

The Children of the Salvària

Roberto Buffi

Our inner life is intimately tied up with the ways in which we tend to destroy the earth we live on. The psyche is the great driving power which, in the final analysis, determines the type of environmental impact our presence on this earth will have. Anyone who works in the field of the care and management of environmental and scenic resources can vouch for the important role inner images play in determining the sort of relationship man establishes with nature. Dealing with these images is of paramount importance. We could even go so far as to say that if we want to have any chance of rectifying the decline our natural world is facing, we must devote ourselves to this task and undertake a sort of “care of the soul” in terms of the relationship that exists between man and nature.¹ This task is all the more urgent in light of the rate at which our planet is being destroyed and in virtue of the intimate connection that exists between “inner nature and outer nature “. Marie-Louise von Franz often repeated that if man destroys nature his soul is lost as well.²

One of the concepts we most often come across in this context is that of nature seen as a garden. According to this mode of thought, nature is not seen as a fully autonomous entity but rather as something which exists for the use and pleasure of man. The wild side of nature is thus completely lost. It follows then that our ways of managing natural and scenic resources are in the majority of cases inspired by images of care and cultivation rather than by images of nature as such; this also applies to the attitudes we tend to adopt towards our woods and forests. A free and wild approach in which forests are allowed to naturally evolve is looked upon with suspicion, because woods are seen as requiring the control and ordering that comes from cutting down trees. It is surprising how persistent this pattern tends to be, even in the face of what can clearly be seen in the admittedly few forests that have been left unmodified by lumbering practices. Careful observation of just this type of forest reveals from every point of view the degree of autonomy a woods really possesses. Not only does a forest which is left intact not create problems – contrary to what many people still believe – but it is also a

¹ From my point of view, one of the best ways of doing this is simply to stay in contact with nature in silence, without studying or applying any method or system.

² My own translation of a phrase reported by G. Isler.

fundamental element of the landscape, offering a glimpse of images that sorely need to be rediscovered because of their uniqueness.

From a biological standpoint, spontaneous nature differs considerably from cultivated nature, but this side of the question cannot be adequately dealt with here.³ It is far more useful to focus on the attitude which underlies our anthropocentric approach, because when nature is managed and cultivated more often than not it ends up being treated in an automatic and non-reflective way. What I personally perceive in all of this is a basic restlessness, a pressing need to leave our mark, a total inability to simply leave things as they are, without having to modify nature nor possess it. I once attended a seminar on topics related to the forest and a colleague mentioned that what he perceived in these phenomena was a sort of “intervention anxiety.” In fact during their training engineers basically acquire a sense of the duty to improve the world, not to accept it as it is. The first of these approaches (that of intervening in the world) is typically masculine, whereas the second one (acceptance of the world as it is) is characteristically feminine; these two approaches ought to hold one another in balance. It is worth noting that the interventionist approach seems to be part and parcel of our extroverted and decidedly practical culture (at least as far as Switzerland is concerned), and is sadly lacking in sensitivity to the symbolic dimension.

The more or less tamed side of nature on which man intervenes so assiduously as well as the strange order that reigns in many forests⁴ seem to be linked to the taming of man himself. We who have colonized an amazing portion of our planet, are at the same time colonized.⁵ The wild natural interior world has been oppressed by a mass of external stimuli and man in his wild, natural state has been made an object of ridicule by our Christian culture, and ultimately disregarded.

Just what does the unconscious have to tell us about our relationship with nature? I came across a collection of stories which seems to deal with this topic as well as addressing the question of the natural forest (outside and inside), its spirit and the possibility of getting closer to it. The text in question is a fairy tale, *The Salvaria* (Wolff, 1987) from the Dolomites found in Carlo Felice Wolff’s collection⁶.

³ For a discussion of this aspect of forests, see R. Buffi, 1997 and 1996 for example.

⁴ In nature as well as in our own lives, “order” is not yet “meaning.”

