

Flying over the Gorges of Psyché

by Michelle Nahon

This theme, suggested as the title for one of the chapters of the book **Sphera II**, currently in preparation, brings to mind the Greek word ‘psuché’, whose primary meaning is ‘breath’. The newborn, if it is to live, must take its first breath—often difficult and laborious—a cry of life, a victory over death; it is the moment of the first use of its lungs—the breath—and its throat—the cry—it is its first participation in earthly life as an individual, living and independent.

This breath will be present throughout the being’s life, throughout the life of each of us; it is the sign of our relationship with the Earth, Mother Earth; this breath that animates us and binds us to her through the oxygen she produces, particularly in her oceans. It is the ‘breath of life’, as the Greek term specifies, and also the ‘principle of life’.

Then, in the translation from Greek into French, we find a second meaning for ‘psuché’: the soul. But what is the soul? The Greeks, the masters of philosophy, asked themselves many questions in an attempt to define it. We can trace the evolution of its meaning through the definitions given for ‘psuché’ and the examples of its usage. For the pre-Socratics, it was primarily a vital principle linked to the Cosmos. Later, it became more individualised; it was the seat of a human being’s emotions, feelings and passions. However, a question arises in the quest for a precise definition: is the soul mortal or immortal? A central question that remains relevant to this day! Plato (c. 428/27–348/47 BC) arrives and establishes his school. ‘Psuché’ is then seen more in terms of rationality than of feelings, and Plato settles on the immortality of the soul in a text, a dialogue, entitled *Phaedo*, which recounts Socrates’ final words and his death. Why the name *Phaedo*? Let us pause for a moment, as it is a very beautiful title for a dialogue. It is composed of two Greek words: light and to give: the one who gives light.

Little by little, the term *psuché* became problematic because of its immaterial and elusive character, and anthropomorphism led to a new use of the word: *Psyché* came to mean “a living being, a person”, since what remained fundamental in the background were breath and life.

But what becomes of this soul at death? In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the word *psuché* refers to the soul of the deceased which has descended into the underworld and become a shade. It should be noted in passing that the ancient underworld bears little resemblance to the hell described in the Christian religion. It is simply the subterranean realm to which the soul goes after death, separating itself from the body of the deceased person. Yet there, as in earthly life, the soul undergoes trials and transformations. The five rivers of this underworld have evocative names: the Styx, the tributary of hatred; the Phlegethon, a river of flames; the Acheron, the river of sorrow; the Cocytus, the torrent of lamentation; and the Lethe, the stream of forgetfulness.¹

How, indeed, can one translate the immaterial and airy quality of the breath of life? A more cheerful and symbolic usage is also found in Greek texts: another meaning of *psuché* is “butterfly”. Bailly’s Greek–French dictionary specifies: “a symbol of the immortality of the soul among the ancients, because of the transformation of the caterpillar or chrysalis into a butterfly.” The breath that inhabits human beings changes throughout life: it becomes more defined and undergoes transformation. In French, there is the expression *c’était une belle âme* (“she/he was a beautiful soul”), which pays tribute to a person’s human, moral and spiritual qualities. And this beauty of the soul possesses the lightness of a butterfly, with its vivid colours and graceful flight carrying it delicately and joyfully from flower to flower.

One can only emphasise this symbol of the soul chosen by the Greeks, which opens the way to many developments to which we shall return, for the dictionary offers yet another meaning: *psuché*

¹<https://www.google.com/search?q=psyché%2C+nom+d%27un+fleuve+%3F+%3F&oq=psyché&aqs=chrome.69i59j69i57j0i512l4j0i20i263i512j46i512l3.6890j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> (11/01/2026)

is also a plant, known in Greek as *tripolion*. In French it has been given the evocative name *aster*, since it bears small star-shaped flowers.

These latter two meanings of *psuché*—butterfly and plant—clearly refer to the beauty of the soul and to its affinity with the air and the heavens.

Finally, when written with a capital letter, *Psyché* is a female mythological figure: the personification of the soul, depicted with butterfly wings. A single, relatively late author, Apuleius (c. 125–after 170), a Middle Platonist poet, published in Latin a work that became famous, *The Metamorphoses*. In it he introduces us to the myth of Psyché—translated into French as *Psyché* and into English as *Psyche*—which was probably based on an ancient oral tale and recounts the life of a mortal woman who became immortal. The title chosen by Apuleius aptly highlights the transformations undergone by Psyche during her earthly life and throughout the centuries. In this work we find the theme of the soul made immortal through the intervention of the Greek gods. Briefly summarised, the story runs as follows: Psyche is so beautiful that no suitor dares approach her, and she arouses the jealousy of Aphrodite, goddess of Beauty, one of whose attributes she embodies. Jealous of Psyche's beauty, Aphrodite orders her son Eros, god of Love, to make Psyche fall in love with a monster. Instead, Eros himself falls in love with her. After many incidents, some of them dramatic, Eros obtains Zeus's permission to marry Psyche, who, by becoming the wife of a god, herself becomes immortal. Here again we encounter the central theme of the myth: the immortality of the soul.

A twentieth-century psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung, devoted his life to understanding the workings of the human psyche, and he was fascinated by the Greek meanings of *psuché*. He frequently returned to them and, for example, in *Symbols of Transformation (Metamorphoses of the Soul and Its Symbols)*, he writes: "...the butterfly is both allegory and symbol of the psyche."²

Indeed, a thousand images come to mind when one evokes the soul-butterfly: its many colours, its delicate and wavering flights, its choice of fragrant and brightly coloured blossoms. The soul is linked to the organs of the senses, for it consists of emotions and images. It fulfils the role of the butterfly in the subtle connection it establishes between body and spirit, fluttering from one to the other, bringing the refined nectar of the spirit to the energy of the body, while nourishing itself through this continual movement that transforms it into presence and light.

