

Feminine apparitions in nature

The healing power of spiritual landscape experiences

Wim Bonis

When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom
Let it be
(...)
And when the broken hearted people
Living in the world agree
There will be an answer
Let it be

Let it be, the Beatles, 1970

It is known that over the past few centuries regularly feminine apparitions have been reported in various places in Europe, and sometimes elsewhere, that have been attributed to the Virgin Mary. Naturally these have been taking place in countries where the Christian faith, and more specifically the Catholic faith, once spread had been spread among the people. They always took place unexpectedly, usually somewhere in remote places in nature – in a cave, near a well, in a forest – in any case, far away from church buildings where the church services took place and also outside the influence of the church authorities.

As most people also know, these authorities have always been hesitant with the recognition of the authenticity of the feminine apparitions. And when the Marian worship at the site and pilgrimages to the site spontaneously began to take on a major form among the people – as has been the case, for example, in Lourdes –, this development was viewed with great suspicion by these authorities. The eventual recognition of the

authenticity of an apparition almost always took place much later. Only in 1851 for the first time the authenticity of an apparition was recognized. But in the centuries before several Marian apparitions had already been reported, like in 1061 in Walsingham in England.

In this article, I would like to pay attention to a number of interesting points regarding these feminine apparitions. Obviously, they took place through a female character. In the Christian regions this was usually the Virgin Mary, but sometimes other female Saints were involved. What do we know about feminine apparitions that have taken place outside the Christian context? I will also pay attention to the fact that the apparitions have almost always taken place in the world outside, at places in nature, far away from the urbanized world. What can we learn from this? Furthermore, I have started to wonder when the first feminine apparitions started to take place. Is it conceivable that the emergence of certain places of worship and pilgrimage is based on unknown apparitions that have never been reported, but have caused a stir among the people? And could the countless figurines and statues of feminine figures/Goddesses – which since the Paleolithic have been found at various locations on the European continent and also outside of it, and of which we often no longer know what kind of worship they belonged – have been inspired by earlier apparitions in nature? And, perhaps the most important point, what do these apparitions tell us about our relation to the surrounding natural world?

Feminine apparitions within and without a Christian context

It has usually not been clear exactly what kind of feminine apparitions have taken place. Initially, there was usually a story about a luminous female figure that was observed – often by children, as has been the case at La Salette and Lourdes in France, at Beauraing in Belgium, at Fatima in Portugal, and at Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ Within the Christian context of the society in which the observers lived, the experiences were quickly interpreted as apparitions of the Virgin Mary. Often it has remained unclear what or who the observers have actually seen. In Lourdes Bernadette has once emphasized that she had not said that she had seen the Holy Virgin, but an apparition that called herself ‘the Immaculate Conception’.² She has also said that the image of Mary that

others had made of the apparitions, did not really resemble what she had seen. The historian Ruth Harris has pointed out that the people who interviewed Bernadette from the beginning had an image in their minds – and held on to that image – that was far removed from her descriptions.³

In this respect, it is important to know that feminine apparitions have not belonged exclusively to the Christian world. Outside the Christian context, numerous other feminine apparitions have been reported, including apparitions of ‘witte wieven’ in the Netherlands and of ‘white ladies’ and ‘fairies’ in the Celtic culture of England and Ireland.⁴ According to the French writer and researcher of Celtic culture Jean Markale, apparitions of ‘white ladies’ (‘witte wieven’, ‘dames blanches’, ‘weiße Frauen’) have been known throughout the history of Europe.⁵ Other feminine apparitions, like Germanic elves and Greek nymphs, can be put into this context as well.

In the region of Lourdes also stories about pre-Christian apparitions have circulated. According to Ruth Harris, the apparition of Bernadette fitted into a tradition of pre-Christian folklore: ‘Although her apparition bore little resemblance to orthodox Marian imagery, its similarities with mythical creatures of Pyrenean folklore were much more marked. The site of the apparition was inhabited by the fairies (...) who inhabited forests, bushes, fountains and, above all, grottoes of the region.’ Yet, although Bernadette’s apparition was young and very small, she was different from the fairies, ‘these little ladies of the forest’, because she had a rosary and a blue sash.⁶ However, apart from the rosary and the sash, the imagery of the people who interviewed Bernadette has largely formed the basis for the image of the apparition that is still shown to the public today, and is also depicted in all the souvenirs. We will never know what kind of apparition Bernadette has really seen. And this actually also applies to the other reported feminine apparitions. Sometimes the way an apparition manifested itself in one particular location was also not always the same.

