrivelled; and death struck everywhere at every second. What was the use of all this blind struggle towards life, this eager trying of wings, this hurried mating, this flight and surge, all this gigantic meaningless biological effort? As I stared down, seeming to see every creature's ignoble little history almost at a glance, I felt sick at heart. It would be better if not one of them, if not one of us all, had been born, if the struggle ceased forever. I stood on my tower, still alone, desperately unhappy. But now the gear was changed again, and time went faster still, and it was rushing by at such a rate, that the birds could not show any movement, but were like an enormous plain sown with feathers. But along this plain, flickering through the bodies themselves, there now passed a sort of white flame, trembling, dancing, then hurrying on; and*

[16]*A Well of Living Waters*, pp. 13f.

[17]Ibid., p. 14.

as soon as I saw it I knew that this white flame was life itself, the very quintessence of being; and then it came to me in a rocket-burst of ecstacy, that nothing mattered, nothing could ever matter, because nothing else was real, but this quivering and hurrying lambency of being. Birds, men or creatures not yet shaped and colored, all were of no account except so far as this flame of life travelled through them. It left nothing to mourn over behind it; what I had thought was tragedy was mere emptiness or a shadow show; for now all real feeling was caught and purified and danced on ecstatically with the white flame of life.[18]

A similar vision of the process of human history as though seen from a vast height was experienced by a woman who is a poet:

I saw the earth covered by a single great tree whose multiple roots fed on the inner sun of gold, the lumen naturae. *It was a tree whose limbs were made of light and the branches were lovingly entangled so that it made of itself a network of beauteous love. And it seemed as if it were lifting itself out of the broken seeds of many, countless egos who had now allowed the one Self to break forth. And when one beheld this, the sun and the moon and the planets turned out to be something quite, quite other than one had thought. From what I could make out, the Lord Himself was the Alchemist and out of the collective swarming and suffering, ignorance and pollution, He was "trying" the gold.*[19]

Another example of a *sublimation* revelation comes from the LSD experience of a professional woman who is also the mother of three children. She describes her experience in these words:

> I knew I was on my way when a releasing and delicious sense of floating in the atmosphere took over and engulfed my entire being. My sense of being contained by body dissolved. I laughed with delight and said out loud, "Now I remember what it's like to be without a body." I was in contact with some level of being, fully conscious but without embodiment. An awareness took form in my mind that I had resisted being born into the world in my present incarnation. I understood why. Air is my true element, the matrix of my being. The ecstacy of being free of body, the aging process, backaches, headaches, creaky joints lasted an eternity. I was no longer confined by the space-time dimensions of earth. How amazing to be "me," fully aware and conscious, and yet without any physical vehicle.

This was followed by other experiences, including the reliving of her own birth, and then came this final vision:

[18]Quoted in Adler, *Studies in Analytical Psychology*, p. 143.

[19]I am indebted to Alice Howell for permission to quote.

> Then began a complex cycle of laughter and tears; the laughter usually connected with an opening of the arms and legs, the weeping with a contraction and closing of the body. I moved back in time through countless ages of mankind, experiencing in my body countless birth, death, and rebirth cycles. I found myself in different parts of the world (mainly Europe), more with simple peasants, farmers, craftsmen than kings and nobles. I was buried or buried others dear to me, having my eyelids closed and arms crossed or performing this ritual for others. The plain wooden box is lowered into the grave, the dirt is sprinkled over the box, the mourners grieve. Then I am a woman giving birth or assisting in the process. There is the cry of the newborn infant, the circular sweep of the mother's arms to gather the child to her breast. Birth cries and death rattles intermingle in a flicker of an eyelash. I realize that my own place in the rhythmic pattern of death and birth is but a moving instant—and that is more than enough. The sense of oneness with the universe, with the birth-death process experienced through my Body-Self totality overwhelms me with grace. It is as though I have been given a gift so precious I need never ask again, "What is the meaning of my life?"[20]

The remarkable similarity between this LSD vision and Priestley's dream indicates that such experiences have an objective validity; that is, they bear witness to the reality of the psyche.

Another aspect of ascent symbolism is the theme of translation to eternity. For instance, Heracles ascended to Olympus from his funeral pyre, a quite literal *sublimatio*. He disappeared from the earth and reappeared on a higher level as a result of being heated. The same thing happened to Elijah (2 Kings 2:11, RSV): "Behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them [Elisha and Elijah]. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (see figure 5-6).

