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Nature and Rites of Passage

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Abstract

My work tells the story of life and living. We all experience birth and death, and many complicated life events and changes occur during the living of a life. What I deem the most important areas of life are the rites of passage that everyone commonly experiences. The essential passages are birth and death, and between these two events, we all experience physical and intellectual development and growth. Throughout this thesis, my work expresses these rites of passage by metaphor.

In addition to metal, several of my sculptural forms incorporate painting on canvas and sculpted wood: the painting providing atmosphere and the wood supporting the metal form like a pedestal. My primary material, however, is metal. For my main subjects I use fine silver because of its warm white color and its characteristic shine after continuous use. The painting and wood are strictly for supporting my metal forms.

My work is not meant simply for artistic appreciation. My sculpture and jewelry are functionally viable; they can be used in real life, and this will make people feel more attached to my work. My work speaks about the sincerity of our thinking and actions in this life, about living, and even about the larger world, through their embodiment in ordinary objects that we can have close to us.
1. Overview

Fierce competition and technological change define the business world today. Living in a fast-changing society of urbanization and globalization, people have put forth much effort to keep pace with the speed of change, and even at this moment are struggling restlessly not to fall behind. The prevailing social conditions remind us of Darwin’s long-supported theory of “survival of the fittest.” Competition has changed the way we live—the most dominant values we find today revolve around acquiring the conveniences that technology has made possible. However, I feel it necessary to stop and consider how we might have forgotten or lost ourselves in this fast-changing world and in our drive to acquire materialistic convenience.

I see that people have lost their sense of the sublime, chasing only after selfish gains and remaining concerned with their everyday busy schedules. One Korean scholar of English literature who suffers from poliomyelitis (infantile paralysis) commented that she was content with her ability to walk only at a very slow pace because by doing so she would have time to observe the world around her and think more. Embracing a “slow philosophy” can give us time for self-reflection and the opportunity to reevaluate today’s way of life. Materialistic values based on competition and today’s rapid pace of life neither guarantee a desirable quality of life nor provide any good for humanity, and certainly do not promise
happiness. For example, in many current films we find characters who gain substantial wealth and fame while at the same time losing valuable things such as their consciences, morals, or love of family and friends. For example, in the movie “Click” (2006), the architect Michael Newman has a typical middle-class family with a lovely wife and children. However Michael is a workaholic—under a lot of stress, trying to satisfy his boss by working long hours, and neglecting his family. One weekend, Michael goes out shopping with his family and buys a remote control device, capable of controlling his own universe. Michael uses it too much and loses control of the device. Suddenly his own life is controlled by the remote, and Michael is able to see the worthwhile parts of his personal life that he had missed. The meaning of life differs with each individual and his or her value system, and therefore should not be carelessly judged.

No one can deny that life itself and living are the most valuable things for people, regardless of their time and place. Life itself is a preexisting condition for our ability to discuss our lives, from birth to death. Life should be regarded as encompassing all respected values in all religions, ethics and cultures. For example, one representative lesson about the preciousness of life is from Buddhism’s teaching of Sal-neng-gu-tack. This is one of the five teachings by Hwarang and it can be interpreted as “not to kill anything thoughtlessly.” Living is a series of processes that everyone

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1 One of the Shilla chivalry codes (576 A.D.) based on Buddhism, teaching not to kill anything thoughtlessly
2 Hwarang: an elite group of male youth in Shilla
experiences, from birth to growth, prosperity, aging and death. Then, as the theory of reincarnation tells us, new birth links us to the recurring stages of life.

Through this thesis I would like to approach various aspects of life(生命) that can be appreciated by all people — experiences that everyone goes through. The way I describe life and living is not with a simple account, like writing in a nature journal. Through my observations of the living process from birth to death, I show my point of view about the different stages of living, and interpret these stages from my own perspective.

Unlike some other artists, my approach to my work starts from a contemplative position. I try to maintain some degree of distance from my work. In light of this, my viewpoint is not always objective, but subjective and even cold to some extent. Further, in my work I try to reveal life and the process of living from the beginning to the end. At the same time, I attempt to express the many complicated events and changes that occur during the living of a life.
2. Theoretical Background

What I deem the most important areas of life are the rites of passage that everyone commonly experiences. The essential passages are birth and death; and between these two events, we all experience physical and intellectual growth and development.