It is worth mentioning that the Dutch folklore researcher Aat van Gilst placed the stories about the Dutch ‘witte wieven’, who according to some folk tales are supposed to have lived in prehistoric burial mounds, in a broader context. In his view, they are part of a collection of many folk tales and sagas, spread over different European countries, about mysterious female beings who are supposed to have lived in ‘women's mountains’, that

sometimes are also called ‘Venus mountains’.⁷ With respect to the current theme, it is very imaginable that these sagas were once based on earlier feminine apparitions.

This connection of mysterious female beings to features of the landscape, like mounds or mountains, is very interesting. The surrounding natural world has also played an important role at the apparitions attributed to Mary.

Anthropomorphic apparitions and the spiritual experience of nature

Because the apparitions occurred in the form of a human female figure, the focus of the pilgrimages and Marian veneration in this context, have not only been put on the persons who experienced the apparitions and passed them on, but understandably also on the apparitions themselves, on the figure of Mary. Yet, we should not forget, that an apparition is never about the apparition itself, but about what the apparition refers to. The apparition functions as an intermediary.

The apparition is in fact a bridge to the spiritual experience of the Sacred Place where the apparition took place – and through that place to the entire surrounding Sacred Landscape, and to the even larger, immeasurable Cosmos of which each specific place is an inextricable part. The apparition connects people to the power and inspiration of that particular place in the natural world – and therefore also to the power and inspiration of the entire natural world. So that's why it is also not a bad thing at all that the pilgrims do not see the apparition itself when they visit the place. The presence of Mary is experienced indirectly through the power and inspiration of the place itself.

As is well known, (institutional) Christianity has always had little or no interest, initially at least, with the sacred character of the natural world: nature worship has always been associated by the Christian authorities with ‘paganism’. It was considered a reprehensible and even dangerous form of experience in which the Devil could hide himself. Nature worship had to be conquered and, if possible, completely eradicated. Therefore, these authorities have always wanted to divert human attention away from the surrounding natural environment.

In this regard, over the centuries they have struggled fiercely against all kinds of pre-Christian forms of spring worship, forest worship, river worship, etc. and where possible, tried to destroy these completely. And when they had not been ‘successful’ in this, because the forms of worship were too deeply rooted among the population, these were – as most people know – replaced by the worship of a Christian saint in that same location. Important with this replacement was that the central focus was taken away from the Sacred place in nature. It was transformed to a more abstract place within the framework of the Christian faith, whereby the central focus of worship was shifted to the person of the (local) Saint. In other words, it was a shift from the natural world to the human world.

The worship of Christian Saints at sacred wells, that has continued until today, shows well, for example, how the older Celtic culture has managed to survive in a Christian context. In Ireland there are, as the Canadian writer and dreamworker Toko-Pa Turner has pointed out in her book *Belonging*, still hundred, and perhaps even thousands of such sacred wells, spread across the country. According to her, before the arrival of Christianity in Ireland these wells were ‘the early shrines of the Mysteries of the Earth’ that people not only visited to receive predictions, but also to receive a cure. She adds to it that the sacred well in Celtic mythology not only is the hidden source from which the water springs, but also that it is ‘a gate between the visible and invisible world’. A cure could take place because at that place help was being offered from the hidden Otherworld.⁸ We can see that with the Marian worship as a result of feminine apparitions, like in Lourdes, this hope for a cure through help from the Otherworld has managed to survive in a Christianized form. With this hope for a cure, the water that is flowing from a sacred well at the cave still plays a central role.

The experience of inner power and the exercise of outer power

At the places, where a Marian worship flourished after the occurrence of apparitions, also such a shift of focus to the Saint has happened, a replacement of the focus on the concrete Sacred place. This was part of the action by the church authorities to put the apparition within the context of the Christian faith. That is also why after the recognition of the authenticity of an apparition a chapel or a church was built fairly quickly at the location.

With the shift of the focus from the experience of the place to the worship of the Saint we also have to do with a shift from *inner power* to *outer power*. The experiences of the Sacred place were largely *spiritual experiences*, in which people were touched directly by the inner power of the animated, surrounding natural world. The worship of the Saint was much more a case of practicing a *religious faith* and, related to that, the subjugation to the outer power of the church authorities. The struggle between inner and outer power, that was initiated by the church, goes back to the Christian struggle against the indigenous ‘nature religions’ of Europe. For practicing the religious faith of Christianity spiritual experiences have never really been necessary.

By adjusting the apparitions to a Christian context the direct exchange between the inner power of animated nature and that of the people was in danger of being lost. Fortunately, rituals and processions in the world outside remain permitted, and sometimes even new rituals were added to them. By this, perhaps unintended, the connection with the inner power of the natural world was kept somewhat alive.