Fire also sublimates Elijah. According to 1 Maccabees 2:58, it was Elijah's fiery religious intensity that accounted for his ascension. "Elijah for his consuming fervour for the law was caught up to heaven itself" (JB). Christ ascended to heaven forty days after his resurrection (Acts 1:9). According to legend, the Virgin Mary ascended into heaven at the time of her death, and the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin has been on the Church calendar (August 15) since the seventh century, although the assumption was not proclaimed as dogma until 1950 (see figure 5-7).

The origin of the symbolism of translation to eternity is probably Egypt. In early Egyptian religion the dead were thought to be turned into stars or companions of the sun. James Breasted writes: "In the splendor of the mighty heavens the Nile-dweller... saw the host of those who had preceded him; thither they had flown as birds, rising above all foes of the air, and received by Re as the companions of his celestial barque, they now swept across the sky as eternal stars."[21]

[20]I want to thank the author of this account for her generosity in sharing this important experience.

[21]Breasted, *A History of Egypt*, p. 64.

FIGURE 5 - 6
Ascension of Elijah (Doré, *Bible Illustrations.*)

A pyramid text describes the translation of the dead king to the heavenly realm in these words: "The king ascends to the sky among the gods dwelling in the sky.... He [Re] gives thee his arm on the stairway to the sky. 'He who knows his place comes,' say the gods. O Pure One, assume thy throne in the barque of Re and sail thou the sky.... Sail thou with the imperishable stars, sail thou with the Unwearied Stars."[22]

And E. A. Wallis Budge writes the following:

> The primitive Egyptians believed that the floor of heaven, which also formed the sky of this world, was made of an immense plate of iron, rectangular in shape, the four corners of which rested upon four pillars which served to mark the cardinal points. On this plate of iron lived the gods and the blessed dead, and it was the aim of every good Egyptian to go there after death. At

[22]Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, p. 136.

FIGURE 5 - 7
Assumption of the Virgin (*The Hours of Catherine of Cleves.* The Guennol Collection and the Pierpont Morgan Library.)

> certain sacred spots the edge of the plate was so near the tops of the mountains that the deceased might easily clamber on to it and so obtain admission into heaven, but at others the distance between it and the earth was so great that he needed help to reach it. There existed the belief that Osiris himself experienced some difficulty in getting up to the iron plate, and that it was only by means of the ladder which his father Ra provided that he at length ascended into heaven. On one side of the ladder stood Ra, and on the other stood Horus, the son of Isis, and each god assisted Osiris to mount it. Originally the two guardians of the ladder were Horus the Elder and Set, and there are several references in the early texts to the help which they rendered to the deceased, who was, of course, identified with the god Osiris. But, with a view either of reminding these gods of their supposed duty, or of compelling them to do it, the model of a ladder was often placed on or near

the dead body in the tomb, and a special composition was prepared which had the effect of making the ladder become the means of the ascent of the deceased into heaven. Thus in the text written for Pepi the deceased is made to address the ladder in these words: "Homage to thee, O divine Ladder! Homage to thee, O Ladder of Set! Stand thou upright, O divine Ladder! Stand thou upright, O Ladder of Set! Stand thou upright, O Ladder of Horus, whereby Osiris came forth into heaven."[23]

The injunction to stand upright is reminiscent of the *Djed* or *Teï* pillar. This classic image of the resurrected Osiris looks remarkably like a ladder in some pictures (see figure 5-8). The process of translation to eternity was graphically represented in antiquity by the image of ascending the ladder of the planetary spheres. When a soul is born into an earthly body it descends from heaven through the planetary spheres and acquires the qualities pertaining to each. Macrobius writes:

By the impulse of the first weight the soul, having started on its downward course from the intersection of the zodiac and the Milky Way to the successive spheres lying beneath, as it passes through these spheres... acquires each of the attributes which it will exercise later. In the sphere of Saturn it obtains reason and understanding, called *logistikon* and *theoretikon*; in Jupiter's sphere, the power to act, called *praktikon*; in Mars' sphere, a bold spirit or *thymikon*; in the sun's sphere, sense-perception and imagination, *aisthetikon* and *phantastikon*; in Venus' sphere, the impulse of passion, *epithymetikon*; in Mercury's sphere, the ability to speak and interpret, *hermeneutikon*; and in the lunar sphere, the function of molding and increasing bodies, *phytikon*. This last function being the farthest removed from the gods, is the first in us and all the earthly creation.[24]

When the soul has purified itself it may ascend the ladder of the planetary spheres, "for when it has rid itself completely of all taint of evil and has deserved to be sublimated, it again leaves the body and, fully recovering its former state, returns to the splendor of everlasting life."[25] The ascent of the spheres is described in a poem by Henry Vaughn:

The power of my soul is such, I can
Expire, and so analyse all that's man.
First my dull clay I give unto the Earth,
Our common Mother, which gives all their birth.
My growing faculties I send as soon
Whence first I took them, to the humid Moon.
All subtilties and every cunning art
To witty Mercury I do impart.