In some philosophies, the concept of death paradoxically leads to another birth. According to psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, a human goes through four new births. The first birth is the natural birth from the mother’s womb to the outside world. The second is the birth of sudden physical and mental change during adolescence. The third is the birth of understanding the reason of life. And the last birth is death, leading to a different world of life.

In many cultures, the ceremonies surrounding death are regarded as important as those of new birth and of life. For instance, in Korea the funeral ceremony is held in a very high and sacred manner. In Korean society, where filial piety is especially profound, when one’s parent passes away a shelter tent is placed near the grave for a three-year period of mourning. In ancient Egypt, many laborers worked for decades to build a pyramid for the burial of the pharaoh. The Egyptian Book of the Dead was written because of a shared belief in the next life. It reminded people to maintain good spiritual health and to live a truthful life, and also provided an escape from their fear of death.
Some people put tremendous amounts of effort, time and money into preparing for cultural ceremonies of death. The reason that these ceremonies are considered so important is that many people, like the ancient Egyptians, believe that death is not the end of one's life, but another beginning—that of the next life. In Greece when a person died, people cremated the body with coins on its eyes. This came from the ancient belief that these coins served as the expense for the dead person's spirit to travel to the next world.

About 2,000 years ago in China, the Qin Shi Huang completed an underground city for his own eventual burial. He constructed a four-story palace and built an inner and outer castle which resembled the capital city of the time, Xian. He also buried more than six thousand clay soldiers and carriages there. His belief in the next life provided an escape from his fear of death.

Common rites of passage are viewed differently as a result of each individual's living environment, culture and value system. Edmund Husserl, a German scholar in phenomenology, based his entire philosophy on this point—that a person's background, experience and ways of thinking dictated his or her feelings and thoughts about an event, even though similar events are shared by everyone.
3. Philosophical Construct

Among the rites of passage all creatures commonly go through, birth and death are the most obvious. Many additional small and large incidents between these two unavoidable events are shaped by an individual's living environment, culture and value system. So, the words I say here will be read and viewed differently by different people. But no matter how my words are received, the events that I will describe are very common, so that everyone would have experienced them at least once, whether happily or not. I am sure the events I will describe have shaped the values of those experiencing them. Finally, I have tried to deliver my message more effectively by using familiar subject matter and materials from nature.

We cannot exist outside of nature and our birth, life and death are not substantially different from what other animals or plants experience. So in describing these rites of passage, I chose to use direct and definitive channels, mediated through nature, rather than abstract ones. Having nature as my overriding theme, I tried to express my ideas metaphorically through familiar objects and life situations.

Further, this effort gave me the opportunity to re-state that human life is part of the grandeur of nature. By representing rites of passage in my art, I would like to help people finding meaning in their lives through connections to certain moments in nature. Since time
continuously produces recurring events (the end of one thing brings about the beginning of another, according to the belief in reincarnation), I arranged my works in chronological order.
FUNCTION: Jewelry, Vase, Candlesticks, Lighting

My work is not merely for appreciation, but is meant to become a part of life, something that people can relate to in their own experience. To enable people to feel more attached to my work, I made it functional, so that it could be used in real life. But my work is not ordinary, just simply to be used. Rather, my work's function is to enhance the significance of each passage it describes, and from this point of view, my work can be categorized as functional sculpture.

Because my thesis deals with life itself, I have placed my work in daily life settings. Using my sculptural forms can help people to recognize the essence of life, and further, to find meaning and value in daily life.

For instance, one of my works, "Budding Night Flower," expresses the birth of life in the form of a vase which represents budding lives. "Leaves," a set of candlesticks, signifies the effort to create harmony and keep in balance with others. The reason that I crafted this concept in the form of candlesticks was to show that when candles burn they illuminate their surroundings, much like people who sacrifice themselves to create harmony with others.

While I concentrate on the value of functionality, I do not want to set boundaries for the forms of my work.

No matter how well a sculptural form functions, it would be meaningless if the form
did not also project the right meaning or give the right impression to people. Thus I have
given much thought to the value and meaning of my forms, while making them also
functional art pieces.
MATERIALS

Several of my sculptural forms incorporate painting, wood and other materials. The painting provides atmosphere, and the wood may for example support the metal form like a pedestal. But metal is my main content; the painting and wood are used strictly in the context of supporting the metal forms. One of the important features in my thesis work is that the content and the context coexist in one composition.

