The Awakening of Consciousness* ~ Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare)
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Signatures: Awakening ~ Cleansing ~ Ingenuity ~ Foresight ~ Self-interest

To be born human and encounter the great joy
of the good Dharma is a chance rarer than
a turtle thrusting its neck through a yoke
floating freely in the great ocean.

Hymn to the Buddha by Matrceta

For three thousand years it was a medicinal, culinary and magical wonder. Physicians, housewives and warriors collected it for so many uses that Pliny, that inveterate observer of nature, listed just twenty-two before he threw down his stylus and declared its uses "too numerous to mention." It was a staple in the huts of peasants and the castles of kings. It served equally well as a vegetable, a spice, a flavor enhancer, a food supplement and a digestive aid. While peasants ate it to stave off hunger, nobility used it to relieve the aches and pains of overeating—and then ate it the day after to help them lose weight! It was a witch repellent, a family planning aid, and the original energy bar. Its gifts to humankind no doubt inspired the poet Hesiod to give it a key role in the creation of civilization. If ever a plant could be credited with raising humanity out of its animal state, it would be Fennel. Nevertheless, this useful and versatile herb appears rarely if at all on the shopping list of the average household today, at least in the U. S. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the English herbalist and folklorist, Lady Rosalind Northcote, lamented, "Few realize from how high an estate fennel has fallen."

A plant of change and ambiguity

Fennel's plummet from glory in the last one hundred and fifty years would not have surprised the 17th-century herbalist-physician, Nicholas Culpeper. A keen observer who dedicated himself to sorting fact from fiction, Culpeper was well aware of fennel's ambiguous nature and its affinity for change. Using the astrological classification of his day, Culpeper placed the herb squarely under the rulership of Mercury, the planet named after the trickster-messenger god of Olympus. Mercury (Hermes to the Greeks) was patron-protector of a motley mix of mortals that included travelers, shepherds, runners, politicians and orators, pranksters, thieves and liars, merchants and other practitioners of easy change and slippery boundaries. Classifying fennel as a plant of Mercury signified that here indeed was a plant of change, transformation and surprise.

Fennel is a member of the vast Apiaceae (formerly, Umbelliferae) family, whose highly serviceable members include the carrot, parsnip, celery, caraway, dill, coriander and anise. Poison hemlock, the death of Socrates, is the only sinister member of the tribe and is sometimes mistaken for fennel, with predictably

disastrous results. Its presence in this otherwise amiable clan could be written off as an exception, or seen as a hint of a darker side to this chemically powerful family.

Fennel's physical appearance displays the variagate nature of its character. True to the family name of the Umbelliferae, fennel's small, yellow-gold flowers grow in umbels, clusters of flowerets that resemble umbrellas turned inside out by the wind. These sway on slender stems above thick, tough stalks that can grow into woody canes up to six feet in height, depending on growing conditions. Originating in the Mediterranean, fennel thrives readily in temperate climates around the globe. The plant changes color as it grows, its leaves beginning as tight, burgundy-brown spike-like clusters that gradually unfold to the plant's characteristic, dark blue-green plumage.

Fennel's seeds are little lessons in ambiguity themselves. Technically, they are not seeds as all, but fruit, which contain most of the plant's essential oils. These little storehouses of chemical compounds are constructed in duple form, each "seed" being one half of a pronged arrangement of two mericarps attached to a common stem—a clue in miniature to a certain double-sidedness, a "duplicity," to fennel's nature.

Though a perennial, fennel is generally cultivated as an annual or a biennial due to its tendency to "bolt," to go to seed quickly and revert to its wild state. It seems to prefer life out on the plain or meadow more than the controlled confines of the garden. Left to its own devices in the flower or vegetable bed, it will outgrow its domestic usefulness and change chemical composition before an inattentive grower can say *foeniculum vulgare*.

Gardeners and chefs tend to adore fennel, while highway workers devote whole summers to destroying it. Fennel appeals to gardeners both for its culinary uses and for the contrast its airy beauty brings to a flower bed (an ornamental bronze variety is a particular favorite). Out of the garden, however, fennel reveals its roguish side. Growing happily along roadsides, its thickly growing woody stalks will spread over any available acreage, rendering berms and roadsides impassable. Highway departments know it as a "noxious weed" and publish instructions for its recognition and mass destruction. (In 2007, for example, the Noxious Weed Board of King County, Washington, became yet another of hundreds of agencies around the world to ban fennel, putting it and two other botanical rowdies on its Most Wanted list as "highly aggressive and difficult to control." A year later, Kitsap County, in the same state, followed suit.)

Even gardeners can find themselves challenged by fennel's exuberance. One blogger on www.thestranger.com, out of Seattle (http://slog.thestranger.com/2007/08/day_2_gardening) expressed the exasperation fennel can induce in the disinterested: "Fennel is the Devil's plant. It took us 2 seasons to get the rid of the seedlings from one plant in our garden. Curse you, fennel! Curse you!"

Despite its aggressive hardiness, however, if conditions aren't met, fennel can succumb to pests, fail to reproduce and disappear—as one marvelous variety did—forever.