Although with the visit to the places of the apparitions the attention of the pilgrims is mainly put on the apparition itself and on the people who had witnessed the apparitions, during their visit the minds of the pilgrims are also opened to the power of the place itself. Through the apparition, or the memory of it, they come into contact with the healing power of the animated landscape. In this respect it is, for instance, telling that in Lourdes everyone, while visiting the cave where the apparition took place, physically touches the stone of the cave wall. And through the many water taps everyone also fills bottles with the water of the spring that Bernadette is supposed to have recovered, by following the instructions of the apparition. By touching the stone of the cave wall and drinking the water of the well, they hope to make contact with and get some help for their cure by beings from the invisible world that is hidden behind this visible, material world. Just like their pre-Christian ancestors have done before them.

Indoor religion and outdoor spirituality

It is good to pay some attention here to the field of tension that manifested itself when the feminine apparitions were put in a Christian context: the

field of tension between, what I have called, *indoor religion* and *outdoor spirituality*.

Christianity, along with Judaism and Islam, has always been a religion in which religious experience was concentrated within the context of a building – as far as Christianity is concerned, this was the chapel, the church or the cathedral. It was essentially an *indoor religion*. The religious experiences and contact with the Sacred dimension of life took place within the walls of the chapel, the church or cathedral. The natural world outside the church building was not part of the religious experience, at least not directly. God had created the world from Heaven and did manage His Creation, but did so from a position outside and from above His Creation. He was not palpably present in it, as had been the case with the spirits or deities of the pre-Christian ‘nature religions’.

It is well known that in Christian doctrine not only was Jesus considered the only son of God, but the land of Israel was also considered the only *Holy Land*. The concept of Israel as the only Holy Land in the world had nothing to do with having experienced the Sacred in the surrounding landscape. It implicitly conveyed the message that nowhere else could you have a meaningful, animated experience of the natural world – in fact, that all across the world you had to avoid that natural world as much as possible.

For most Christians, all the stories and events in the Bible were connected to a land that existed somewhere far away. As is well-known, in the Middle Ages the Crusaders regularly traveled to the Holy Land, not only to fight against the Moslems, but mainly to see and experience the land of the Bible with their own eyes. This already clearly showed that people have a deep need to be able to be in direct contact with the places where the religious events have taken place.

The indigenous, pre-Christian ‘nature religions’ had always primarily been forms of *outdoor spirituality*. They were rooted deeply in the local environment, and ensured that the people could experience a spiritual connection with the surrounding natural world – that they could feel that they were fully embedded in a Sacred Land(scape), embraced and protected by her innate maternal power. In this respect, the cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram has pointed out, that for our distant ancestors the outdoor world was essentially a world *in* which they lived, an ‘ancient

interiority that was once our common birthright – the ancestral sense of the surrounding earthly cosmos as the voluminous *inside* of an immense Body, or Tent, or Temple.’⁹

When Christianity spread further and further across Europe, the need for that connection had always continued to exist among the people – because it is very basic human need. However, as said earlier, Christianity initially had no connection or affinity with the natural world. But under pressure of the people gradually the church authorities began to make some space for it. Over the centuries, the experience of Christianity has therefore always been adapted regularly so it could root itself deeper in the European soil.

The rise of the worship of the Virgin Mary– which, after Mary had been given the title ‘Mother of God’ at the first Council of Ephesus in 431, had acquired an official place in Christian faith – has played a major role in this. As a result, the religious experience could already be embedded a little bit more in the daily life of the people. The processions, at which the worshipped Saint was carried through the town or countryside by the believers, and the pilgrimages that people made to important religious places, have contributed to make the outer world more part of the Christian experience. But this did not change the fact that Christianity remained essentially an indoor religion.

By the Marian apparitions the door was opened a little but further to the the outer world, to the surrounding natural world. They further contributed to make the rooting of Christianity in European soil possible. But with that, the door was also opened once again to the neglected heritage of indigenous ‘nature religions’, to the experience of *outdoor spirituality* by which people came into contact again – in a positive sense – with the inner power of the animated landscape around them.

Miraculous finds of Mary and Black Madonna figurines

Interestingly, the strong connection to a particular location not only exists in the manifestations of feminine apparitions, but also in the stories about the miraculous finds of figurines the Virgin Mary or the Black Madonna in remote places in nature. Jean Markale has pointed out that, in addition to the Marian apparitions (and apparitions of other Saints), a rich folklore has also emerged about the statues of the Virgin Mary that were found in one place

in nature and refused to be moved elsewhere. There are many stories about miraculous finds of these kinds of figurines in a place in untouched nature: when people tried to take them to another place, often to a place in the inhabited world, they kept coming back to the place in nature where they were found. This pointed, as has always been the case with the apparitions, to the intimate connection that Mary had with that particular location in nature.¹⁰

In this context, the Dutch historian, theologian and symbol expert Annine van der Meer has written about the miraculous finds of Black Madonna figurines. According to her, many of the stories that have survived tell us that the Black Madonna figurines were not only often found in remote places in nature, but that the discovery was made by an animal: by a cow or a sheep. The persistent return of the figurine to the place where it was found often resulted in the building of a chapel or a church on that exact spot. But, as Van der Meer has pointed out, sometimes people also came to a compromise: in autumn, winter and spring the Madonna stayed in a populated area or city, and in the summer there was a procession to the place where she was found.¹¹ A visit to the specific place where the figurine was found remained important.