[23]Quoted in Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, 2:125f; see also Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of the Resurrection*, 2:167.

[24]Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, pp. 136f.

[25]Ibid., p. 137.

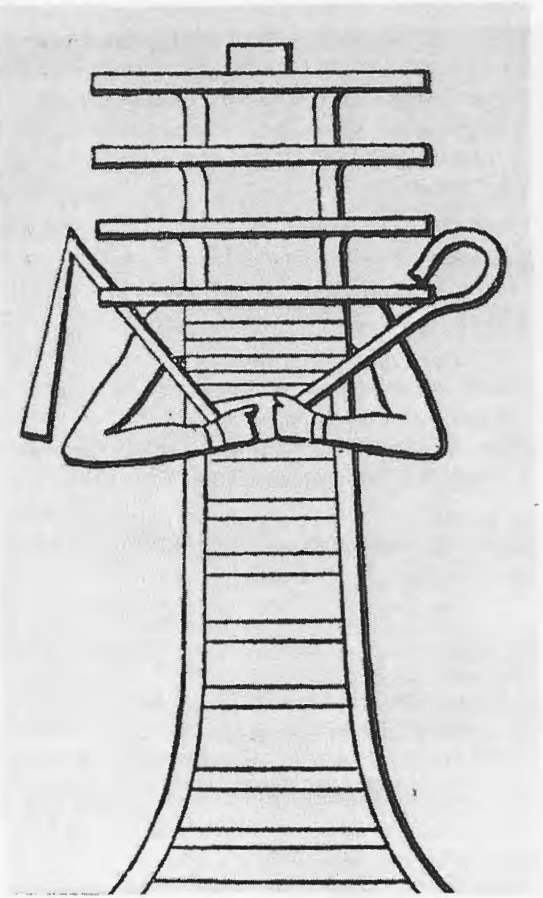

FIGURE 5 - 8
Osiris as a Ladder (From the papyrus of Ani, British Museum. Reprinted in Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection.*)

Those fond affections which made me a slave
To handsome faces, Venus thou shall have.
And saucy pride (if there was aught in me,)
Sol, I return it to thy royalty.
My daring rashness and presumptions be
To Mars himself an equal legacy.
My ill-plac'd avarice (sure 'tis but small;)
Jove, to thy flames I do bequeath it all.
And my false magic, which I did believe,
And mystic lyes to Saturn I do give.
My dark imaginations rest you there,
This is your grave and superstitious sphere.

Get up my disintangled soul, thy fire
Is now refined and nothing left to tire,
Or clog thy wings. Now my auspicious flight
Hath brought me to the Empyrean light.
I am a sep'rate essence and can see
The emanations of the Deity.[26]

It is also Henry Vaughn who wrote these well-known lines describing a *sublimatio* experience:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,
All calm as it was bright,
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
Driv'n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the world
And all her train were hurl'd.[27]

There is a kabbalistic parallel to the theme of returning to the planetary archons the qualities pertaining to each, as indicated in this passage by Gershom Scholem:

> The task of the Kabbalah is to help guide the soul back to its native home in the Godhead. For each single *Sefirah* there is a corresponding ethical attribute in human behavior, and he who achieves this on earth is integrated into the mystic life and the harmonic world of the *Sefirot*.... The kabbalists unanimously agreed on the supreme rank attainable by the soul at the end of its mystical path, namely, that of *devekut*, mystical cleaving to God.... (This is achieved by climbing) the ladder of *devekut*.[28]

The state of *devekut*, or cleaving to God, was thought by the kabbalists to be achieved by prayer:

> The worshipper uses the fixed words of the prayer as a banister during his meditation which he grasps on his road of ascension so that he should not be confused or distracted. Such meditation results in the joining of human thought to the divine thought or the divine will.... The thought expands and ascends to its origin, so that when it reaches it, it ends and cannot ascend any further...therefore the pious men of old raised their thought to its origin while pronouncing the precepts and words of prayer. As a result of this procedure and the state of adhesion (devekut) which their thought had attained, their words became blessed, multiplied, full of (divine) influx.[29]