The names fennel has acquired over the centuries are as varied as its uses and the countries in which it grows. Impatient with the dozens of regional, culinary and botanical names the plant and its various sub-species have accumulated along the way, some classifiers reduce the choices down to two types, according to how they sit on the tongue: sweet or bitter. (http://electrocomm.tripod.com/hinojo-fennel.html). *F. dulce*, favored for the table, is also known as sweet fennel, Florence fennel, Roman fennel, Italian fennel, *finocchio, F. Sativum* or simply *dulce*. What makes *F. dulce* "sweet" is the high concentration in its essential oil of the chemical compound, anethole, estimated subjectively, in human tests, to be thirteen times sweeter than sugar. Dulce is cultivated for its seed, bulb, leaves and, more rarely, its pollen. *F. vulgare*—a.k.a. "common," "wild," "large" or "giant" fennel—is grown primarily for its seed oil, where fenchone, an isomer of camphor, predominates, giving the oil a very bitter taste. *Vulgare*'s seed is generally used for medicinal purposes, the plant grown on a large scale and its oil extracted from the "seed" by pharmaceutical companies.

Fennel's accumulation of names throughout its history doesn't compare to the collection of tales leading up to the present name of the genus. The ancient Greeks knew the plant as *marathon*, a derivative of *moraino*, "to grow thin"—a salute to the age-old practice of consuming the plant for the purpose of losing weight (fennel is still a key ingredient in many weight-loss programs and products today). Others insist that the name of *marathon* for fennel was a reference to a field in Attica by that name, famous in Greek history as the site of a decisive Athenian victory over Alexander's Persian army—and supposedly a place where wild fennel grew in abundance.

Another, even more intriguing debate connected with the Greek name involves a Bronze-Age Mycenaean ideogram, the character for wool, found on a clay-tablet bill of lading describing the inventory of an ancient ship. The picture-symbol in question, rendered as *ma-ru-the-won* in the Roman alphabet, puzzled decoders of Linear B, as the Mycenaean language was called, because it appeared in a list of ingredients usde to make perfume. Scholars wondered why a small amount of wool would be listed among the spices, wine and other ingredients common to early perfume formulas. Some conjecture that the wool was used as a filter to screen out contaminates, but others say that the ideogram was actually a scribe's mis-chiseling of one character in the proper word, the word for fennel—a "typo", and in stone, no less! Until more evidence is in the debate continues and adds its own prankish note to the lore surrounding this plant of Mercury, the trickster-god.

The genus name that finally took hold was the one the Romans gave it: *foeniculum*, "little hay," an artful christening that evokes the sweet smell and soft tangle of fennel's feathery leaves.

Awakening

At the table and by the bedside, fennel's predominant feature is its capacity to stir and awaken the senses and bodily processes. It behaves with food and acts on the digestive system in ways that enliven, invigorate, rejuvenate or otherwise stimulate and refresh. Chefs use it to neutralize unwanted flavors and odors and tease out the flavors of other ingredients. Food writer Howard Yoon, in an article for the NPR online column, "Kitchen Window," crowned its virtuosity in the kitchen as "the Zelig of vegetables," pointing out that "tuna tastes more tuna-like when cooked with fennel"; even "a simple salad of greens, red onion and lemon vinaigrette has more zing…" *(Cit. note)*

Down the centuries, people have recognized fennel's unmistakable ability to invigorate and energize. Roman soldiers ate it right from the field as an energy boost before battle. Gladiators consumed it for the same reason; after the contests, winners were crowned with fennel wreaths as a symbol of their strength and valor.

It is a traditional treatment for a spectrum of common ailments, from indigestion to lethargy. Herbal medicine classifies it as a "stomachic," an agent that tones and reactivates the natural action of the stomach. In Chinese medicine, it is used to "regulate the flow of Qi (energy) in the stomach," and practitioners prescribe it for digestive disorders ranging from nausea to hiccups. Fennel's power to revitalize and awaken inevitably gave rise to hype and exaggeration. One nineteenth-century medicine man, obviously trying to find a market niche, pitched his elixir to men with the claim that fennel "gives the user strength, vitality and sexual virility and fertility."

Fennel's awakening abilities extend to its oil, which has the curious property of quickening the flow of certain body fluids and secretions. Traditional herbal medicine prescribes dosages of fennel oil to induce perspiration and salivation, for fever control and as a mild expectorant. The materia medica also classifies it as a galactogogue, a stimulant to the production and flow of milk in nursing mothers and, in veterinary medicine, cows. Paradoxical to these boons to motherhood, fennel oil also stimulates the flow of the menses; enough evidence exists to support the belief that women and their midwives have long used fennel oil as a means of terminating pregnancy.

Fennel's power to awaken is associated with what has to be its most dramatic role in the mythic history of human consciousness.

If ever there was a thoroughly ambiguous nature it was that archetypal hero, god and con man, Prometheus. One of theTitan gods arising out of the prehistoric consciousness of the ancient Greeks, Prometheus' chief mission in eternity seemed to be to thwart Zeus, king of the Olympian gods. Hesiod tells us that Prometheus was suspicious of the ill will Zeus had for the mortal race—he had once before deprived humans of fire and, Hesiod implies, intended to eventually wipe out the troublesome species. Out of sympathy

for the two-legged creatures Prometheus devises a simple yet daring plan to steal some of the gods' fire and transport it to earth to benefit mortals forever. As his means of concealing and carrying the precious coals, the Titan chooses a stalk of a giant fennel:

> *The brave son*
> *Of Iapetos deceived Zeus, and he stole*
> *The ray, far-seeing, of unwearied fire,*
> *Hid in the hollow fennel stalk, and Zeus*
> *Who thunders in the heavens ate his heart,*
> *And raged within to see the ray of fire*
> *Far-seeing, among men.* (Hesiod 41)

And so it was, according to this ancient tale, that fennel played a key role in a defining moment in human history, the advancement of humanity and the awakening of civilization itself.