In this respect, Markale has suggested that Marian figurines or statues found in remote place in nature might actually have a pre-Christian origin. They might have been figurines or statues of Gallo-Roman (Mother) Goddesses that peasants had buried on purpose when Christianity was spread over Europe. Because they did not want to renounce their old religious customs, they had hidden them on purpose in an inaccessible place. Much later these statues or figurines were rediscovered, either by people or animals, and thought be depictions of the Virgin Mary or the Black Madonna.¹²

Just as has been the case with the feminine apparitions, the Christian believers were drawn hour of their church building by these miraculously discovered figurines and statues of the Virgin Mary and the Black Madonna. By this their minds were triggered to reopen to spiritual experiences in the natural world.

Born as a soul from the womb of Mother Earth

As I have pointed out earlier, feminine apparitions almost always took place in remote places in nature. This could be at a cave, in a forest, near a specific tree, on a hill, at a spring or a river. It is worth mentioning in the context of the current theme, that these kinds of locations have also functioned all over the world as places where a child's human soul was born from Mother Earth, before he or she could be born from his or her individual mother. With this, from the very beginning of our earthly life a deep connection was created between ourselves and the specific place where we were born.

According to the religious historian Mircea Eliade the belief that humans are born from Earth has been universally spread among our ancestors. In certain places – like in caves, swamps or springs – they led a kind of fetal existence in the womb of Mother Earth, before they were brought into the world by their mother.¹³ But more recently, and perhaps a little closer, indigenous peoples who still practiced a form of outdoor spirituality have also always tended to call Mother Earth a Sacred Matrix or Womb from which their souls were born – before they were actually, as people of flesh and blood, born from their 'own' mother. The 'Native American' Choctaw believed, for example, that they had once come up through a narrow opening in a revered hill.¹⁴ Most Pueblo origin stories tell of 'emerging from womb-like underworlds through navel places in the land'.¹⁵ And the Navajo said they had sprung from the 'bowels of the earth'.¹⁶ Among Australian Aboriginals there was a similar belief: 'Aboriginal religious theory held that a woman became pregnant after a spirit-child, extremely small but fully human, had entered her body, usually when she went near special localities.'¹⁷ In this regard, the Kogi of Colombia have not so long ago pointed out that we moderns have forgotten the Great Mother. In their view, we have forgotten where we come from, and we have lost touch with the source of our own existence.¹⁸

The cave paintings from the Paleolithic period, which in Europe have been found in France and Spain in particular, indicate that the cave had a ritual function in the spiritual experience of our distant ancestors and that they considered the cave to be the womb of Mother Earth. Apparently, this is a vision that is deeply rooted in our human experience, as it had managed

to survive in later periods and even until the present. The womb experience of the cave was continued in the Neolithic in the shape of the artificial, megalithic mounds. New Grange in Ireland and Maes Howe on the Orkney islands in Scotland are famous examples of this, but many other comparable constructions were built in that period. During the winter solstice for a very short time a (phallic) sunbeam shines through the narrow entrance into the round interior of these mounds. Although Silbury Hill in England has no cave-like interior in which on a specific moment a sunbeam can shine, there are many indications – as has been explained fascinatingly by the English researcher Michael Dames – that also this artificial hill has been a ritual representation of the womb of the Earth Goddess for our Neolithic ancestors, and as such has played a central role in the (harvest) rituals in Her honour.¹⁹ Much later still, this idea has survived in the construction of the medieval cathedrals dedicated to the Our Lady.²⁰

And, as the feminine apparitions that happened in or near caves and also the popularity of the pilgrimages to these sites have shown us, the idea of the cave as the womb of Mother Earth has managed to survive up to this day. In the apparition to Bernadette in the cave of Massabielle in Lourdes, for instance, something of the old conception of the birth of our soul from the earthly womb and our deep connection with Mother Earth has been preserved. When a healing of an illness or handicap has taken place as a result of the visit to the location of the apparition in the cave, this can be considered a form of being reborn. When during our life we have lost access to the deeper part of our being, our soul, by entering the womb of Mother Earth – and supported by the palpable presence of the Virgin Mary – we can revive our contact with it.