In metal craft, if jewelry or a vessel is considered the content, then the person who wears the jewelry or the interior space on which the vessel is laid becomes the context. Most metal artists cannot anticipate the circumstances that will become the context for their artwork, since contexts vary according to surroundings or situations. In some of my thesis pieces, I included the context within my work, because for me the context is as important as the content. The context is a crucial element in forming my work, since it plays the role of magnifying the aesthetics of each composition.

As for material, I mainly use fine silver, instead of sterling silver, since I am fond of the characteristics of fine silver. Although silver, aluminum, steel, titanium, and white gold all have the same color, each metal has its own characteristics. Silver has a white color and conveys the feeling of my work, but also, as opposed to other white metals, fine silver brings warmth, temperance and depth.

Since ancient times the more closely attached silver objects become to a people, in other words the longer they use them, the more they will value the beauty of silver.
My intent to have people see my work as part of their lives and this characteristic of silver—that its luster can only be deepened through continuous usage—are well matched.

Another characteristic of silver is its preciousness. And this aspect of silver agrees well with the precious stages of living that I am trying to describe. I hope that people can think of the precious moments in their rites of passage as they build a relationship with my work made from this precious material.

To render my surfaces, I chose various textures, like those of flowing water or the dim light of moonlight, to express different moods. Color creates atmosphere in my compositions, carried out by painting. For instance, in my “Budding Night Flower,” I used a dark blue color to create a gloomy atmosphere, and for “Death (Re-birth),” I used reddish black colors, like burning ashes, to set the mood.
SCALE

Seeing the entire picture of our existence reveals three main periods: birth, life, and death. And my three main works that represent these three events, “Birth”, “Balance,” and “Death (Re-birth),” were made in a large scale for this reason: to enable those experiencing them to actually become a part of them. Making these works bigger than life size produced a surrounding environment so that viewers could walk into that environment.

Some of my other works—“Last Hope (Hope),” “Pistil (Inception),” “Cocoon (Empty Shell),” “Bud (Blooming),” “Green Peas (Caressing),” “Morning Dew (Beginning),” and “Cocoon (Incubation)” —are small, wearable, personal ornaments, signifying various small and large incidents and experiences in life from birth to death. These wearable ornaments can also be viewed as wearable sculptural pieces. They could also, perhaps, become wordless signs or symbols that describe their wearers. As we wear these pieces close to our bodies, we can remember more often the meaningful events that each piece symbolizes.
4. Description of Works

1.1 Pistil (Inception)

1.2 Cocoon (Incubation)

1.3 Budding Night Flower

2.1 Morning Dew (Beginning)

2.2 Green Peas (Caressing)

2.3 Leaves (Harmony)

2.4 Bud (Blooming)

2.5 Last Hope (Hope)

3.1 Cocoon (Death/Re-birth)

3.2 Cocoon (Empty Shell)
Through this work, I tried to express one of the most fundamental and essential processes of life, fertilization, through bloomed flowers and their pistils and stamens. Beautifully bloomed flowers meet the warm spring sunlight after enduring a long winter, much as one's climax in life is often reached after overcoming adversity. Approaching it from a purely scientific perspective, the fragrance of these beautiful flowers is meant to attract bees or butterflies which serve as mediators to bring the pollen of stamens to pistils. Once the pollen is delivered to a pistil by bees, butterflies or the wind, it travels through a comparatively long style to reach the ovule for pollination. This moment is the beginning of new life, not a result of a strictly natural event as in the "law of preservation of species," or a phenomenon without any special preparation, but a wondrous occurrence brought about by a long, prepared process, with many and various constituents working together in harmony. I expressed this idea through a rendering of bloomed flowers and their pistils and stamens, but I wanted as well to portray the mystery of birth that all creatures, including humans, are privileged to have.
1-2 Cocoon (Incubation) — brooch