Cleansing

Fennel oil is a carminative, a cleansing agent for the digestive system. It has been used for centuries to expel gas and relieve indigestion. One contemporary herbal remedy, marketed under the quaint name, Heather's Tummy Tea, promises buyers that fennel is "exceptional for IBS—irritable bowel syndrome—bloating, gas and abdominal pain." Fennel tea is highly regarded as a tonic for the liver, kidney and spleen, especially for the ill effects of overeating or excessive intake of alcohol; one enthusiast (obviously speaking from personal experience) recommends it as "wonderful for hangovers." Fennel is also a diuretic, an expectorant and a laxative—all cleansers of the body—and is sometimes added to stronger purgatives to ease the griping caused by these more violent treatments.

A peculiar account of fennel's cleansing virtues comes from Pliny:

> *When a snake's body gets*
> *covered with a skin owing*
> *to its winter inactivity*
> *it sloughs this hindrance*
> *to its movement by means of fennel-sap*
> *and comes out all glossy for spring.*

Pliny's story of the serpent's fondness for fennel is just the beginning of a long and curious narrative about its purgative qualities. In his "Five Hundreth Good Points of Husbandrie," a voluminous compilation of household tips and information that makes "Hints from Heloise" seem perfunctory, the medieval herbalist, Thomas Tusser, listed fennel as one of twenty-one strewing herbs best for dealing with "odors caused by poor

hygiene" and the public sanitation systems of the day. Stalks of it were strewn on the floors of cottages, castles and kennels as a flea repellent also: wearing a piece of it in one's left shoe was recommended for preventing wood ticks from biting the legs (why just the left and not the right, too, is not explained, except *left,* derived from the Latin word *sinister*—meaning hidden, secret or deliberately concealed—probably had something to do with the cryptic instruction). As an aromatic, fennel was a popular addition to tussie-mussies, nosegays of herbs that people would carry with them when they had to go out and about in the streets, and hold to their noses to counter the stench of public places—and, it was hoped, to protect against the plague. (Fennel oil does contain a known antimicrobial hydrocarbon called L-limonene, an ingredient used in many, orange-smelling housecleaning products today, but it was certainly no match for the Black Death.)

If fennel worked so well as a flea repellent, it was only logical to try out the herb's pesticide power on witches. As early as the third and fourth centuries, the young and nervously militant church at Rome began denouncing non-believers as witches and heretics, including all those who still practiced the "old religions," the many nature religions indigenous to Europe. By the Middle Ages, Europe was a land dominated by a politic of fear. In such a climate, God-fearing, witch-fearing (and perhaps simply Church-fearing) people festooned their homes with fennel, stuffing it in keyholes, draping doors and windows with it, spreading washes of it on their walls to ward off the infestations of witches many came to believe were an insidious scourge of the land. By the time of a very real horror—the establishment of the Inquisition in 1492 when Isabella and Ferdinand expelled all Jews from Spain, torturing those who remained until they converted or died hideous deaths—a prominent display of fennel served not only as a deterrent to witch invasion but offered, also, a measure of insurance against accusations by neighbors: a spray of fennel tacked to the front door would have been advertisement that the occupants within had no dealings with witches, evil spirits or heretics.

It was in this culture of suspicion, paranoia, and hysteria that fennel came to play one of the strangest roles in its history. In 1575, in Friuli, Italy, an agrarian cult calling itself *Il Benandanti*, "the Good Walkers," came to the attention of a village priest in this isolated mountain town, and, shortly afterward, to the Inquisition itself. In the course of hundreds of testimonies taken by Church interrogators, uncovered in Vatican archives by historian Carlo Ginzburg, the spirits of hundreds of people (some reported thousands) were under mysterious command to rise up each night, leave their bodies in their beds, and make their way to fields outside their villages. There, the disembodied spirits would wage astral war against hosts of *malandanti,* "bad witches" whose aims were to ruin crops, maim village children, urinate in water barrels and get up to other mischief equally despicable to an agrarian community. These "Good Walkers" were said to be males between the ages of 20 and 40 who had been born with a caul, a birth trophy for centuries throughout Europe for its reputed power to give the possessor good luck and the person born with it supernatural powers. (Women born with the caul were thought to have the ability to see the dead.)

Among such a bizarre collection of tales one would expect to find contradictions enough to dismiss them out of hand as wild folk tales, yet this general plot line was told so consistently that interrogators were dumbfounded. Another consistency stood out as well, as stark as a scarecrow in a moonlit cornfield: the Good Walkers carried fennel stalks as weapons. The bad witches, on the other hand, wielded sorghum sticks, which, as everyone said, they used to beat their victims mercilessly.

Exactly why the Benandanti chose fennel as their banner for the Good is not explained, but a remarkable consensus on this point indicates that the plant's protective and purgative powers were firmly fixed in the collective consciousness of the region.

Foresight/Ingenuity

Hesiod had good reason to call the flame Prometheus stole "far-seeing." On a practical level, the herb was used for centuries to clear the vision and restore eyesight. The 10th-century herbalist Aemilius Macer gives a poetic rendition of another of Pliny's observations, this time of snakes and fennel in spring:

By eating herb of Fennel, for the eyes
A cure for blindness had the serpent wise;
Man tried the plant; and,
Trusting that his sight
Might thus be healed, rejoiced
him right.

Eating the resinous stalks supposedly rid the reptiles of mucus that accumulated in their eyes during winter hibernation. Culpeper gives a more exact formula for an eye treatment for humans, a recipe that indicates some degree of success with the films and "floaters" of aging eyes and points to the resin of the plant as the active agent. "The distilled water of the whole herb, or the condensed juice dissolved…that in some counties issues out of its (fennel's) own accord, dropped into the eyes, cleanses them from mists and films that hinder the sight."