Our animated body as part of the larger landscape body

Being born as a soul from Mother Earth, gave the child ‘a sense of belonging’ to the place, and thus to the surrounding Sacred Landscape. From the beginning, it has given us all the feeling that our own body is inextricably linked and embedded in the larger landscape body. The feminine apparitions in nature are a manifestation of that deep connection. Perhaps that is why the child’s mind in particular is often touched by the apparitions. They bring us into closer contact with our own animated body,

and make us feel that our body is only a smaller reflection of the surrounding, animated landscape and is an inextricable part of it. Our own health – physically, mentally, and spiritually – depends directly on the health of the natural cyclical world immediately around us, from which we constantly keep being nourished during our entire life.

The intimate connection between ourselves and the landscape that surrounds us is beautifully expressed by Valerie Andrews in her book *A Passion for the Earth*: ‘The land is truly the larger body that contains us. It is our second skin.’²¹ Perhaps it is even better, and more realistic, to say that the land is our first skin, and that we possess the second skin. When we experience ourselves as part of the greater landscape body, the animation of both with a soul comes along naturally.

The feminine apparitions open our minds to the constant exchange that takes place between the inner power of living nature and our own. This exchange of powers is both mutual and reciprocal. From that exchange can emanate a strong healing effect, which concerns both ourselves and the surrounding natural world. Our own health can be improved by just being aware that we are always part of a much larger natural world that is very alive and also Sacred, and from our improved health we get more energy and feel encouraged again to take better care of nature. At once we remember that in fact we had always been included in this benevolent, natural process of reciprocal gift exchange – and that we had just forgotten about it for a little while.

Survival of the Goddess heritage

It has often been pointed out that through the worship of the Virgin Mary, elements of the ancient Goddess heritage still live on – and that this would be the case in particular in the representations and stories about the Black Madonna. In the vision in which we as souls are born from the Earth, the ancient Goddess heritage still resonates strongly. Unlike the creation by a male God, as we know it from the Bible – and where, as is well known, earthly life was created once from a position outside nature, from Heaven – the Goddess continuously creates life from within and always remains intimately connected to Her creation. The presence of Her power can be experienced directly through all of Her material creations.²² The creation of

new life, as it takes place in our own individual human life, is a small-scale reflection of this: the man makes his contribution from without, the woman does it from within and takes care of the growth of the fetus in her body for 9 months.

This means that, from the earthly perspective, the Goddess originally does not so much *represent* the Earth, but that She herself *is* the (animate) body of the Earth, in all its various manifestations – the enveloping matrix of the living, animated organism to which we all owe our lives. In Celtic mythology, for example, we have been told that the Goddess was the Goddess of the Land. The American writer Courtney Weber has pointed out in this connection that the Goddess Brig(id) ‘was spirit of many things, she was primarily the green earth itself. This should not be confused with being a Goddess “of” the earth.(...) The earth was alive and cognizant. Brig was its spirit and the soil, rocks, hills and rivers were her body’.²³ According to her, this was also an important reason why it was not considered necessary in Celtic culture to make a ‘carved image’ of her. But this does not mean, of course, that the people of that time did not observe manifestations of human, feminine apparitions at some caves, hills and rivers, which confirmed Her presence in the Sacred Landscape. In this respect, I have already referred to stories about apparitions of ‘white ladies’ and ‘fairies’.

It is important to add that Brigid’s identification with the earth was also linked to the cycles of the seasons. The role of Brigid was mainly associated with the light spring/summer period and the Cailleach fulfilled that role for the dark autumn/winter period. The English psychologist and writer Sharon Blackie – who has spent years studying the feminine side of Celtic mythology and folklore, and its strong relationship with the surrounding landscape – has also paid a lot of attention in her books to the Cailleach and Brigid and to the fact that they are two manifestations of the same Goddess. Many natural landscape features in Ireland and Scotland, including mountains and hills, still bear a name that can be traced back to the Cailleach.²⁴ In her recent book *Hagitude*, she has put her focus specifically on the manifestation of the Cailleach. In this book she has shown that the seasonality of the two manifestations of this Goddess is also reflected in the cycles of human life, especially in those of women.²⁵

So Celtic mythology was not only closely connected to the surrounding landscape and its cycles, but simultaneously on a smaller scale, also to ourselves and the reality that we are always embedded in a landscape. It reminds us that with our animated body we are always part of that larger animated body, and that both of them are constantly moving through cyclic changes. This connection between the cycles of human life and the seasons in the landscape is particularly interesting for the present theme of feminine apparitions in nature. As we have seen before, these apparitions make us aware of the fact that we as humans, like all other living beings on our planet, are always fully enveloped in the matrix of Mother Earth – and therefore nurtured as by a mother by the surrounding natural world.