Certain Hasidic sayings use the image of the ladder, such as the following: "The souls descended from the realm of heaven to earth, on a long ladder. Then it was taken away. Now, up there, they are calling home the souls. Some do not budge from the spot, for how can one get to heaven without a ladder? Others leap and fall and leap again, and give up. But there are those who know very well that they cannot achieve it, but try and try over and over again until God catches hold of them and pulls them up."[30]

Another saying states, "Man is a ladder placed on the earth and the top of it touches heaven. And all his movements and doings and words leave traces in the upper world."[31]

The image of the spiritual ladder was used extensively by ascetic Christian mystics (see figure 5-9). It derives probably from the passage in Augustine's *Confessions* concerning the ascent of the soul to the heavenly Jerusalem. "We ascend thy ladder which is in our heart, and we sing a canticle of degrees; we glow inwardly with thy fire—with thy good fire—and we go forward because we go up to the peace of Jerusalem" (13, 9).

Several Christian martyrs are associated with the image of a ladder. Most notable is St. Perpetua, who had the following dream while in prison shortly before her martyrdom in the arena of Carthage in the year A.D. 203:

> *I beheld a ladder of brass, of miraculous size, which reached up to heaven, and was so narrow that it could only be ascended singly. On either side of the ladder, all manner of iron implements were fastened–swords, lances, hooks, daggers and spears–so that anyone who was careless, or did not hold himself erect while climbing, was torn to pieces and remained hanging. Beneath the ladder lay a gigantic dragon, lying in wait for the climbers and frightening them away. Saturus, however, went up before me (just as he later chose to be put to death first, for love of us, because it was he who had taught us but afterwards was not with us when we were thrown into prison). And he reached the top of the ladder and, turning to me, spake: "Perpetua, I am holding thee, but see that the dragon does not bite thee." And I answered: "He shall not harm me, in the name of Jesus Christ." And the dragon slowly lifted his head out from under the ladder, as if in fear of me, and I trod on it, as though I were treading on the first rung of the ladder, and ascended to the top. And I beheld a vast garden and seated in the centre of it, a tall white-haired man, in shepherd's dress, who was milking sheep, and*

[26]"The Importunate Fortune," in *The Complete Poetry of Henry Vaughn*, pp. 384f.

[27]"The World," *op. cit.*, p. 231.

[28]Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 174f.

[29]Ibid., p. 370.

[30]Buber, *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings*, p. 40.

[31]Ibid.

FIGURE 5 – 9
The Mystics' Ladder to Heaven (Icon from St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, 11th–12th century. Reprinted in Weitzmann, *The Icon.*)

> *round about him many thousands of people clad in white. And he raised his head, looked at me, and spake: "It is well that thou art come, child!" And he called me to him and gave me also a morsel of the cheese which he was milking, and I received it with folded hands and ate. And all who stood around said, "Amen." And at the sound of this invocation I awoke, and was aware that I was still eating something sweet, I know not what. And I immediately reported the vision to my brother, and we understood that it meant the coming passion. And from that time we began to put no more hope in this world.*[32]

This awesome dream illustrates the *Zeitgeist* of the Christian era then just beginning. The new Christian spirit was the spirit of *sublimatio* (see figure 5-10). This is illustrated in the following passage from the Syrian poet, Jacob of Batnae, who uses the idea of Jacob's ladder as a prefiguration of Christ's cross. "The cross is set up as a wonderful ladder upon which mankind is in truth led up to heaven.... Christ arose upon earth as a ladder of many steps, and raised himself on high, so that all earthly beings might be exalted through Him.... In the ladder, Jacob truly perceived the crucified one.... On the mountain, He (the Lord) made fast the mysterious cross, like a ladder, set Himself on the top of it and from thence blessed all the nations.... At that time, the cross was set up as a guiding ideal, as it were a ladder, and served all peoples as a path leading up to God."[33]

In Dante's *Paradiso* there is a beautiful example of the *sublimatio* ladder. In canto 21, accompanied by Beatrice, Dante is shown the seventh heaven of Saturn, the abode of contemplative souls (see figure 5-11).