Fennel's ability to improve vision is not confined to physical eyesight alone. Gardeners and highway workers know that to step into a large planting of fennel in full flower is to experience a sensation that can only be described as mood-altering. Medical herbalist Dylan Warren-Davis tells of motoring in New Zealand with a friend along a stretch of road that cut through acres of naturalized fennel. As they were driving along enjoying the beauty of the herb in flower, they saw, much to their dismay, highway crews busily mowing down the herb and leaving a mangled mulch in their wake. The air, he remembers, "was filled with the intense aniseed-like aroma of fennel. Its refreshing fragrance filled the car and permeated our clothes." A few minutes and miles later he realized he was actually feeling intoxicated and that he had been paying little attention to the road.

"Fortunately," he commented, "the number of other cars on the road in rural New Zealand is very small!" ("Valerian & Fennel; Two Contrasting Mercurial Herbs," http://www.skyscript.co.uk/fennel.html)

The scent from fennel's essential oils induces a pleasurable, calming sensation. In large quantities it can be overpowering—disgusting to some (particularly those hired to eradicate it!) and hallucinogenic to others. Fennel is in fact listed as a hallucinogen in the materia medica. This is due to the presence of myristicin in its essential oil—a naturally occurring benzodioxole with proven psychotropic properties. Hallucinogen manufacturers (who for obvious reasons remain anonymous) put myristicin in a special chemical category, unique to their underground industry, called "essential amphetamines." Myristicin is also found in higher amounts in nutmeg and also occurs in anise, Star anise, black pepper, carrot and mace. (Warning: consuming two nutmegs will not only cause vivid hallucinations but pain, vomiting and death. And, before interested parties rush out to grow a crop of fennel for recreational purposes, it should be noted that myristicin has consistently skirted government censure and regulation as having "no toxic effect"—at least in the amounts typically capable of being ingested.)

Regardless of the disputed effectiveness of myristicin as a hallucinogenic, it is fennel's sweet, aromatic flavor that makes it one of the key ingredients in absinthe. While its role here is a supporting one, and not the lead of the piece, fennel's anise-like sweetness provides an essential counter-melody to the spirit's flagship ingredient, wormwood, and adds a sensation of pleasure to the task of transporting the imbiber to the more visionary planes of altered consciousness. (A fuller consideration of absinthe will be found in the upcoming chapter on "Wormwood and Intuition.")

Fennel's relationship to the visionary has been found in the art and artifacts of ancient Greece. The staff of Dionysus, god of wine, passion and general chaos, was frequently depicted as a stalk of giant fennel—hollow and segmented like bamboo, and on occasion sporting a crown of ivy leaves tumbling out of the top of the stalk. Devotees of this wild god—the joyous, and deadly, Bacchae and Maenads—were said to have carried their own fennel wands on their revels, using them as weapons when necessary against those who were ignorant enough or unfortunate enough to get in the way of their mindless rampages across the countryside. Scholars generally take the fennel staff of Dionysus to be a fertility symbol, an interpretation that is totally in keeping with fennel's connection with Prometheus, the god who fertilized civilization with the divine, "far-seeing" fire. Both gods, each in their own way, deliver to mortals dramatic changes in consciousness that free them from mere existence into a vision of a larger life.

Fennel has not fared well with Western medicine—the U.S. Food and Drug Administration officially removed it from its list of substances classified as medicinal drugs in 1912. But it has maintained its status in the kitchen, where its mercurial adaptability brings out the ingenuity of cooks who like to play with it. Its

amiable accommodation to other foods and its own virtuoso performance as a spice, vegetable and condiment have prompted cooks and foodies to dub it "the chef's secret weapon."

Fennel can enhance nearly everything served to the table, from meats and fish to soups and sauces, from bread to pickles. Chefs who know what they're doing even use its delicate, anise-like flavor in puddings, custards and other desserts. In the hands of a good cook, practically all parts of the plant find their way to the table, especially the large white bulb that comprises the base of the leaf stalk of sweet, or French, fennel. Thomas Jefferson first encountered it in Paris and wrote to friends back home in America, "Fennel is beyond every other vegetable, delicious…there is no vegetable equals it in flavor. It is eaten at dessert, crude, and with, or without dry salt, indeed I preferred it to every other vegetable, or to any fruit."

The pollen has especially captured the imagination of adventurous cooks and diners. Known in Italy as "spice of the angels," fennel pollen as a spice is just beginning to become known to the U.S. market and is still considered a "local exotic crop." A food reviewer on the Web site of a small but going concern in California which gathers it in the wild and packages it commercially extols the "heady and honey-like" flavor of the golden grains. (*URL)* A writer for the Web site of Zingerman's Mail Order foods, out of Ann Arbor, Michigan, describes the special culinary experience the pollen brings to chef and table in words that hearken back to the visionary powers of myristicin: "In twenty years of cooking and traveling, I've never tasted anything else remotely like this. It's exhilarating - intoxicating even… Its aroma is sweet and pungent, smelling intensely of everything great about fennel and then some. Sometimes I'm surprised it's actually legal." (URL)

One of the more ingenious uses of fennel is the way Prometheus used it, as a carrying case. Before the era of cardboard, plastic and other miracles of modern packaging, travelers found that the hard, bamboo-like stalks of *F. communalis* was ideal for storing and transporting valuables, especially fragile ones. People tucked ointments, medicines, scrolls, spices and jewelry in segments of stalks of the giant fennel. The practice was once so common that fennel became known as *narthex*, the Greek word for box, chest or casket. (Anyone today who even recognizes the word will likely know it only in relation to church architecture; the narthex, in a church, being a box-like room located just inside the entrance, and furthest from the altar, which was originally designed to be a holding pen to separate the uninitiated from the faithful. Room and term remain part of church architecture today, although its meaning as "container" and the reference to fennel are long forgotten.)