The creation and healing of the 'Wasteland'

It is also interesting that the Celtic vision of the Goddess of the Land in the later King Arthurian stories still resonates in the story about the wounded Fisher King. In order to be allowed to rule and ensure that the land remained fertile and well taken of for the well-being of the people, the King had to be married to the Goddess of the Land. The Fisher King, however, had been injured because he had failed to take good care of the country and its people. The bond between the King and the Goddess of the Land had been broken. The result was a *Wasteland*, a land that had become barren with a population that was suffering all the time. In order to heal the wound and this Wasteland, it was first necessary to understand exactly what was going on – to understand the cause. The search for the Grail, the path on which the knights of King Arthur's round table went, were all about healing this Wasteland. Finding the Grail was equivalent to healing the Wasteland, but as those stories have shown, this certainly wasn't easy.

The American researcher Betty Kovacs has pointed out – in her book *Merchants of Light* – that currently in the Western world we are living in a Wasteland. According to her, this is the result of a long process of suppression by the rulers of the animated underground of existence, as a result of which we have lost contact on a collective scale with the animation of the surrounding physical world, and thus also with the soul within ourselves. As a result, the whole of life has lost its purpose and meaning.²⁶

It doesn't take much imagination to see manifestations of this Wasteland all around us in our time. In fact, the Wasteland is the result of a worldview that not only considers the surrounding natural world exclusively in a materialist way, as a collection of resources that can be exploited limitlessly by us, but that actually focuses solely on the human world. Healing the Wasteland involves the full inclusion once again of the surrounding natural world into our worldview. True healing can only take place when we acknowledge that the human world has always been embedded in and dependent on the natural world – with its balancing web of living beings, interconnections and ongoing cycles on many different levels – and that it still is. By renaming the natural world *the more-than-human world*, David Abram has emphasized very aptly that the scope of life includes much more than just our human life; that our human life extends limitlessly into the more-than-human dimension of nature.²⁷

Kovacs has clearly shown that the animation, and the spiritual experiences associated with life, are essential parts of it, and are absolutely necessary to give life purpose and meaning – and that the experience of the animated underground of existence has been able to continually push to the surface over the centuries, but unfortunately was repeatedly suppressed by those in power. An important moment of re-animation took place in the High Middle Ages, in the period when, among other things, the cathedrals dedicated to Our Lady were built and the Grail stories also began to circulate in Europe at the time. Kovacs points out that, despite the fact that we live in a dark time in which violence and war take place on a large scale, there is also such a revival of animation taking place worldwide in our time. On the positive side, she is convinced that this time the ruler be will no longer be able to suppress this development, because now the survival of all humanity depends on it.

Because for nearly two thousand years the symbols of the Sacred have been exclusively masculine and dangerously incomplete, for Kovacs the animate subsoil has everything to do with the feminine: 'In many of the underground forms [of the culture], the feminine dimensions of the divine reflected the unity of vision our culture needed for health and wholeness.'²⁸ Because of a meaningful dream Kovacs had in the 1960s, she began to realize that Our Lady reflected her own soul, the soul of everyone, and also

the soul of the world – and that She could no longer live in the great cathedrals that had once been built for Her: She is alive and ever-present in nature, and She comes alive with every step we take in space and time.²⁹

I think that the Marian apparitions in nature, and the other female apparitions, also show that Our Lady could no longer come to life in the inner context of the cathedrals. That is why she has regularly shown herself, and still shows herself regularly, outside the walls of the churches and cathedrals. By regularly appearing to us in the outdoor context of the natural world, She is reviving our sense of outdoor spirituality and She is helping us with including the surrounding natural world once again in our worldview.

The imagery of the apparitions

It is significant that apparitions are primarily images. The messages they might communicate to the present witnesses are important as well, but these words are secondary to the image. In his book *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, the American surgeon Leonard Shlain has pointed out that there are major differences between the power of the images we have created and the words we have written down.³⁰ This can help us to deepen our understanding of the feminine apparitions a little further.

Shlain argued that the images we create are primarily reproductions of the sensual, visual world. They are concrete and our brain always perceives all the parts of a whole at once, integrating those parts into a synthetic gestalt: we perceive the image *in one go*. According to him, reading words takes place in a completely different way: the eye reads individual words in a certain linear order, gradually unfolding the meaning. In the case of apparitions, the images are of course not created by us and the words are spoken, not written or read, but I think the difference is still meaningful. Interestingly, Shlain linked the difference between images and written words to a difference between the feminine and masculine view of life: ‘(...) a *holistic, simultaneous, synthetic*, and *concrete* view of the world are the essential characteristics of a feminine outlook; *linear, sequential, reductionist*, and *abstract* thinking defines the masculine.’ In this respect, he didn’t connect the feminine and masculine to specific sexes, but saw them more as the yin-yang qualities existing in every human being.

