

A Flash of Golden Fire: An Interview with Thomas Elsner

The following is a transcript from an interview with Thomas Elsner, who will be delivering the Fay Lecture series for 2016 at the Jung Center in Houston on April 15 through the 17th. The interview focused on Mr. Elsner's upcoming Fay Lecture Series: "A Flash of Golden Fire" and was conducted on March 11, 2016 by McMillan Institute Scholar Michael Escamilla, MD.

M.E.: Welcome. We are here talking to Thomas Elsner about the upcoming Fay Lecture series, which will be called "A Flash of Golden Fire" and which will be held at the Jung Center of Houston between April 15 and April 17 of this year. Tom, welcome. Where are you calling from this morning?

T.E.: I'm in my office in Santa Barbara, California.

M.E.: I understand you are a Jungian analyst in practice there in the Santa Barbara area and that you also teach at Pacifica Graduate Institute.

T.E.: Yes, I've been teaching at Pacifica for over ten years and have been in Santa Barbara for about the same time.

M.E.: Great. Just for people to get to know you, could you tell us a little bit about what you teach at Pacifica? What areas you teach in?

T.E.: Sure, I've taught classes on Jungian Psychology in general. I've taught a course on the psychological interpretation of fairy tales. For a long time, courses on alchemy and dream interpretation. General psychology courses as well. But I seem to specialize in courses about literature. I have that interest in the relationship between depth psychology and literature. The symbolic imagination in general seems to be the thing capturing me.

M.E.: Very interesting. And that fits into the talk that you are going to be giving. The full title of the talk is "A Flash of Golden Fire: Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner and the Alchemical Imagination." I thought we could maybe start the conversation by talking a little bit about Coleridge. For those who don't know who Coleridge was or where this poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," fits into literary history, could you tell us a little bit about Coleridge?

T.E.: Sure. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a British Romantic poet. One of his most famous poems was "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," published in 1798 along with a collection of poetry by William Wordsworth that was called Lyrical Ballads that pretty much set off the Romantic poetry movement at that time. So Coleridge was really a giant of the imagination, whose contemporaries were Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Byron. And along with Romantic poets, those people really, in my mind, were keeping alive the symbolic imagination during the time of the enlightenment, when that side of the human psyche was generally regarded as superstition and delusion. So the Romantic poets, to me, were really in the same lineage with the alchemists, taking over the alchemical confrontation with the shadow, with the feminine, with the animated view of nature. Those things that were really pushed into the background during the age of enlightenment. And Jung took up this alchemical mythology explicitly in the 20th century. So I see Coleridge and his contemporaries as standing in a line of tradition, the alchemical

tradition, through the 18th and 19th century and then becoming a part of the depth psychological traditions of the twentieth century.

M.E.: Coleridge was primarily a poet, I take it?

T.E.: Yes, he was an English poet. He was also a philosopher and a literary critic and a lot of other things, besides a poet. But he did all of his visionary poetry - "Kubla Khan," "Christabel," "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner" - actually in his early twenties.

M.E.: As often a lot of poets are inspired in their early years. And you mentioned Keats being in that group of Romantic poets?

T.E.: Yes. He's in the same group. He's a bit younger - in the second generation behind Blake and Wordsworth and Coleridge. But the same lineage. Same tradition.

M.E.: I was thinking of Keats, as he also wrote his poetry as a young man.

T.E.: All those people, what they had in common was that they shared an interest in the primacy of the unconscious. Jung, in a seminar in *Children's Dreams*, once said that that we speak of the unconscious at all was due to the Romantic spirit. They were tuned in and knew many of the things that interest us in the depth psychological field today.

M.E.: How did you first come across this poem? Did you come across it once you were a Jungian or was this something that you came across earlier in your life experience?

T.E.: I majored at U.C. San Diego in English Literature and Philosophy, so I came across this poem early on, but it never really captured me. It was strangely about ten years ago, during a psychotherapy session. A client of mine mentioned... he was talking about his depression and he said "it's like water, everywhere, but not a drop to drink." And then about ten minutes later he was talking about this pathological sense of guilt that he had and he said "it's like an albatross around me neck." And he didn't recognize these were lines from "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" because they have become part of the vernacular. But I recognized where they came from, so I went back to the poem and looked at it to see what they had to say about depression or guilt or his process. And he was mildly interested in the poem, but it really captured me. The next ten years plus, I was really dragged into it and fascinated. My dreams responded very much to the poem's content - the process as I started to work on it. I wrote about it in my diploma thesis at the Center for Depth Psychology in Switzerland and it's been with me for over ten years. It's become a real vessel for my own process and I think this poem also has a lot to say about the collective psychology and mythology of Western culture.