In this work, I tried to depict the mother bearing a fetus in her womb, through the form of a cocoon. After the internal fertilization, the fetus spends about ten months in the mother’s womb. During the first eight weeks, the fetus develops into a human figure with hands, feet, brain and heart. After this initial development, the fetus continues growing in the womb, receiving all necessities including food through the placenta and excreting waste matter. Such activity of the fetus is its preparation and development to meet the outside world. The fact that the fetus can be recognized as a human being so soon after fertilization and that the period of growth is so much longer signifies the importance of incubation. I wanted to represent the incubation process of humans as that of butterflies. A caterpillar makes a cocoon and stays inside it, keeping the energy it accumulated during its caterpillar stage to prepare for the next stage of its life. Inside the cocoon, it prepares to meet the outside world by producing wings and shedding its excess body weight in order to prepare for flying smoothly in the air. Through this work, I wanted to express the process of incubation which is not visible but nevertheless is a very important and fundamental process in our life. The fetus grows inside the womb as a caterpillar grows inside its cocoon.
This work reveals the birth of life through the flower budding on the cliff during the night. The way I feel about the whole process of flowers being pollinated, buds bursting forth, and flowers first blooming and then fading, is that it is very similar to our lives. By noticing how flowers bloom, we can learn about the marvel and nobility of our own lives; watching a flower that blooms just once and then dies, we can recognize the limits of our lives. These two lessons teach us about the preciousness of every moment we experience.

The wood piece depicts a cliff, its sloping and steep line representing the instability of today's world. As progress in medical science continuously advances, more people have been able to extend their life spans and the death rate of infants has substantially decreased; however at the same time, the birth rate, especially in modern societies, has been falling. I think this is the result of excessive individualism and a preoccupation with materialistic pursuits. Furthermore, indiscriminate terrorist attacks and massacres due to power struggles threaten the dignity of human life itself. I expressed this cruel circumstance through the
The background painting symbolizes the world we live in, balancing the overall atmosphere of the work. The dark color of the painting represents the night; the darkness of night is meant to show the severity of the environment in which birth occurs. The darkness also expresses indifference in today’s world—no one cares or even gives a glance at the wonder of birth.

The silver vase signifies the birth of life—the budding flower rooting at the brink of a cliff and blooming alone in the surrounding indifference, an existence that no one recognizes. A birth may not always be held as a blessing. Like this budding flower, many births take place in rain, wind and dark. But, regardless of the environment in which the birth is held, this new start symbolizes limitless potential and hope toward one’s future life. This work’s budding flower, the birth that overcame many adversities, will shine even more because it has a polished finish on its surface.
2-1 Morning Dew (Beginning) – brooch

This work symbolizes the morning dew dropping from a leaf. Whenever I walk outside in the early morning, my most cherished observation is the morning dew that has formed on the leaves. Morning dew forms during the silence of dawn and appears every morning, as if washing away past worries and suffering, and gathering up new energy and vitality for a new day. During our lives we continuously experience new beginnings, whether small or large; every day we may start by promising ourselves to live a better life than the day before. We may even meet a new beginning by attending our first day at a new job or by getting married. For in a way, life is a series of new beginnings and the chain that connects these new beginnings. Through this work, I tried to symbolize one of these new beginnings.

2-2 Green Peas (Caressing) – brooch

The "Green Peas" brooch reveals the care of parents for their children. Inside the peasecod, tender peas are growing, and their color is light green because they have yet to meet the outside world’s sunlight. The peasecod protects these tender peas from rain,
wind, insects and glaring sunlight until they are fully ripe and ready to meet the world. A
mother loves her children more than anyone else, and she holds them as she did in her
womb so that they can grow without getting hurt. By portraying the peasecod holding the
peas, I tried to depict a mother’s instinctive care and love. However, when the green peas
come out to the world as the peasecod opens its shell, they will drop onto the ground, lay
their roots in the earth and grow to bear another life. The reason I chose to reveal some of
the peas facing the outside was to depict the upcoming day when the peas would be ready
to come out, leaving the care of their mother, the peasecod.

2-3 Leaves (Harmony)

This work is my expression of living today
and how we must maintain our balance
through harmony with different people, social
systems and practices. The leaves on a tree
resemble our current society in that, while each person stands as one individual, each
individual is at the same time a part of the whole and must harmonize with others.

Leaves change throughout the seasons. In spring, young and feeble leaves sprout at
various places over tree branches and face out to the sky to absorb the sunshine. In summer,
leaves flourish and turn green. In autumn, fruits ripen and leaves change to a vibrant array
of different colors. Winter leaves become dry, their forms become distorted, and they end their lives, falling off the trees. As spring returns, trees once again produce new buds and leaves. This life cycle of the tree is similar to that of our own. We are born, we create harmony with each other and bloom together, and when we die there will be someone new born to replace us.