Shlain acknowledged that this difference between the feminine and masculine, and between the image and the written word, was also reflected in religions: the power of the image was central in – relatively peaceful – Goddess-oriented religions, and the power of the written word was central in – more warlike – God-oriented religions.³¹ This confirms that images, and the Goddess-oriented religions that used them to communicate their spiritual vision, were much older than the written words by which the relatively recent God-oriented religions primarily communicated their message. The power of an image also reaches much deeper into our being than words can ever do. The distinction between outdoor spirituality and indoor religion that I discussed earlier is also relevant here: the use of images has always fitted very well in a community in which outdoor spirituality was practiced and the use of written words has always fitted very well in the practice of the indoor religions. And, of course, these connections still exist to this day.

With regard to the feminine apparitions that happened in a Christian context, this means that – due to the prevalence of the image over the words that were communicated – the minds of the witnesses and the pilgrims visiting the sites were connected back to the pre-Christian Goddess-oriented religions by these apparitions. And in this way, in places like Lourdes the image of Our Lady still connects the minds of the pilgrims back to this pre-Christian era – however little these pilgrims might have been aware of this process.

Contemporary feminine apparitions

As we have seen, feminine apparitions have also been taking place outside a Christian context – and before Christianity spread across Europe and later across the entire world. But feminine apparitions have also not belonged exclusively to the past: they live on today and at the same time reach further back to a past that much older than Christianity. In the town of Woodstock near New York the former Buddhist Clark Strand was confronted with a mysterious feminine apparition on June 16, 2011, that he has called Her *Our Lady of Woodstock*. Since then, he is still experiencing the presence of this apparition. Every month she still communicates a message to him that is spread to the world through the website dedicated to Her apparition.³² More

and more people, including myself, feel inspired by Her presence and Her monthly messages. To honor her more directly a small group of people regularly come together location in the woods near Woodstock that is marked by a statue of Her.

The feminine character of this apparition is an important element. She is placed in a context that goes back far into prehistoric times, by which is also suggested that all feminine apparitions belong to a tradition that has existed long before the rise of Christianity. In this way, the feminine apparitions are once again transformed to their original form: to anthropomorphic manifestations of a deep spiritual connection with the surrounding natural world that must have been a common expression of the outdoor spirituality of our distant ancestors – long before the advent of the institutional forms of indoor religion. I think that the well-known Marian apparitions can also be understood from that broader context and take to a deeper meaning. In the world of our distant ancestors of course these manifestations were not yet connected to a specific religion, due to the simple fact that there were no organized religions yet. Through the millennia we have increasingly lost touch with this kind of outdoor spirituality. Apparitions like the one of *Our Lady of Woodstock* can help us to revive that original spiritual connection in our time.

Also others in our current time have reported experiences with feminine apparitions outside a Christian context. Betty Kovacs, the researcher that I have already mentioned above, has reported that during a shamanistic ceremony with the Intihuatana in South America, in which she participated, a beautiful woman appeared in the sacred space, who smiled as she passed by and observed the ceremony. The shamans told her later that she was a manifestation of Pachamama, the Great Mother, and that sometimes she appeared as a beautiful young woman, but at other times as the Old Woman of the sacred Mountain, Huayna Picchu.³³ In this respect, Kovacs has pointed out that the feminine image has been a central figure in cultures for thousands of years: ‘She has been s symbol of the sacred waters (...). She was the tree, the serpent, the earth, the sky, the stars, the moon, the sun, the hills and the mountains, the caves, the animals, the seasons: she was nature, she was life – both genders – and all life was divine’.³⁴

Closer to my home in the Netherlands, the Dutch philosopher and spiritual therapist Pamela Kribbe has pointed out – in her book *De Aarde spreekt*, in which she has included channeled messages that she received from the Earth –, that sometimes the Earth appears to her in feminine form: ‘In speaking with her sometimes the image of a young woman appears in a light dress that, fresh as spring, dances in the wind. In her transparent eyes I see images lighting up (...). Images that help me to experience the presence of the soul of the Earth.’³⁵ The Earth tells Kribbe in one of her messages that our body is the bridge between us and nature, and that through our body we are connected with her.³⁶

The examples mentioned above are showing us that contemporary feminine apparitions continue to play the role of intermediary to the surrounding animated landscape. They invite our alienated, separated self – our undeveloped ego – to let go of its imagined position of controlling nature from without; and thereby to make space in our mind and heart, so that once again we can start feeling at home in the natural world. The apparitions make it clear to us, that they are not there to deny our physicality, the embodiment of ourselves, but, instead, to affirm the importance of our body – in its animated form –, as an inextricable part of the larger, animated body of the landscape.