Self-interest

Christopher: "No, my good Lord." — Ben Jonson, *The Case Altered*
Count: Your *good Lord*! Oh! how this smells of fennel!

In the practical arenas of cooking and medicine, fennel's reputation is impeccable. Cooks and healers know there are few herbs more gracious or helpful. Then we come to the strange and puzzling lore—far less honorable—of the Elizabethan and Victorian eras. By the eighteenth century fennel had acquired associations of duplicity, flattery and hypocrisy, a contradiction of all the illustrious lore and honor it had accumulated since ancient times. A century later Lady Northcote, voicing bewilderment and dismay over the turn of events, quotes a verse still popular in New England at the time:

"*Fenel is for flatterers,*
An evil thing it is sure,
But I have alwais meant truly
With constant heart most pure."

For a clue to fennel's reversal of fortune we must turn to the plant itself—the plant whose "seed" is not really a seed, but fruit that is, in a way, disguised as a seed; a fruit with a duple construction, twin carpels joined by a stem. Here at the core of fennel's chemical power we have a physical glyph of the "duplicity" of this otherwise pure and virtuous plant ("Duplicity" today is almost always a perjorative term, but its root is innocent enough, deriving from "duplex," two-sided, or simply "contradictory doubleness of thought, speech or action.")

In Act IV of *Hamlet*, Ophelia all but hurls sprays of two flowers the corrupt Claudius, crying, "There's fennel for you, and columbines!..." In her escalating hysteria she is able to get away with the audacious act of publically throwing the king's sins in his face through the use of the social code of communication dear to Elizabethans, the "language of flowers." To all who knew the code, Ophelia's choice of bouquet reveals the hidden nature of each character who receives a flower, and the king is awarded fennel for his hypocrisy and love of flattery; and columbine—generally for infidelity, and in the king's case for his perfidy and wife-stealing.

How did fennel fall from its place of high honor in Roman times to the stink of base flattery in later centuries? Writers and folklorists have pondered the paradox, arriving at various conclusions. A common conjecture is that the plant's quickness to wilt was a symbol of weakness, of fecklessness, and fickleness. A variation on this theme is the slang use, in Italy, of the Italian word for fennel, *finucchio*, which when applied to a person implies foppishness, dandyism and homosexuality. Others have interpreted fennel's quick wilt as a ready symbol for the fleeting, transient nature of flattery. An even wilder guess borders on Freudian free association; namely, that fennel's ability to curb the appetite while providing little or no sustenance is in this regard like flattery, which "simply strokes the ego." (URL) However, none of these observations explains fennel's fall from glory to its debasement in the language of flowers.

A logical explanation lies in the use of fennel over time. As the once-coveted icon of victory in the Coliseum, fennel over the centuries came to be a conventional token of praise. From there it was only natural to begin associating the token of praise with he who offered the token—sincerely or not.

Another factor to be considered relates to the vanilla craze of the seventeenth century (see Chapter 2, on

the Orchid) when Europeans got their first taste of the wonder-flavor when it arrived from the New World. In our own day and age of Dairy Queens and Dunkin' Donuts it is difficult to imagine how sweet fennel must have seemed to the European tongue, how its anethone must have delighted a populace that didn't yet know even Jell-o (that first easy-to-make dessert for ordinary people made possible by twentieth-century refrigeration). Before vanilla and the seventeenth century one of fennel's most remarkable virtues would have been its taste. Somewhere in the Middle Ages, long after the spectator frenzy and fennel honors of the Coliseum had faded from memory, the heavy cloak of Sweetness *became fennel's calling card.*

> *When from the boughs a savory odor blown,*
> *Grateful to appetite, more please'd my sense*
> *Than smell of sweetest Fennel…* – Milton, *Paradise Lost*

From sweetness to cloying flattery, it was an easy slide down the slippery slope of pleasure and self-indulgence. The complimenter who overuses sweetness in his praise is suspect, and fennel, the bestower of sweetness, came to be associated with flattery—and flatterers—so completely, it seems, that associations of bad character and bad fortune soon followed.

"Sow fennel, sow sorrow" was an adage that arose out of Puritan America. The saying remained so popular for two centuries that people came to believe it was a proverb from the Bible. (It's not). So unquestioned was the saying that, around 1790 one New England gardener, his name long lost, was moved to protest the defamation by writing and circulating a broadside at his own expense in defense of the plant:

An Excellent New Song composed over a bed of FENNEL, just sown.

"He that soweth fennel seed, soweth sorrow, for death will surely follow."

> *What scripture says, we must always*
> *Give good attention to;*
> *But they're unwise who credit lies*
> *And count all fables true.*
> *This bed contains the last remains*
> *A thimble full or so,*
> *Of Fennel-Seed, which should indeed*
> *Have been sown long ago….*
> *But some receive and do believe*
> *Strange fancies which they hear;*
> *For some suppose whoever sows*
> *This seed, won't live a year.*
> *A thousand ways cut short our days,*
> *None are exempt from death;*
> *Yet we ne'er (r)ead that Fennel-Seed*
> *Ee'r stopt a person's breath.*
> *I can't devise where danger lies*
> *In Fennel-Seed alone;*
> *The seed of Dill as well might kill,*
> *As any seed that's sown."*

There is no doubt that self-interest and deception of others ultimately lead to misfortune, sorrow and the rest of the proverbial troubles associated with fennel, and that these undesirables now lie side by side with fennel's gifts and pleasures. We could write off these qualities as anomalies or exceptions, but there is more to be gained from deeper reflection upon fennel's paradoxical nature. As the quantum physicist, Niels Bohr, said, "The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth."