⁵ I can’t help recalling the words of Isaiah, “Woe to those who add house to house, and join field to field until everywhere belongs to them and they are the sole inhabitants of the land.” (Isaiah 5,8).

⁶ Carlo Felice Wolff was an expert on the area of the Dolomites and its local folklore. His works include publications on the Alps and more specifically on the Reto-romanesque peoples. His *Dolomiten Sagen* (1913) contained his very first reports of Dolomite legends.

The tale was most probably first recorded by the author at the beginning of the 1900's in Ladin and seems to have grown out of the network of related Ladin dialects spread over the Grigion region, the valleys of the upper Adige and Friuli, and in the wooded areas of the Dolomites where Ladin was once widely spoken but which are now populated by Italian and German speakers. The tale itself is set in the neighbourhood of Andràz, a village situated along the road that runs from Cortina d'Ampezzo to the Fiemme Valley, at the opening of the Falzarego pass.

Near Andràz there once lived a farmer whose home was at the edge of the forest. One day, while he was busy cutting wood in the forest, he came upon a young girl picking strawberries.⁷ “And just what are you going to do with those strawberries?” he asked her. “I’m going to take them to my mother” was her reply. “And just where might she live?” he inquired. “Up there, in the caves, amidst the rocks.” “Why do you live in the caves?” asked the farmer, “don’t you have a house of your own?” To this the girl answered, “We have to make do with life up there because we are Salvàrie (Women of the Bush). Our ancestors chased us up into the mountains.” Having said this, she disappeared among the bushes. From that day on, the farmer often met the girl in the same place and each time enjoyed talking to her more until he came to be so fond of her that he went to the local curate to ask if he could marry a Salvària without committing a sin. The curate responded that there would be no problem as long as the girl allowed herself to be baptized. The farmer went straight back into the woods and asked the girl if she was willing to be baptized and to marry him. She accepted, but on the condition that the farmer never ask her what her name was. The farmer accepted and the wedding was celebrated straight away. Now up until this time no one had ever heard of a farmer marrying a Salvària and the local people were sure that nothing good would come of it. Nevertheless, the couple lived in perfect harmony for a good seven years and even though the man was very curious about his wife’s name, he never put the question to her since he had promised not to do so. At this point the farmer met another young girl in the woods and asked her if she too was a Salvària. “Yes” she answered, “why do you ask? Do you know another?” “I sure do!” he answered. “Is it Lonca?” replied the girl. “Lonca?” asked the farmer, “and who might that be?”. “Oh, she’s the Salvària who married a man from Andràz” was her reply. Naturally this was a sort of revelation to the farmer who thought, “I finally know what my wife’s name is!” and as he was returning home, he called out from afar, “Lonca, Lonca!” No sooner had the girl heard her name than she came to the door saying, “Oh no, woe is me! Now I will have to leave you and our children and go back up into the mountains.” The farmer couldn’t believe his ears, and tried to stop the girl but alas it was too late, she had already fled towards the mountains and was never to return. But from time to time, in the evening she did come back, to tuck the children into bed while her husband sat helplessly and sadly at the table watching her. After a

⁷ The original text uses the term “gamate”, blueberries.

time, the girl pleaded with her husband to go away and not to look at her in such a way, but since he was not willing to meet the request, she became invisible, even to the farmer. The children were the only ones who could feel her presence as she tucked them in at night and gently caressed them. This went on until the last day of that year, after which she returned again.⁸

I am going to take the liberty of examining this tale as if it were a dream revealing the inner nature of the area and indeed of the entire region of the Alps, as well as an expression of certain aspects of our Western culture as such.⁹ I will take into consideration just a few elements of the tale, especially those which are relevant to the considerations made thus far.