M.E.: It's amazing how working with our clients in Jungian analysis opens new doors into the psyche or the unconscious in ways that we couldn't have predicted ahead of time. Thank you for telling us about that. You mentioned that in your view, these Romantic poets kept a tradition alive that had been, maybe not suppressed, but just overlooked during the period of the enlightenment. I generally think of the enlightenment era as the time where there was more of a focus on the natural sciences and logic. Is that a fair description of that?

T.E.: Yes.

M.E.: I wonder if you could say how you view the enlightenment age? And second, you mentioned the Romantic poets carrying on a tradition. What was that tradition that was lost in the age of enlightenment?

T.E.: I see the tradition that was lost in the age of enlightenment as the alchemical tradition. What I mean by that is that the enlightenment was really starting in the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth centuries in Europe. What grew up out of that period of time scientifically was the idea that the world was susceptible to a mathematical, quantitative analysis only and the universe obeyed mechanical laws, so it was akin to a giant clock that ran on deterministic principles, from start to finish, with no room for human will or anything else. This is why the Romantics were in an all out war against that vision, which Coleridge called the "Mechanical Philosophy." So, the alchemists were the people that turned to the shadow side of their culture – the shadow side of the patriarchal religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And the shadow side of these traditions included an emphasis on the problem of evil, a confrontation with the feminine side of things, and an interaction with nature that was experienced as ensouled and animated, not just determinist and quantitative. So matter, the feminine, and the animated dimensions of matter were the three ideas that were central in alchemy, central in the Romantic system, and I think became central for Jung as he tried to unite those two traditions in European culture, namely, the rational, quantitative, scientific, that he was obviously steeped in, with what was banished from that tradition - the irrational, synchronistic side of things. We forget that Jung as we know him - we think of him as someone interested in synchronicity, symbolism, that side of things. Jung thought of himself as a natural scientist very much. He was very much interested in uniting these two streams of thought that became very separated during the seventeenth century in Europe. And that's how I see the Romantics and that's what the talk will really be about. What are the myths in our time now that want to seek to unify opposites that have been split in our culture. Obviously, looking around at the world politically, scientifically, psychologically, religiously - from all sides - I think there's a sense that many of us feel that something in psyche wants to unite tensions that have been at war with each other in recent years. The talk will get into what those are, how I see that in Romantic poetry, and how we experience those things today.

M.E.: For someone who comes to these lectures, how do you think these talks could help a person in their own particular journey?

T.E.: Jung said "if I'm in a dark hole, I feel better if there's others down there with me." I think of the alchemists and Coleridge. The poem itself is a descent into the collective unconscious, much like Jung's *Red Book*. To the extent that we are on a similar journey of having to confront, through the individuation process, our own shadow, come to grips with what has been excluded in our own lives, and see our lives in a more whole way, we can learn a lot from the Romantic poets, the alchemists, the people who have lived through these experiences before us. I could say a lot more about that, but I'll just leave it there.

M.E.: Do you have any recommendations if someone wanted to do some reading ahead of these talks? Any particular writings from Jung? I guess obviously the poem would be good to look at, but do you have any recommendations about something people might read ahead of time?

T.E.: About the poem and about Coleridge and Romantic poetry in general, a really fantastic essay was written by Ted Hughes, the British poet laureate, as an

introduction to a book published by Faber and Faber - I think it's called *The Choice of Coleridge's Verse*. Ted Hughes has an introduction that's really excellent and really along the lines of how we are going to be talking about the depth psychology perspective. In terms of alchemy, I'd recommend Marie Louise von Franz's book *Alchemy* - it has a green cover, published by Inner City. And if people want to get more into the depths of this material, a very challenging book, but really excellent, is by Ross Woodman, the Romanticism scholar, husband of Marion Woodman, now deceased. He wrote a book called *Sanity, Madness, Transformation: The Psyche In Romanticism*. Excellent book. Not an easy read, but worth the trouble if you are into this topic.

M.E.: I'd like to thank you for taking the time to talk us about your upcoming lectures. I know that the many people who come to the Fay lectures are really looking forward to your visit this year. I hope you will enjoy your time in Texas.

T.E.: Thank you so much. I'm very much looking forward to it. This has been a long journey with the Ancient Mariner for me. I'll see you there in April.

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