From Signature to Archetype

When the child was a child *It didn't know it was a child,* *Everything was full of life* *And all life was one.*	Wim Wenders, "Wings of Desire" (Road Movies Film Production GMBH, Berlin, and Argos Films, Paris, 1987)

Awakening

When the child was my child, we'd walk sometimes, mid-morning, in the Vermont woods—me with my camera, he with a stick which he'd wand over bits of moss, a fallen tree, a clutch of toadstools. I would watch for those moments when my camera could catch the gleaming gold of his hair as he passed through the slants of sunlight, the brass buttons on his jacket glinting like pirate treasure. In those days all I had to do was say, "Derek", and he would turn, his miraculous child's smile a sun in itself, and I would catch the shot.

Then one day, suddenly, and without warning, he began to dodge the camera. When he saw it pointed in his direction he would turn away, or stoop over on the pretense of pointing to a bug, or make a face. From that day on and for years to come, I could not take a picture of him without him grimacing, posing or in some other way mocking the attempt to catch him unaware. The child who was a child was no longer a child. The child had become aware of itself.

Like Adam and Eve, my son at age three knew the experience of self-consciousness for the first time. All of us, barring brain trauma at birth, have gone through this first awakening to Self, both as very young children and as members of our own species. Fennel's first two signatures take us back to this change, and remind us of the mercurial leap our cerebral circuitry took when we emerged from the dream-world of the Unconscious to this first experience of self and "I"-consciousness.

The remaining four signatures of Fennel walk us through the rewards and the pitfalls of this peculiarly human state, self-consciousness. If we hear and heed their message, Fennel and its signatures can show us our own gifts more clearly, and serve as a guide around the perils of our own making.

The story of Narcissus is the story of a mortal creature discovering the miracle of himself reflected in a quiet forest pond. This mythic lesson may be the first portrait we have of this infant form of self-awareness. Like the creation story in Genesis it focuses on the dangers, not the rewards, of this state of consciousness.

In gazing upon his own reflection, Narcissus becomes so entranced by the beauty of the self—himself—that he is rendered oblivious to the love of another. The nymph, Echo, the lover who loves him without return, is reduced by the grief of unrequited love to an aural ghost of her former self. As punishment for his self-

absorption, the gods change Narcissus into a flower, condemned to look at himself beside the pool for all time, subject to the cycles of nature and deprived of higher states of mortal consciousness.

It would take us almost three thousand years more and a physician named Freud to give this self-absorption a name and study its nature in depth. For lack of any other name for it at the time, Freud called it *das Ich*, the "I", or (as his translator chose to put it) the Latin for "I", Ego. This became the clinical term for the mind aware of itself, the ability of any toddler— unlike a cat or a coyote—to look in the mirror and think, "That…is Me."

The human cerebral cortex is four times larger than that of our nearest ancestors, the apes. This larger, frontal portion of our brain, the part we commonly refer to as grey matter, accounts for most of what we call human consciousness including cognition, perception, memory, thought, language, intellect—and above all, self-awareness. About two million years ago, anthropologists estimate, this "new brain," began to appear in hominid-type creatures roaming the planet at that time. About a hundred and fifty thousand years ago, it fairly exploded in size among a few of the ape-like species and transformed Australopithecine into *homo sapiens*—how or why is still not understood.

The fire Prometheus stole for mortals didn't just give them heat and light, to cook their meat by day and watch for predators at night. According to Aeschylus, the divine fire also gave the creatures the capacity for inventing the arts and crafts, the building blocks of civilization: The creatures also got a new brain in the bargain.

Symbolically, the fennel stalk Prometheus used as a travel case, to carry and protect the glowing embers, served the same purpose as our expanded brain and skull do for us today—to encase and carry the fire of mind and consciousness, and with it, the awakening of the imagination.

Cleansing

As a medicinal cleansing agent fennel is classified as a carminative. The term is from the French *carminatif*, an even older term for a process of cleaning freshly sheared wool with card-shaped screens with which to bat the fresh animal fiber into shape to prepare it for spinning. In the course of this batting, stray plant matter and other debris that would mar the finished product are separated out as well, "dis-carded" and dropped to the floor. Herbal medicine adopted the term to refer to the cleansing action fennel and other herbs have on the digestive system.

As fennel expels toxins from the body (and fleas from kennels) so "I"-consciousness, Ego, combs our minds of debris from the Unconscious that would offend the Super-ego, or conscience. It performs its relentless job by calling into play various tricks of the mind known as defense mechanisms, the "carding" processes use

by the Ego to keep us stable and functioning. Defense mechanisms vary from person to person depending on the personality, and range from the healthy to the psychotic. All have one purpose in common: to keep us out of the crossfire, as much as possible, between that built-in censor, the Super-ego, and everything it considers shameful or troublesome "vermin" from the Unconscious. The case of the Benandanti may be one of the most bizarre examples in recorded history where a people's collective use of the same defense mechanisms helped to maintain their sanity under insane conditions.

According to Key Italy, an Italian real estate Web site, Friuli, Italy, is about "as far away from the influence of Rome as you can get" in its mountain isolation in the northeasternmost corner of the country. The area around Friuli is still a curious mix of three cultures: Italian, German and Slav. In the late-fifteenth century, the region would have been protected enough by its geography to hang onto the practices and beliefs of folk religions from all three cultures, long after the rest of Europe had been scoured for witches and heretics.