> Within the crystal that bears round the world
> the name of its great king in that golden age
> When evil's flag had not yet been unfurled,
>
> like polished gold ablaze in full sunlight,
> I saw a ladder rise so far above me
> it soared beyond the reaches of my sight.
>
> And I saw so many splendors make their way
> down its bright rungs, I thought that every lamp
> in all of heaven was pouring forth its ray.[34]

In the foregoing I have given a number of examples of the symbolic theme of transition to eternity. Now comes the question, What does this

[32]Quoted in von Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua*, pp. 10f.

[33]Ibid., p. 95.

[34]Dante, *The Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardi, pp. 235ff.

FIGURE 5 - 10
Simeon Stylites on His Column Besieged by a Serpent (Reliquary, 6th century. Paris, the Louvre. Reprinted in *The Early Christian and Byzantine World.*)

mean psychologically? We are speaking here of the greater *sublimatio* as contrasted with the lesser one. The lesser *sublimatio* must always be followed by a descent, whereas the greater *sublimatio* is a culminating process, the final translation into eternity of that which has been created in time. What does it mean psychologically to translate into eternity that which has been created in time? Individual consciousness or realization of wholeness is the psychological product of the temporal process of individuation. For that to be made eternal is a mysterious idea. It seems to imply that consciousness achieved by individuals becomes a permanent addition to the archetypal psyche. There is indeed evidence for this idea.[35] For instance, Jung had *sublimatio* visions when close to

[35]See Edinger, *The Creation of Consciousness,* p. 23ff.

FIGURE 5 - 11
Dante's Ladder of Saturn (Doré, *Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy.*)

death in 1944. He found himself elevated far above the earth and stripped down to an "objective form":

> I had the feeling that everything was being sloughed away; everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence fell away or was stripped from me—an extremely painful process. Nevertheless something remained; it was as if I now carried along with me everything I had ever experienced or done, everything that had happened around me. I might also say: it was with me and I was it. I consisted of all that, so to speak. I consisted of my own history, and I felt with great certainty: this is what I am. "I am this bundle of what has been, and what has been accomplished."
>
> This experience gave me a feeling of extreme poverty, but at the same time of great fullness. There was no longer anything I wanted or desired. I existed in an objective form; I was what I had been and lived. At first the sense of annihilation predominated, of having been stripped or pillaged; but suddenly that became of no consequence. Everything seemed to be past; what remained was a *fait accompli*, without any reference back to what had

been. There was no longer any regret that something had dropped away or been taken away. On the contrary: I had everything that I was, and that was everything.[36]

I understand this passage to be a description of the greater *sublimatio* in its total and ultimate form. Partial aspects of the same process occur, I think, whenever an item in one's personal psychology is decisively objectified. It then becomes an eternal fact, untouchable by joy or grief or change.

The majority of *sublimatio* images we encounter as therapists belong to the lesser *sublimatio*. In fact, for contemporary patients, images of ascent, heights, and flying almost always indicate the need for a downgoing. Modern individuals have had entirely too much *sublimatio*, at least of the lesser kind. They need descent and *coagulatio* (see figure 5-12). The relative freedom of the sublimated state is an important achievement in psychic development, but only a part. It can be disastrous to be stuck in the sky. Ascent and descent are both needed. As an alchemical dictum says, "Sublimate the body and coagulate the spirit."

Just as ascending birds represent *sublimatio* and translation from the temporal to the eternal, so descending birds represent contents from the archetypal world that are incarnating by breaking into the personal ego realm. The dove of the Holy Spirit descended on Christ at the time of his baptism, indicating the incarnation process. An eagle descended on Tarquin Priscus on his way to Rome signifying his destined kingship. For ages birds have been considered the messengers of God. In ancient times the auspices (from *avis*, "bird" and *specio* "to look at") were taken by examining the behavior of birds. Psychotic patients have told me that they receive messages from God delivered by birds. Upward movement eternalizes; downward movement personalizes. When these two movements are combined, we get another alchemical process, namely, *circulatio*. A paragraph from the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes* refers to *circulatio:* "It ascends from the earth to the heaven, and descends again to the earth, and receives the power of the above and below. Thus you will have the glory of the whole world. Therefore all darkness will flee from you."

In astrological imagery, *circulatio* refers to the repeated ascent and descent of the planetary spheres whereby each of the archetypal principles, symbolized by the planetary archons, is encountered successively. Chemically, *circulatio* refers to the process in which a substance is heated in a reflux flask. The vapors ascend and condense; then the condensed fluid is fed back into the belly of the flask, where the cycle is

[36]Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, pp. 290f.

