

FACING THE DIVINE MOTHER: KRISTEVA, CIXOUS, AND IRIGARAY
ON THE *UN*-COVERY OF THE *NEVER REALLY LOST* FEMININE

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*There is not a single Mary anywhere on the globe who is Joseph's wife
and nothing more.*

Lou Andreas-Salomé, "Looking Backward"

*A female god is still to come. We are not purely redeeming spirits, not
pure flesh, not a veil for the wisdom of the world, not mere mothers, not
mere devils*

Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women"

Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, as French Feminists trained in psychoanalytic theory identify western philosophy of religion, thought, and culture as masculinist. Even as they describe a certain loss of the divine feminine in the history of western thought, they are not seeking to fill in the loss with a mother substitute. Kristeva highlights aspects of Freudian and Lacanian thought in approaching a feminist re-working of some core issues related to gender in providing methodological tools, even a feminist metaphysical reworking of Lacanian psychoanalytic thought, in relation to the topic: not so much a recovery of the lost feminine, but a turn to face and mourn the *real* as "loss." Helene Cixous offers a form or style in expressing some aspects of Kristeva's theory in or as *écriture féminine* or as the laugh of the medusa. Luce Irigaray's more recent interests and writings concern not so much the theory or style of the "recovery of the lost feminine," but a model for a woman becoming divine, or in her words, "becom[ing] free, autonomous, sovereign."¹ Through Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous's discourse on an embodied divine feminine, as well as some insights from Tibetan Buddhism, I suggest a new paradigm for a feminist theology and philosophy of religion, one that has the potential not just to appease, but to truly mourn by facing the loss of the mother before articulating an embodied female divine. Such a direction for a

Adams: Divine Mother

feminist approach to religious practice and theology is able to not only react against, but to actually transform masculinist approaches to mainstream religious traditions in the west today.

Referring to some of Freud's seminal texts and theories concerning psycho-sexual development opens up a line of reasoning that calls for a reevaluation of what Freud called the "oceanic feeling" and Lacan referred to as the real. In some ways Freud and Lacan associate the time in the psychosexual development of a child when she has not yet developed a separate sense of self in terms of lack or need. Clearly, but perhaps not most primarily, they both also assert it was also a time of plenitude, fullness, bliss, and absolute lack of lack, or need. Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous consider a *transvaluation* of pre-oedipal stage, playing up on this tension, but ultimately viewing the real as a type and time of plenitude rather than as our culture has come to view it, not only as a signification of lack/need, but also as *abject*.

Through a critical and psychoanalytical approach to the topic, as well as following Irigaray's directive in seeking perspectives, teachings and practices from sources outside the western tradition, I explore insights that could enable a type of healing or mourning of what our culture may identify as the "lost Mother." I focus on the possibility of returning to the *real* as a form of the return of the mother. It is clear that Freud and Lacan, as well as most of their predecessors either, one, retain the real in obscurity and not so much experience it, but talk around it, or two, ridicule it as just another attempt to find the lost utopian motherland/space. Tibetan Buddhism offers specific teachings regarding such a return. Referencing some of the insights involved supports a reevaluation of traditional western approaches to psychology, philosophy, and religion functioning as a reversal in chiasmic form in order to suggest of a total transvaluation of western metaphysics. This is a transvaluation that does not stay within the western concept of dualism, focusing on the feminine over the masculine; it instead transcends such dualisms altogether. As the really real, or more particularly as the practically real, the feminine principle as it relates to Kristeva's use of Plato's *chora* is not the opposite of reality, or what will bring insight, clarity, wisdom, freedom, and autonomy. It is not, as Irigaray points out in her re-reading of Plato's allegory of the cave, the forgotten womb as something to be left behind when entering into the "real" world of Ideal form. Nor is it some underlying indefinable, chaotic, mess of subjectless existence one may also leave behind before entering the world of the imaginary and the symbolic order.