The biggest impression I received from my study of leaves is that they form a beautiful harmony with each other although each leaf may have a slightly different shape. Leaves model for us how to form a balance in our lives through harmony with many different and unique individuals; this ought to be the way we live.

So I chose leaves as my subject for this work about harmony. The work’s three leaves each have a different shape, but together they strike a balance. Two of the leaves are well matched in perfect harmony, but the third is broken and hangs down to the ground. As such, these three leaves represent diverse aspects of life. But even so, they are well balanced to each other.

This work functions as a set of candlesticks. Living in harmony with others requires some extent of sacrifice. Candles are used as a symbol of sacrifice in many religious practices, especially in Buddhism, because a candle itself must be burned to illuminate its surroundings.

I tried to bring an image of dark forests to the work by painting the background.
This painting was meant to show our given environment—that of a hard daily life filled with large and small incidents happening in a cruel world. On the stage of such a world and such a life, three candles can shine forth.

2-4 Bud (Blooming) — brooch

Whereas one of the previous brooches, “Pistil,” depicted already bloomed flowers, this work shows a flower bud that has yet to open. The flower bud grows while concealing inside its green shell the flower petals which will soon bloom beautifully. The flower bud, with its hidden petals folded over each other in a small space inside, prepares for its future. Soon the bud will open and the flower’s petals will burst forth as they reach to the sky. It is hard to imagine the blooms that will emerge from such small buds, but many wondrous shapes of flowers do in fact bloom from buds such as this one. This work depicts the bud as one’s growth and preparation for the moment of climax, but it could also be viewed as a moment of tension and nervousness before a closely-approaching climax.

In our own lives, we can recall glorious moments that were achieved only after a long preparation and growth, much like flowers that fully bloom after their long preparation. As a matter of fact, we may experience many such moments, for instance, academic
achievements that come after long study and research, the attainment of artistic goals after much devotion and effort, moments of victory in athletic pursuits after repeated training and self-discipline, and even the acquisition of wealth and authority after years of diligence and integrity. As we struggle through many stages of effort to arrive at these goals, I wanted to express the process of achieving them, and the tension and nervousness that come before that achievement, through this flower bud.

2-5 Last Hope (Hope) — brooch

I intended this work to describe hope through the image of the last leaf hanging on a tree in the autumn. I got the idea for this work from the American writer O. Henry's famous short story "The Last Leaf." In the story, a girl named Johnsy became pessimistic about her ability to recover from an illness when she observed the falling ivy leaves our side her window. But when Johnsy saw the last leaf endure the beating rain and strong gusts of wind, she did not lose hope to win back her health. In the end, she did not let go of her "last hope," and she overcame her adversity.

I must ask whether people can live their lives without any hope. Many people consider their hope for tomorrow as the meaning of life. If these people do not have a positive attitude toward life, they will lose their desire for tomorrow, and this may lead
them toward death. Thus, hope in life can be a very important driving force to encourage people to strive for a better life.

Through this work, I wanted to deliver the message of hope through one last leaf hanging faintly on a small branch. Although one person's hope might be very small and seemingly not as valuable as someone else's, it can nevertheless be extremely precious and beautiful when we understand and sympathize with the situation of the person.

3-1 Cocoon (Death/Rebirth)

Through the description of cocoons, this work metaphorically represents death—the end of life as well as another beginning. The cocoons that appear to have fallen on the ground and the one left leaning on the painting are the shells left behind after caterpillars have turned into butterflies. The painting, which creates an atmosphere for the work, is a metaphorical expression of life as fire. I am reminded of passionate living when I look at dancing flames, and of death when I look at the resulting ashes. Legend tells of a mythical bird that periodically burned itself to death and emerged from the ashes as a new phoenix. Perhaps because of this, I always picture fire and ashes when I think of death and re-birth. And that is why I used red to represent fire and black for ashes, in addition to laying charcoal on the floor.
As is stated in an old saying, "A man shall be born from earth and shall return to the earth," there is no man who will not die and live forever. We are actually preparing for death from the moment of our birth.