Jung was right to insist upon the phrase "both at once". Allegory belongs to the rational level which it stimulates. Symbol belongs to another level of consciousness; it is never wholly explained. Returning to it allows one, with each new encounter, to perceive a fresh aspect of its inexhaustible mystery.

Starting from one of his patient's dreams, Jung presents a particular aspect of the transformation from chrysalis to butterfly—an image that does not immediately come to mind, since we tend to imagine or paint a colourful, radiant butterfly. Yet there are countless kinds of butterflies, and his patient's dream featured a small butterfly that emerges in houses: a moth. It is true that all butterflies undergo this transformation, and imagining a tiny, drab-coloured moth emerging from its chrysalis also evokes and emphasises the vital energy required to attain a new stage in the development of consciousness.

² Genève, Librairie de l'université, Georg et Cie, 1973, p. 421.

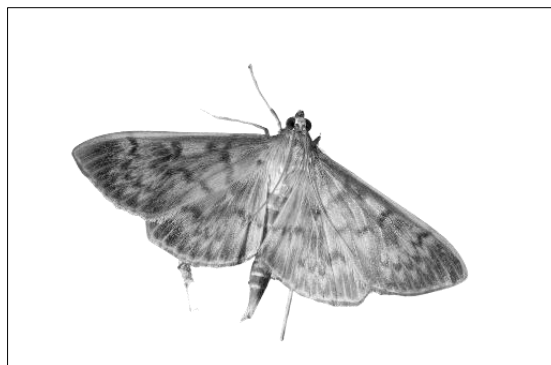


Fig. 1- A moth

Jung's patient awoke with the image of the butterfly vivid in her mind, and suddenly a poem imposed itself upon her. She sent it to Jung, who entitled the chapter in which he presents it **"The Song of the Moth."** The poem is addressed to the Sun:

The Moth to the Sun

*I longed for thee when first I crawled to consciousness.
My dreams were all of thee when in the chrysalis I lay.
Oft myriads of my kind beat out their lives
Against some feeble spark once caught from thee.
And one hour more – and my poor life is gone;
Yet my last effort, as my first desire, shall be
But to approach thy glory; then, having gained
One raptured glance, I'll die content.
For I, the source of beauty, warmth and life
Have in his perfect splendour once beheld.*

This is followed by Jung's own translation, entitled **"The Moth to the Sun"**, wrote by Jung: *I yearned for you from the first awakening of my worm-like consciousness. I dreamed only of you when I lay within the chrysalis. Countless multitudes of my kind perish as they fly towards some faint spark that has emanated from you. One hour more, and my frail existence will be over. But my final effort, like my first desire, shall have no other aim than to draw near to your glory. Then, having caught sight of you in a moment of ecstasy, I shall die content, for once I shall have contemplated, in its perfect splendour, the source of beauty, warmth and life.*

The Greek word *khrysallis* is derived from *khrysos*, meaning "gold". This protective envelope awaiting birth is striking because of its colour, but it also symbolises a potential in gestation; and—whether by coincidence or not—the golden chrysalis gives way to an insect seeking the gold of the sun. Yet such a transformation takes place in darkness, and the butterfly enclosed within the chrysalis must expend all its energy in order to emerge from the cocoon.

Jung studies the metamorphoses of the soul as it seeks fulfilment, gradually rising beyond the earthly plane and "taking flight" towards heaven, towards the divine. The energy deployed by the soul is not physical but psychic, and Jung uses the Latin term *libido* to designate it, a word whose primary meaning is "desire" and whose secondary meaning is "voluptuous pleasure". This term brought him into conflict with Freud, who had already adopted it, but Jung greatly broadened its meaning to encompass all psychic energy, whereas Freud tended to restrict it to sexual energy. In several of his books, Jung argues for the importance of this spiritual energy, which he regarded as the very source of human life. He compares it to the physical energy studied by physicists and stresses that it is universal and immortal, both immanent and transcendent. In constant activity³,

³ *Métamorphoses de l'âme et ses symboles.* (Cf. note1).

the libido spiritually impels us towards the transcendent, just as the moth is drawn to the sun, ready to die for the chance of beholding it.

The dreamer later wrote to Jung again. Re-reading a philosophical article she had encountered the previous year, she “came across these words”, as she put it: “The same passionate yearning of the moth for the star, of man for God.”⁴ Consciously she had forgotten the passage, yet it had remained imprinted within her, and her unconscious brought it back to her through a dream and a poem.

The forces of psychic energy, constantly at work, were there to remind her of the path in life she was called to fulfil, expressing themselves through dreams, poems and synchronicities, and revealing the interdependence of the personal and the universal.

Our personal *Sphera* is created, unfolds, blazes forth and becomes illuminated, with its moments of darkness and rebirth.

Therefore, in our search for wholeness, let us continue to soar above the “Gorges of the Psyche”, so revealing of our inner richness, bearing within them joy, peace and love.



Fig. 2- The butterfly emerging from its cocoon

The mind reasons; the soul resonates.

The mind moves; the soul is moved.

The mind communicates; the soul communes.

François Cheng, *De l'âme, sept lettres à une amie*, Ed. Albin Michel, 2016.

⁴ Id., p.163.