Exploring the pre-oedipal stage as the really real in its relation to feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism provides the impetus for a flip of conventional notions concerning western metaphysics upside down and around. Tibetan Buddhist teachings and practices point in a direction of understanding the real not in some obscure indefinable way, but through opening to the awareness of the feminine principle as emptiness and space, seeing all things as they really are, before the move first into the imaginary, with a separate sense of self, and then into the symbolic world of language. If the ground of being were reversed, then conceptual language would be as Plato's evaluation of art in the Republic, three times removed from reality. Such a transvaluation or reversal functions in not only offering a much needed critique on

Adams: Divine Mother

western religion and theology, but also in offering a recovery of the feminine divine in a manner able to transform western theology, philosophy of religion, and culture.

***FORT!*: “Are You My Mother?”**

‘Where is my mother,’ he said. ‘I do not see her anywhere. I will go and look for her’, . . . “I have a mother,’ said the baby bird. ‘I will find her, I will I will . . .’

Dr. Seuss

In her book *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* Feminist philosopher Grace Jantzen notes how throughout the history of western philosophy of religion and theology, God is male. Following Irigaray’s text “Divine Woman,” Jantzen points out that when women in western religious traditions seek to “become divine” they have no maternal model to emulate. Certainly western religious thought has helped form as well as continues to influence the western psyche and culture. Throughout the history of western theology and philosophy there has not been a Mother God for women to identify with and/or emulate, nor for a man to accept and integrate into his sense of divinity/perfection. There is no image or iconic representation of the divine mother, nor as I will explore below is there a recognition of the maternal presence as it is associated with the most “primal” experience in human life, that is of when the child has no sense of separation from the mother in the early months of infancy. For, as I will demonstrate, the two are related.

In order to explore such a “lack,” in either representations of, or acknowledgement of, a Mother God in western theology, philosophy of religion, and culture French psychoanalyst scholars such as Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray offer the insights that western religion arises not from the Oedipal Complex or fear of the father, but of the loss of the mother, or rather never really dealing with the fear of the loss of the mother. Diane Jonte-Pace argues for a counter-thesis to Freud’s “master thesis,” as “Oedipal paradigm, characterized by death wishes for fathers and by erotic desires for mothers.”² Instead of associating death with the father, Jonte-Pace suggests a counter-thesis that associates death with the mother. Jonte-Pace asserts:

. . . God, mothers, mortality, and immortality appear as interlocking topics, which Freud was unable to confine within a narrative of father-murder and mother-love. Often interruptive and subversive, this counter-thesis haunts Freud’s psychology of religion, as if to challenge the dominance of the Oedipal paradigm.³

Certain of Jonte-Pace’s directives help illuminate Freud’s writings, as they are suggestive of a slight variation of a famous feminist dictum “the personal is political” into “the personal is *cultural*.” His viewpoint reflects not only his personal biography, but he is also a product, as well as a producer, of western culture. I return to Freud’s last and perhaps most perplexing text, *Moses and Monotheism* in order to provide a fresh reading of some core issues of the text read through the lens of Jonte-Pace’s “counter thesis.” I do so in order to explore some hidden territory providing insight into

Adams: Divine Mother

how a strictly Freudian psychoanalysis could not only obscure, but also help bring insight into the loss of the mother in western theology and philosophy of religion.

Reading *Moses and Monotheism* through what Diane Jonte-Pace identifies as a counter-thesis associating death with the mother to Freud's "master thesis" associating death with the father, opens a view on Freud's work and thinking as a man representative of his time and culture. I offer a commentary on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* that supports my argument that he functions as representative of western thinking during his own time as well as today in not being able to face and accept the loss of the divine mother in the history of Judaism and likewise in the history of western thought/life in general.

In *Moses and Monotheism* Freud raises two issues in the text he viewed as controversial: 1) Moses was an Egyptian; 2) Moses was killed by his followers. As he found there were parapraxis or signs/symptoms of a pathology or trauma evident in the Hebrew Bible, that of a murder, Freud made an attempt to find the origin of the loss/trauma through his master thesis, the oedipal paradigm. In so doing, Freud indicated "two distinct forces, diametrically opposed to each other" that "have left their traces on [the text], falsifying the text in accord with secret tendencies, maiming and extending it until it was turned into its opposite." He speaks of one force extending to the place of the other, functioning as "an indulgent piety reign[ing] over it, anxious to keep everything as it stood, indifferent to whether the details fitted together or nullified one another." He then describes evidence of the conflicting forces in the Biblical text itself: ". . . Almost everywhere there can be found striking omissions, disturbing repetition, palpable contradictions, signs of things the communication of which was never intended." He interprets such textual parapraxis and other forms of textual deviance and divergence as follows: "The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder. The difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed but in the doing away with the traces."⁴