The way we view death as another birth is similar to the transformation of the larva (or caterpillar) into a butterfly. Once the larva in its cocoon casts off its skin to become a butterfly, the larva no longer exists, but instead has been transformed into a new existence as a butterfly.

In Buddhism, the cocoon frequently appears as a metaphor for human life. The life cycle of the butterfly follows four stages:

- egg (birth),
- larva, also called caterpillar (growth),
- pupa in its cocoon (death), and
- imago or adult butterfly (re-birth).

After its birth as an egg from its mother's body, the insect achieves its complete transformation only after completing these four stages, from infancy to adulthood.

In the first stage, birth, the egg represents the will to live. The next stage, larva or caterpillar, is the stage of preparing for death after growth. The caterpillar grows by feeding itself and transforms gradually into a larger and larger creature, shedding its skin five times in the process. When its transformation is complete, it becomes a pupa surrounded by a
cocoon. Not only does this unmoving cocoon signify death, but it also refers to the grave, which, again according to the theory of reincarnation, is the place of new birth. I used an LED lighting system which emits mysterious blue and purple rays to signify re-birth.

One day, the creature is "reborn" into a beautiful butterfly after having endured its cocoon period. The emergence of the butterfly depends on the seeming "death" of the cocoon phase. This new stage is only feasible if the pupa achieves its emancipation from the cocoon, rising above itself and succeeding in completing the transformation. The life cycle of the butterfly repeats itself over and over, similar to the morning-forenoon-afternoon-night cycle of a day, and the spring-summer-fall-winter cycle of the seasons. The cycle of life and death has been one of the most popular subjects of both Western and Eastern philosophers who appreciate this dramatic transformation.

I expect that every age has different approaches toward this phenomenon. Youth, in pursuance of life changes, will continuously seek new visions and look to the future, bearing all kinds of painful moments so as to become "butterflies." Old men preparing for death may think of the place where their graves will be. In the East, as the cocoon sends forth a butterfly, the grave is the place of reincarnation, transforming death into everlasting spirit.
When I observe an empty cocoon hanging on a branch, I am reminded of a corpse. In this work, I tried to depict the empty shell of a cocoon after the butterfly emerged and flew away. Thoughts about dead bodies are different for every different individual. If the corpse is of one’s loved family member, it would be observed in sorrow; and if it is from war or murder, then it may be observed with fear or sorrow for the cruelty it represents. The cadaver in a medical school’s dissection class, on the other hand, is merely a model for study.

The way I feel about an empty cocoon is different. For me, the empty shell does not signify meaninglessness, fear or sadness that the spirit has left. Rather, it is a real object that reminds me of the butterfly that flew away. And, furthermore, it reminds me of the stages of life that the butterfly went through, and the stages of life that I am going through even now. Realizing that the empty cocoon signifies the emergence of a butterfly makes me believe that death is actually a journey to a brighter and wider world with more graceful and gorgeous figures.
5. Conclusion

Works of art often reflect the artist’s view of life and the world, and my work is no exception.

The environment that I grew up in and the environment that surrounds me at this time of my life have been the sources from which I drew my themes and subjects. At the same time, my work embodies other themes and subjects that hold the messages I intended to deliver. In other words, I was able to discover many things about myself while making my thesis pieces; my experience working on this thesis has helped me to re-identify what I have held strongly in my head and how I have thought and acted while living my life. Throughout this process I have thought carefully, and have had the opportunity to learn from my work.

Art objects can often be evaluated as being more successful when the artist’s message is more far-reaching than the works initially reveal. In light of this, while my work has not deviated much from my standpoint of being female (for example, the brooch, vase, flowers and candlesticks are soft and easily accessible), my themes go beyond this feminine stance. They highlight the importance of birth and the process of living.

My works’ functions, themes and subjects speak about important and difficult issues—about the sincerity of our thinking and actions in this life, about living, and even about the larger world—through their embodiment in ordinary objects that we can have close to us. Indeed, the universal values that serve as my subject matter go beyond age, sex,
and race, even beyond time and space. The opportunity I had to work on this thesis makes me want to find and express other worlds as well, and continue to re-define my identity, thus consolidating the value of my message.
Appendix: Further Reading and Guidance


Jung, Carl. Memories, Dreams, Reflections. Vintage, April 1989