The plot of the tale follows a pattern which can be found in many stories: women generally referred to as “Melusine” appear to men in isolated places where they seduce them and offer their love so long as the men are willing to keep a promise. (Planche 1993). The farmer in our tale lives in such an isolated place, on the edge of a forest. Isolation has the effect of activating the forces of the “beyond”; psychic energy which is not invested in social interaction is withdrawn and held within the individual (von Franz 1974, p. 144). This man, who as a farmer represents a force which modifies the natural environment perhaps more than any other, is intent on cutting wood – a difficult and typically masculine task. And it is to just such a man, who modifies nature to meet his own needs and whose rapport with nature is one of practical necessity, that the young girl appears in an isolated place as she is picking wild strawberries. All of this contributes to the creation of an atmosphere laden with the quality of *Eros*.

Strawberries are among the tastiest, most pleasing and delicate woodland fruits (the German term *Erdbeere*, literally “berries of the earth” is highly significant). Botanically it belongs to the family of the *Rosaceae* and alludes to the rose as the flower of love. Appreciated even in ancient times, this fruit is among the most appreciated in popular traditions and in virtue of its delicate nature, is not easy to conserve, a fact which is of importance. Strawberries, like the young girl in our tale, need to be treated delicately; they suffer if they are picked haltingly and seem to call for an original and direct approach.

We could summarize the opening scene of the tale in this way: man as the modifier of nature and of the forest, pronouncedly “masculine” in light of his extroverted and practical-utilitarian attitude (he asks the girl what she is

⁸ The original text runs, in part, as follows: ‘n tzakan leva ‘ntei kontorni d’Andràc ‘n paròn, ke lava na cesa sot al bosk. Sto om tande oute l ziva a fe lenja e a mené zu bore. Nvjade ntel bosk el vejga na tosata foresta, ke kojava garnate. Al la domana ci ke la fes k oste garnate. De kast la respon, ke lai le porta a sua mere.

⁹ For further informatiupon regarding this approach, see G. Isler (1991, p.97).

going *to do* with the strawberries) comes face to face with *eros*, face to face with love and with feeling, face to face with feminine qualities. At the same time it seems that this budding *eros* is searching for this man. This is the message the unconscious sends out to those who “manage” nature, to woodland farmers and to others in similar positions. The unconscious speaks to them of *eros* and of the feeling which is so sadly and completely lacking in their and our approach to nature.

The young woman lives in a cave in the wilderness and thus corresponds to a psychic content or quality which is far from consciousness, a fact which is underscored by the absence of a father figure. The values which the Salvària incarnates are missing from the system of recognized collective norms and values. The Salvàrie, as the tale reveals, are destined to live cut off in the wilderness because they have been banished there by their ancestors. The whole situation, seen from their point of view, is sad and has roots that reach down or go back to a distant reality.

The woman identifies herself as a member of the Salvàrie, she is a woman of the forest, and as such represents the forces of the forest and of the earth itself, those forces which appear as vegetation demons and spirits such as the *Dialas* present in the popular traditions of the Grigioni and which likewise are said to dwell in woodland caves. We could interpret them as intermediaries between man and nature and it is worthy of note that they are feminine figures, nymphs or fairies in search of men. God himself incarnated as a man in the figure of Christ; now it is the Feminine which seeks incarnation.¹⁰ The girl appears all on her own as if she wanted complete and undivided attention, as if she wanted to be observed carefully. Tradition has it that such appearances of single, isolated “woodland women” reveals their wisdom and their divine nature.¹¹

In short, the Salvària represents the Anima, the internal femininity of a man, partially excluded from his consciousness and able to compensate his rationalistic approach thanks to the qualities of *eros*, to the ability to recognize and accept what is irrational, and to feelings for nature. It is she that allows a man to be in touch with the unconscious.

Salvària means literally “woman of the bush” as Wolff himself points out. But in the very term Salvària, the word “salvare” or “save” echoes as a reminder of the fact that she is what needs to be saved but is also the one who saves or rescues. It is worth pointing out that the local curate approves of this marriage despite the widespread scepticism on the part of the local folk,

¹⁰ My thanks to Dieter Baumann for this observation.

