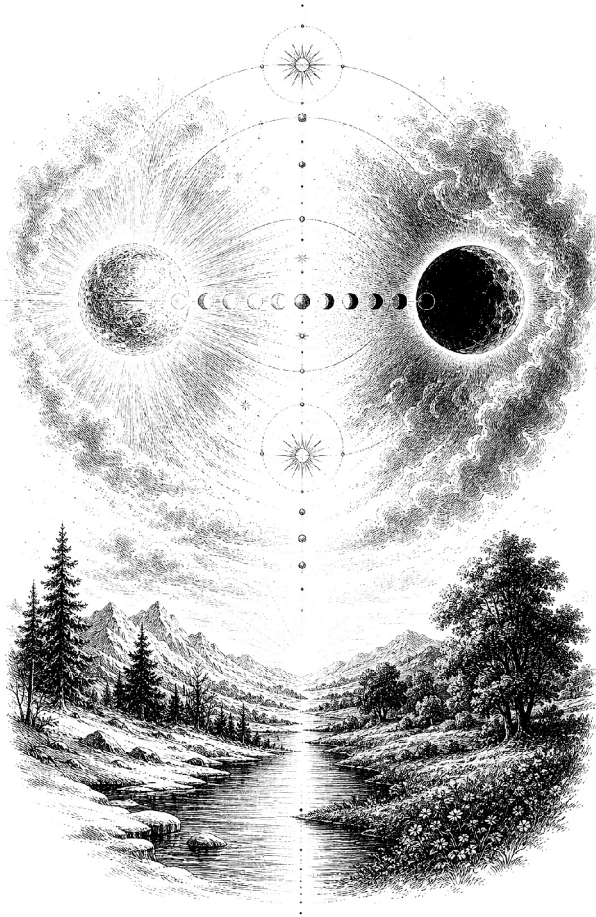


CHAPTER IV

A TIME OF CONTRASTS

THE PRINCIPLE OF POLARITY



“Everything is Dual; everything has poles; everything has its pair of opposites; like and unlike are the same; opposites are identical in nature, but different in degree; extremes meet; all truths are but half-truths; all paradoxes may be reconciled.”

– *The Kybalion*

The Dao gives birth to One. One gives birth to Two. Two gives birth to Three. Three gives birth to the ten thousand things.

– Laozi, *Daodejing*, chapter 42; working rendering of the supplied Polish passage

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After Ursula K. Le Guin's A Wizard of Earthsea: an editorial retelling of the passages quoted in the Polish edition, not the original English wording.

To understand where we are going, we may have to turn toward our beginnings and recognize them as part of our lives. Every word and action has consequences; even the light we make brings a shadow with it. Growing knowledge does not simply multiply our choices. It can make our responsibilities clearer, until the task is to do what understanding requires.

We cannot erase every act already committed. Sometimes we must complete what we began. Instead of being swept along like a loose branch, we may learn to understand the current from its source to the sea. And the beginning of listening is the willingness to fall silent.

– After Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

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In this fourth chapter, "A Time of Contrasts," we begin our first journey through the Times, exploring the Principle of Polarity:

"Everything is Dual; everything has poles; everything has its pair of opposites; like and unlike are the same; opposites are identical in nature, but different in degree; extremes meet; all truths are but half-truths; all paradoxes may be reconciled."¹

Simple as it sounds, this principle has surprises in store. Our journey will take us through paradoxes, apparent opposites, and the limits of familiar language. We will ask what it means to stop the river of time, encounter intense heat in apparently cold space, and consider whether a little absolute emptiness could ever be caught in a trap.

Then we will visit several imaginary or hypothetical realms, trying to read the old and new maps that describe them.

The first paradox appears immediately. The principle seems to declare everything double, yet its purpose is to reconcile the pair. Within this Hermetic account, apparent opposites may be poles of a common process. Light and darkness, mind and body, or matter and energy can prompt a search for unity. The pairs are not all equivalent, however: energy is not a substance opposed to matter, and an ethical contrast is not automatically a measurable physical continuum.

The Kybalion explains differences of degree through its language of vibration. We can use that idea to question rigid divisions without pretending it explains every contradiction. Some differences are differences in amount; others concern category, relationship, or incompatible claims. Not every opposition dissolves when a frequency is changed.

Alchemical and philosophical traditions also explored a union of opposites, expressed through terms such as *coniunctio oppositorum* and *coincidentia oppositorum*. The ouroboros—the serpent eating its tail—offers a related image.

Its circle can suggest the meeting of beginning and end, life and death, multiplicity and unity, and the continuing renewal of a world that never stands still.

The fourth principle asks us to look beyond the divisions through which we ordinarily organize experience. Where we see two things, might we be overlooking a relationship or a larger whole? That question can illuminate perception without proving that all differences, including suffering and harm, are illusory.

TWO SIDES OF ONE COIN

Two is an unusual number: the only even prime, and a powerful symbol in many traditions. Some associate it with femininity, receptivity, or matter; others give it different meanings. No interpretation belongs to every culture. Here I will use it as a figure of relationship. Two endpoints define a line segment. If we imagine the line continuing beyond them, the endpoints can also suggest the limits of a particular view: the small stretch we know within a greater extent.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes tells a story about the origins of desire. The first humans are rounded double beings of three kinds: male, female, and male-and-female. Their strength alarms the gods. Zeus cuts them in two, and Apollo turns and heals the divided bodies. Each surviving half longs for the wholeness it has lost. The story accounts for

different forms of attraction; it is not a historical account of human origins, nor a rule that a person must find a partner to become complete.²

The myth makes division intelligible through an imagined earlier unity. It invites a comparison with the Pythagorean and Hermetic questions that accompany us: might the many things we encounter be different expressions of something shared? The comparison does not make Plato's philosophy identical with the Universal Mind of *The Kybalion*. It gives us a way to approach the same persistent puzzle from another direction.

We experience a world of differences and oppositions, and our own minds divide it further as we give things names. The Principle of Polarity asks us to consider whether the extremes we notice might nevertheless belong to a common nature. Unable to take in the whole span at once, we turn toward one end and then the other. What lies between them may be harder to see than either extreme.

Our minds also become meeting places for those extremes. We think through pairs: light and darkness, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, spirit and body, being and nonbeing, small and large, straight and curved, near and far, familiar and foreign, sweet and bitter. Some are opposites on a scale; others are contrasts our language has taught us to make.