As men and women of the caul, the Good Walkers were regarded as people possessing magical power anyway; in the throwback paganism of the countryside around Friuli, with their reputed practices of waging astral war on witches and (in women of the caul) the ability to see the dead, the Benandanti would have been among the first to be investigated for witchcraft as the religious climate of Europe shifted from the traditional folk religions to the doctrines of the new Church. When the Inquisition finally penetrated their mountain villages, the Good Walkers were forced to find ways to stay clear of imprisonment and torture. Using part-conscious evasion and a part-unconscious and ingenious combination of defense mechanisms, the Good Walkers found ways to confound their interrogators long enough to walk the narrow line between opposing worldviews with a relative minimum of punishment.

Many chose to volunteer at least part of the truth: yes, they were engaged in concourse with witches, but only by fighting against them; and then on the side of the Good and Jesus Christ; also, not in the body but their spirits only engaged in the suspect activity. And in case there was any doubt, fennel stalks and sorghum sticks made it clear who was who. The strategy worked—long enough, at least, for the Inquisition to lose interest in witches. (By mid-sixteenth century the Church was moving on to genuine heretics, like Lutherans and Jews.)

In defending themselves in this real-world war between a powerful Superego (the Church) and an equally powerful Unconscious (their ancient folk beliefs), the Benandanti seem to have used an ingenious set of defense mechanisms to preserve their sanity, safety and special identity. In Ginzburg's summaries of the hundreds of testimonies taken, we can see the mind-tricks of ego-cleansing at work: introjection (taking the judgmental role of the punitive aggressor-parent, the Church, upon themselves); rationalization ("I'm engaged in activity I know is suspect but it's for a good cause"); dissociation (body from spirit); and denial ("I don't do these things, my spirit does"). Such were among the weapons of choice that confounded their interrogators, halting them, temporarily at least, from quick action and immediate punishment.

One witness, for example, grilled for particulars about the witches he fought, volunteered this interesting bit of corroborative detail. “The witches,” he said, “do reverence and pray to their masters who go about with great solemnity in black dress and with chains around their necks, and who insist on being kneeled to.” Whether or not the interrogators realized the description could just as easily have applied to the habit, rosary and beads of a priest is not recorded. And whether or not the remark was a taunt, deliberate or unconscious, it was a disarming use of displacement, the mental ploy that shifts one’s fear and anger from the real object of concern to a less threatening one—in this case, from priest-Inquisitor to “bad witch.”

The consistent use of the same defense mechanisms on such a large scale at first makes case of the Benandanti seem to us strange and bizarre. The fact is, we all use these ego-carminatives as a first defense against the pests and toxins that threaten our psyche. Ginsburg’s research is a goldmine for researchers further interested in the psychology of the Benandanti (—and what these testimonies can tell us about how the human mind reacts to the tyranny of the mind imposed by fascism and power). For our purposes here, however, it is sufficient to note that the defense mechanisms of the Benandanti seem to have kept them free, and relatively sane, in a world gone virtually mad.

Their ultimate fate also points up the fact that the ability of our ego-consciousness to keep things clean and orderly carries a price. Over time and under continual harassment, the Benandanti came to believe that they also were witches, as their respected parent-authority, the Church, insisted they had to be. To find some measure of security amid the tyranny of the Inquisition, the Benandanti did the only thing they could. They rationalized their fear and anger raised by their true enemy, a Church bent on religious homogenization, and in so doing, ultimately surrendered their identity—and more significantly, their personal connection with the unconscious.

Like the Benandanti under the influence of the Church, we too engage in over-zealous suppressions of the daemon within us in our constant efforts to appease that internal witch-hunter, the Super-ego. In so doing we find that we purge ourselves not only of our demons, but our angelic energies as well. When our carminatives become purgatives, many of us—often, in mid-life—suffer under the vague awareness that, having lived our lives letting in only those parts of reality our ego-self has permitted, we have scrubbed ourselves too clean, and cut ourselves off from the fertile fields that lie beneath the radar of consciousness. Ironically, ego-awareness comes equipped with self-blindness, a habitual “carding” of our consciousness of the full realities of the world in which we live and work and play.

The last three Signatures of fennel point to the special gifts of self-consciousness—and the inherent temptation of ego-consciousness to use them for its own ends.

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Foresight/Ingenuity

Fennel's versatility in food and medicine are physical counterparts to our own ingenuity and cleverness at survival. Lacking the physical strength of other mammals, we have inherited an expanded brain instead, and the executive powers of a prefrontal cortex. Our tool-making, our arts and crafts, our inventions and commerce are all hallmarks of our unique capacity to survive, even dominate, our world. Because of them we can devise ever new and more efficient ways of conducting the business of living.

Fennel's effects upon vision—physical eyesight as well as the inner vision of the imagination—calls to mind the special visionary nature of our species. "Prometheus" is Greek for foresight. Intimately related to ingenuity (Prometheus' other gift and strength), the gift of foresight, the ability to "see" something called a Future, is directly related to an ability to remember events and circumstances of the Past. Foresight and ingenuity are enhanced, or limited, by how well we perceive the Present through these two lenses. Here is where our greatest strength, ego-consciousness, becomes our greatest weakness. The story of Cyrene, and a giant fennel called silphion, is a classic case of the pitfalls of ego-consciousness, and the all-too-easy slide into corruption that Fennel's final three Signatures illuminate.