¹¹ According to the *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (1936, p. 55).

convinced that nothing good could ever come of such a union. How hard it is to give up a traditional, apparently safe position in order to accept new values into our lives.¹² The scepticism of the local folk of Andràz can be seen and felt in our own resistance. The curate's acceptance of the marriage allows us to catch a glimpse of a tendency within Christianity to accept and integrate feminine values, and this is consoling. But a condition is established, i.e. that the woman be baptized, an imposition which is redolent of the way the so-called pagan peoples were obliged to accept baptism by the restless forces of Christianity, and which appears in the tale in the attitude the farmer adopts towards his new wife. In keeping with her wishes, the Salvària is not completely integrated into the Christian community because she is baptized without a name. The fact that the woman accepts baptism is worthy of reflection, for it would seem to indicate that nature itself truly wants to move closer to man. The woman is pagan, and from this we might conclude that the feminine values found in nature and necessary for a relationship with nature, are not to be sought or found in Christianity, or at least not only within Christianity. The meeting and union between these two worlds bears its fruit: two children are born of the marriage.

Having a name means actually "being someone", and the Latin saying "nomen est omen" is worthy of mention in this context. For the primitive mentality, a name captures the essence of the person or object, and determines the very fate the person or object will encounter. Primitives also equate a name with the soul (Jung 1931/34, par. 665). A name then is the thing itself (Jung 1928/31, par. 735). Accordingly, by pronouncing the name of a person, one actually acts upon him or her. A name takes on magical qualities, both in a positive and in a negative sense: the force of a higher power can be activated by pronouncing its name, a spirit (such as the demon responsible for an illness) can be made to disappear by calling out its name and harm can be done to a person by repeatedly hitting an object while repeating the name of that individual. According to an ancient belief, knowledge of a secret name gives power over the one who bears that name. (Jung 1945/54, par. 436). In archaic times, bestowing a name on a person or object was equivalent to possessing that object. The battles that are waged in scientific circles over names and definitions is evidence of this same reality, and attempts to name a natural phenomenon as proof of our knowledge of the single cause behind it is a clear manifestation of a *logos* approach. Feeling is closer to the principle of synchronicity. Jung himself speaks of the (apparent)

¹² The masculine principle generally tends to affirm the values of "perfection" while the feminine principle defends the values of "completeness".

power the name of an object holds when one's relation with reality is disturbed. (Jung 1912/52, par.201).

So the Salvària does not wish to be completely identified but seems to prefer to remain in the shadows and not to be owned or possessed. She seems to want to step out of the magical approach which can be found throughout the whole Alpine region (and in other places as well)¹³ and which, to my way of thinking, is still present. This, disguised as reason or in the guise of Christianity, still conditions our relationship with nature. Are we any more ready to face up to the secrets of the forest than our farmer from Andràz was? Might our need for scientific clarity be a real obstacle to involvement in the life of the forest? It remains difficult for us to accept the fact that the forest has its mysteries and thus cannot open itself up to us. The forest in its natural state, the earth, nature itself must not be defined in an attempt to possess them; rather they need to be courted. They need to be loved and to be complimented for their beauty.

The farmer never stops being curious about his wife's name but he refrains from speaking to her about it because of the promise made to her. Perhaps he takes the whole thing lightly, as if it were a game, without asking what is behind or beneath the entire question. His meeting with the second Salvària is significant from this point of view; the man laughs and is convinced he has been clever. And once he knows his wife's name, he runs home shouting it out from afar. In his immaturity and childishness, he is not able to remain silent. He thinks it is all just a sort of guessing game or riddle, and doesn't recognize that what is at stake is his relationship with a great feminine mystery, the mystery of nature. Here he demonstrates his inability to symbolize, and he underestimates the Salvària. When his wife decides to leave, the desperate farmer doesn't want to accept his fate and tries to stop her. He never imagined that the whole question was so important!