I have suggested earlier that there may also have been feminine apparitions preceding the creation of the countless female figurines and statues that have been found all over the European continent and beyond since Paleolithic times. The link of the apparition of *Our Lady of Woodstock* to the prehistoric past of our distant ancestors also raises such a question. Whether such apparitions have formed this basis of course can never be proven with certainty, but it is interesting to consider it anyway. Then these figurines and statues, which have often been identified as depictions of unknown or well-known Goddesses, could also have played an intermediary role in connecting people (more deeply) to the surrounding Sacred Landscape – a similar role as the anthropomorphic feminine apparitions have had in later, more recent times. This also fits in well with the fact that the Goddess heritage has always played a central role in the way our distant ancestors always felt deeply embedded in the surrounding Sacred Landscape – a landscape that is subject to constant change through cyclical

processes, yet has always provided people with an unchanging basis of maternal protection. Hence we still talk about ‘Mother Earth’.

The apparitions as messages for everyone

In our current modern society, people who consider themselves to be ‘secular’, who have managed to loosen their religious ties and instead have adopted a materialist vision of life and of nature, usually have little or no interest for the phenomenon of feminine apparitions. It is not uncommon that they smile politely when you tell them you are going pay a visit to a place, like Lourdes, where feminine apparitions have been reported, but that they really do not understand why you would want to go there. It is a pity when a priori – as is often the case at the moment – these apparitions are dismissed as curious phenomena that are only important for people with a Christian view of life; or more particular, for people with a Catholic view of life.

The feminine apparitions have a message that is important for all of us: they tell us that the surrounding landscape is much more than a lump of matter – more than ‘a collection of objects’, in the words of the American cultural historian and ‘ecoth theologian’ Thomas Berry – that we can limitlessly and one-sidedly exploit for ourselves; that the landscape – as a local manifestation of Mother Earth, the larger body in which we are embedded – really is alive and animated. In this respect, Berry stated: ‘The universe is a communion of subjects.’ The apparitions tell us that we cannot take one-sidedly from nature just to make our own lives more pleasant, but that we all have a reciprocal relationship with the surrounding landscape; that we should be very grateful for what She gives to us, and from that awareness must give something back as well. This reciprocal principle seems to be forgotten by many these days, but was certainly known to our indigenous ancestors. When the European colonists came in the ‘New World’, they were regularly reminded of this by the ‘Native Americans’ they came across. It is well-known that in the nineteenth century Chief Seattle has already warned us that whatever we do to the surrounding natural world, we also do to ourselves.

Healing ourselves and the world

As has become clear, the Marian apparitions have made an enormous contribution to the rooting of the Christian religious experience in the local environment and to reconnecting the religious experience of the people in general with the surrounding natural world. This fulfilled a deeply felt, spiritual need of the people, which had managed to survive from the prehistoric times of our distant ancestors.

The Marian and other feminine apparitions have shown us that the power of the ancient Goddess of the Land has been able to survive into our present time. They want to remind us that we can only turn the tide if we are truly willing to descend to the cause of the creation of the Wasteland. And that applies not only to the ‘world leaders’, but to everyone on this planet: every contribution to the planetary healing process is important.

With regard to the Marian apparitions there are many reports about the curing of individual people with an illness or handicap after they have visited the location of the apparition. In this respect, the American doctor, healer and writer Lissa Rankin, who has also visited Lourdes, has pointed out that curing and healing should not be confused with each other: according to her, you can be cured without being healed, and you can be healed without being cured.³⁷ Curing concerns our physical body, whereas healing is a much more extensive phenomenon and also includes our underlying view of life. Besides this, curing generally concerns the individual human, whereas healing also has a collective character.

We may also wonder who or what has actually caused the healing: was it the invisible presence and power of the apparition or was it the power of the animated place itself? Little or no emphasis is put on the fact that the apparitions on that particular spot offer an important contribution to re-enchanting our experience of the surrounding natural world – and thereby also to transforming and healing the materialist vision of life underlying the Wasteland. And we may also wonder what we can contribute ourselves to the healing process. There are new scientific insights into the healing power that we possess ourselves in the form of the *placebo effect* – as for instance discussed by the American biologist Bruce Lipton.³⁸ This research shows that a deeply rooted, heart- and soul-centered, belief into the power of our own body to heal itself can offer a significant contribution to the healing

process. Unfortunately, this view is not yet (fully) integrated in the mainstream version of medical science.

Anyway, we should not forget that healing ourselves and healing the Wasteland are always two wonderful developments that imply one another, and are probably just two manifestations of the same phenomenon that happen simultaneously. This mutual healing process is a process in which our sense of separation is gradually healed and the original sense of interconnection, with which we were all once born, is recovered. As long as the feminine apparitions continue to manifest – in whatever form or context, but always as a call to awareness of the animate underground of existence, of our own souls, the souls of others and the souls of the natural world as a whole – we know at least that there is still hope, for us and the planet.

Leiden, December 2024

Notes

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