Self-Interest

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."— Santayana

Established by pioneers from the Greek island of Thera in 630 B.C.E., the city of Cyrene was situated off the northern coast of Africa, in Libya, on what Herodotus extolled as a "piece of land equal to any country in the world for cereal crops…not to compare for goodness of soil with either Asia or Europe." The soil was black, and water from rain and natural springs were in regular supply. Coming from seven years of drought and famine in their homeland, the settlers considered themselves blessed by the gods. As if to cap their good fortune, a strange "shower of rain the color of pitch" had soaked the ground around the city site a few years before the Greeks had landed, causing to spring up a wonderful, new, giant species of fennel—a plant so remarkable that it was said to be a gift from Apollo. The Greeks called the giant fennel, silphion, which, Herodotus noted, "grew luxuriantly and wildly in that country as an obstinate weed."

Silphion proved to be much more than a noxious weed. Also known as silphium, lasar, laserwort or lasarpicium (depending on Greek or Roman usage), silphion was apparently not only bigger but better than other fennels. It quickly became popular as a seasoning—so quickly that its overuse gave Archestratus, the poet-gourmand, occasion to warn friends not to "allow anyone to come near you when you bake sea wolf,

neither Syracusan nor Italiote, for they…make a mess of them with cheeses and sprinklings of vinegar and silphion brine."

Like other fennels it also proved useful as a medicine, but so outperformed it cousins that people began to tout its virtues, especially those of its resinous sap, as a cure for a host of ailments, from warts and baldness to frigidity and leprosy. Pliny supported its legitimate use as an antidote for poisoning and a cleansing solution for the womb after birth. If this weren't enough to make it a prized market commodity, silphion gained a reputation for being a safe abortifacient (and therefore a contraceptive) as well. The poet, Catullus, almost seems to be enticing his lover, Lesbia, with the promise of free sex through silphion:

> *You ask how many kisses of yours*
> *Are enough, Lesbia, for me and to spare,*
> *As great a number as of Libyan sands,*
> *Which lie at laser-bearing Cyrene…* (Catullus 7)

Demand for silphion escalated to craze proportions. Prices skyrocketed until only the wealthy could buy it, and they did. Cyrene became famous throughout the Mediterranean world because of its crop, and so identified with it that the city-state began to inscribe images of silphion on its currency. At least one coin, a __ drachma, marketed its contraceptive use; the coin, recovered in archaeological digs, pictures a woman in profile pointing to the plant with one hand and gesturing to her genitals with the other. By the time Roman rule began, in 67 B.C.E., silphion was literally worth its weight in silver.

There was only one problem: Silphion refused to be cultivated. The giant fennel would only grow in the 25- by 125-mile area north of the city where it had originated and steadily flourished. Cyrene's rulers had seen early on that its cash crop would need protection, and took strict measures to secure the area and insure the crop's safekeeping. Laws were put into place regulating commerce, sales and harvests, and punishing poachers, smugglers and, especially, sheepherders, whose flocks loved the tasty greens and were said to have made tasty meat themselves after grazing on the miracle weed.

For six centuries Cyrene successfully guarded its golden goose. For twenty generations the untamable fennel returned the favor and made the city among the richest and most famous throughout the Mediterranean. Yet, by the first century C.E., silphion was for all practical purposes extinct.

Pliny wrote that he knew only of a single stalk that had been obtained in his lifetime—it had recently been presented to Nero; to his knowledge, this one was the last one in existence. (A handful of modern-day expeditions have tried to find remnants of the giant fennel, but without success.) With the Roman occupation Cyrene began a slow but sure decline. By the fourth century C.E. the historian Ammianus Marcellinus described Cyrene as "a deserted and ruined city." Synesius, a prominent citizen of Cyrene who proudly traced his ancestry back to Cyrene's legendary founders, mourned the city of his birth as a "vast ruin" at the mercy of nomads.

What happened? Explanations range from poor government and natural disasters to gradual economic decline. More precise accounts blame over-harvesting, over-selling and overgrazing of the silphion crop—wholesale exploitation and abuse of the city's treasure. Taking all accounts into consideration, a familiar picture emerges: When silphion was in the hands of Cyrene's founders and their descendants, the crop was wisely stewarded as a resource upon which the city's fate and fortune depended. Under foreign occupation, however, Rome's one-year governors, indifferent to the city's future and personally invested in their own, sent tons of the crop in duty tribute to Rome and steadily pilfered from the silphion supply to fill their own personal coffers. Cyrene's founders and leaders had tended the city's resource for six centuries; it took less than a single century for imperial greed and a complicit wealthy class to deplete the supply. Opportunism, greed and self-interest had replaced foresight and ingenuity. Local investment and control became a thing of the past. And so did silphion.

Undoubtedly the greatest of fennels, silphion was in all respects a giant among resources. It is quite likely that it was even the plant Hesiod had in mind when he scripted Prometheus' theft of the Olympic fire. Like all gifts and unearned resources, however, the fate of silphion reflected the character of those who benefited from it. In the stark light of hindsight, the individual and corporate blunders that contributed to the extinction of silphion—and Cyrene—seem incredibly easy to avoid. Yet these are the very mistakes we humans seem compelled to repeat *ad nauseum*, and nearly always out of ego-centeredness and self-interest.

When self-awareness stays arrested at the level of base self-interest, when in our cleansings we conveniently forget or suppress the past, then ingenuity becomes cunning, foresight degrades to duplicity, and the awakened become stupid once again. On the other hand, when we use our awakened consciousness to look at ourselves in the full-length mirror of self-awareness, we can keep a watchful eye on both the demons and angels we find there. Under this discipline of self-honesty our gifts of foresight and ingenuity will spring forth to save us—and, for the most part, from ourselves.

Such is the paradox of fennel. Ego needs to be tempered by empathy before it can become an ally, not a child; a remedy, not a toxin; a tool, not an instrument of self-destruction. And it will require work on other paths on the Tree of Life to see, finally, the beauty of Eve's unwitting decision to become self-aware.

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