We need to honestly ask ourselves at this point if the problem the farmer faces isn't also our own great illness. For aren't we just as concretistic and rationalistic – or even obsessive? Don't we always *want something from nature*? We seem to be incapable of consciously respecting a style of non-intervention and of remaining silent. Perhaps, like the farmer from Andràz, all we want is to “know the name”, without showing the patience that a real instinct for the reality of the unconscious calls for. Our uncontrollable need and desire to know can actually kill the possibility of recognizing symbolic reality, and ultimately ruin everything. (Jung 1906-1945, p. 53-55).

¹³ See, for example, the works by E. Renner (1976) or A. Buechli (1992). As far as the Canton of Tessin is concerned, see D. Baratti (1989).

A secret is an unredeemed mystery. Anyone who is not gripped by the mystery tends to become suspicious and starts to see secrets everywhere.¹⁴ The ego – perhaps because it is too weak – is unable to give in and stand back. The magical approach to reality actually puts the ego, with its desire for concreteness and its need to seek its own advantage, in the forefront. People with a “weak ego” therefore tend to be extremely concretistic.¹⁵ They lack the patience to wait for the right moment and they lack the trust in destiny that is needed. What they most abhor is the state of suspension.¹⁶ The ability to keep a secret is a fundamental acquisition along the road of the process of individuation which in turn is indispensable for sustaining a relationship with nature. Without personal growth and development, nature herself cannot be protected.

And yet it is ultimately impossible not to ask anything of nature, and the state of not knowing goes against nature herself. There are even some variations of this tale in which the man’s wife goes off because he doesn’t ask her anything. The real problem is how to know when to stop. In the fairy tale *The Beautiful Vasilissa* the heroine of the story decides at a certain point to simply stop and to ask nothing more; the witch in the tale then tells her that she was indeed right to investigate no further (“I eat those who are too curious”). The Great Mother seems to want us to ask, but she equally wants us to be able to recognize when we need to stop asking. Only *eros* can tell us when we need to stop and when the time comes to remain silent. For this reason, instinct linked to *eros* is fundamental in the world of science. The best approach is one in which a sort of religious respect dominates, while a sly and clever attitude can be particularly damaging. (von Franz 1972, p. 144).¹⁷

Thus the Salvària returns to her cave up in the hills. It seems that things just had to go the way they did – paradise needed to be lost in order to reach an even higher goal. A non-integrated partial content thus falls back into the unconscious. But in the tale, the woman’s children, images of something new, remain. Here we can see the prospect of a new sort of contact between consciousness (the farmer) and the unconscious (the woodland nymph). The way these children grow and develop will be of paramount importance.

This tale brings us face to face with the problem of the *natural man*; our Christian culture has made few if any concessions to this side of our reality, denying the importance of the dark, feminine and instinctual elements

¹⁴ My thanks to Dieter Baumann for this insight.

¹⁵ Schizophrenics for example tend to be extremely concretistic.

¹⁶ This shows up in group discussions where such people have a hard time holding back a thought.

¹⁷ The interpretation of the tale *The Beautiful Vasilissa* contained therein is particularly important.

of humanity. And through this tale the great theme of *eros* emerges as seen in the sort of relationship man establishes with woman, but also in the rapport man has with nature (the side of the question I have tried to deal with in this essay). The story seems to tell us that the real solution to the problem of the split that has set in between man and nature is to be found in the attitude of the individual, and cannot be found in the Christian tradition that surrounds us. The tale also highlights a fundamental aspect of the relationship man-nature which we are called to live, i.e. *eros* in the respect we feel and show towards nature, in the feeling we have for animals, rocks, air, fire, water and the earth itself.¹⁸ All of these elements –all of them!- need to be seen and treated as living beings.

Nature within us also wants to be met and loved. And there can be no real relationship with nature inside nor with nature outside, unless we cultivate a deep sense of the sacred. The tale of the Salvària is so timely that one almost feels it was written just for us – and yet the problems we face in our relationship with nature have been around for ages and ages. It is indeed an old story, still waiting to be solved.

Contra, 1997

¹⁸ We also need to regain a sense of fear in the face of nature, a quality which is closely tied up with *eros*. We mustn't forget that nature, both inside and outside, also corresponds to evil.