FIGURE 5 - 12
The Tower of Babel (Bruegel, 1563. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Reprinted in *The World of Bruegel.*)

repeated. *Sublimatio* and *coagulatio* are thus repeated alternately, again and again.

Psychologically, *circulatio* is the repeated circuit of all aspects of one's being, which gradually generates awareness of a transpersonal center uniting the conflicting factors. There is a transit through the opposites, which are experienced alternately again and again, leading finally to their reconciliation. Jung describes *circulatio* in these words:

> Ascent and descent, above and below, up and down, represent an emotional realization of opposites, and this realization gradually leads, or should lead, to their equilibrium. This motif occurs very frequently in dreams, in the form of going up- and downhill, climbing stairs, going up or down in a lift, balloon, aeroplane, etc. It corresponds to the struggle between the winged and the wingless dragon, i.e., the uroboros.... This vacillating between the opposites and being tossed back and forth means being contained *in* the opposites. They become a vessel in which what was previously now one thing and now another floats vibrating, so that the painful suspension between opposites gradually changes into the bilateral activity of the point in the centre.[37]

[37]Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis, CW* 14, par. 296.

Circulatio is an important idea in psychotherapy. Circular motion around a center and up and down are common in dreams. One must make the circuit of one's complexes again and again in the course of their transformation. The "powers of the above and the below" are combined to the extent that the unified personality is created that connects the personal psyche (below) with the archetypal psyche (above).

The above passage from the *Emerald Tablet* gives a clear expression of the difference between the alchemical attitude and the Christian religious attitude. Jung emphasizes this point since it makes clear the nature of the psychological-empirical standpoint of which the alchemists were forerunners. He writes, "[In the *Emerald Tablet*] it is not a question of a one-way ascent to heaven, but, in contrast to the route followed by the Christian Redeemer, who comes from above to below and from there returns to the above, the *filius macrocosmi* starts from below, ascends on high, and, with the powers of Above and Below united in himself, returns to earth again. He carries out the reverse movement and thereby manifests a nature contrary to that of Christ and the Gnostic Redeemers."[38]

The difference in the images corresponds to the difference between religious faith and psychological empiricism. In another place Jung puts it this way: "[From the religious viewpoint]... man attributes to himself the need of redemption and leaves the work of redemption, the actual *athlon* or *opus,* to the autonomous divine figure;...[From the alchemical viewpoint] man takes upon himself the duty of carrying out the redeeming *opus,* and attributes the state of suffering and consequent need of redemption to the *anima mundi* imprisoned in matter."[39] And again, "[The alchemist's] attention is not directed to his own salvation through God's grace, but to the liberation of God from the darkness of matter."[40]

The alchemical *filius philosophorum* begins and ends on earth. This suggests that primary importance is given to the concrete, spatio-temporal reality of the ego. The fulfillment of the limited human condition is placed above ideal perfection. Nevertheless, this distinction must not be pushed too far. Very interestingly, our chief scriptural reference to the ascension of Christ (Acts 1:9–11) is immediately followed by a statement concerning his return to earth: "...as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

[38]Jung, *Alchemical Studies, CW* 13, par. 280.

[39]Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy, CW* 12, par. 414.

[40]Ibid., par. 420.

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven'" (RSV).

In spite of the danger of *sublimatio* for the modern mind, its symbolism remains at the core of all human effort for development. All that evokes our better, "higher" nature, indeed, all morality partakes of *sublimatio* imagery. This is well expressed by Longfellow, from whose poem "The Ladder of St. Augustine" I shall quote a few stanzas to conclude this chapter:

St. Augustine! well hast thou said,
That of our vices we can frame
A ladder, if we will but tread
Beneath our feet each deed of shame!

All common things, each day's events,
That with the hour begin and end,
Our pleasures and our discontents,
Are rounds by which we may ascend.

.....

The longing for ignoble things;
The strife for triumph more than truth;
The hardening of the heart that brings
Irreverence for the dreams of youth;

.....

All these must first be trampled down
Beneath our feet, if we would gain
In the bright fields of fair renown
The right of eminent domain.

.....

Standing on what too long we bore
With shoulders bent and downcast eyes,
We may discern—unseen before—
A path to higher destinies.

Nor deem the irrevocable Past,
As wholly wasted, wholly vain
If, rising on its wrecks, at last
To something nobler we attain.