Freud's chosen narrative to provide context for the trauma was the murder of the father, he reasons from the oedipal paradigm based on "totemic religion" where brothers gathered to kill their father. According to this, his master thesis, one would assume the logic and derivation of second point above, that Moses' followers killed him, but the first, that Moses was an Egyptian does not seem to fit in so well within the context of the oedipal paradigm. Why would Moses as father of the Jews not really be a Jew but an Egyptian, a member of a people Egyptologist Jan Assmann describes in the western historical imagination as: "rejected, discarded, and abandoned,"⁵ or, in other words, what is associated with the pre-historical maternal realm. Clearly Egypt, in its role as the cradle of civilization represented pre-history, or the pre-oedipal realm, for Freud; this is a civilization that, as Assmann points out, was, considered according to Kristeva's terminology, *abject*.

Furthermore, Kristeva's notions of the symbolic and semiotic, may be particularly significant to note in Freud's reference to Egyptians "pictorial" language as being more primitive. He refers to the possibility that the Hebrew scribes were the first to create a written alphabet. According to a type of Freudian recapitulation, the early scribes functioned as the name of the father or law of the father, initiating language in written form in order to provide entryway into the realm of the symbolic. Freud refers to the

Adams: Divine Mother

suggestion “that early Israelites, the scribes of Moses, had a hand in the invention of the first alphabet,” he then comments: “If [the Hebrew scribes] were bound by the prohibition against making images they had even a motive for forsaking the hieroglyphic picture writing when they adapted their written signs for the expression of a new language.”⁶ Such a comment would support an argument for the scientifically questionable notion of recapitulation, that of identifying the Egyptians as associated to the maternal realm, and perhaps in their use of image as language into what Kristeva may identify as the semiotic. In any event, such a description relates it to what Kristeva would associate with the mother, the maternal realm, or more generally with the abject.

Even though it may have seemed obvious that the real loss/murder was not of the father God, but of the divine feminine or mother God, Freud did not acknowledge it. Instead his only recourse to explain the troubling narrative symptomatic of trauma was, again, to use his seeming obsession with the oedipal complex he explores in his *Totem and Taboo* to devise a rather convoluted plot that included the death of Moses, the father, by his followers, the sons. Where Freud came up with a rather convoluted narrative plot to explain away the pathological anomalies in the text indicating trauma, or signs of guilt in finding evidence of masking or attempting to cover over a crime, again, I suggest that the true murder was that of the divine mother.

Freud was haunted by the topic of his book; just as he found evidence in the Biblical text of a trauma, a murder, so too does there seem to be a general consensus in secondary texts on *Moses and Monotheism* that it also contained distortions: “The text of *Moses and Monotheism* seems to reflect the difficulties Freud experienced while composing it. It is riddled with apologies, hesitations, repetitions.”⁷ Where Freud appeared to have struggled composing the text, authors of commentary on the text likewise express a type of troubling haunting concerning the topic. Richard J. Bernstein notes his own as well as Jan Assmann’s experience of angst in their writing their respective books on Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*: “Assmann tells us that once he started writing his book, he could not set it aside to work on other projects until he had completed his final draft. He speaks of the Moses discourse as having a life of its own. I too have experience this compelling power.”⁸

Freud’s notion of the uncanny may apply to such a troubling haunting of angst. In utilizing a type of counter thesis to Freud’s master thesis in reading *Moses and Monotheism*, then it would be certain to evoke a sense of the uncanny, where what should have been covered over, or repressed has become manifest, as Freud refers to “Schiller’s definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden, but has come to light.”⁹

A further exploration of a counter-thesis reading of *Moses and Monotheism* may help to bring to light some aspect of a western perspective on the beginnings of Monotheism. For, the Hebrew Tradition brought with it the notion of monotheism: one male Father God. Through what Assmann may identify as ‘normative inversion,’ when that which comes before is “rejected, discarded, and abandoned” concerning his reference to how the Greeks and Hebrews dis-regarded Egypt, certainly there appears to be a disparaging of Egyptian culture. The process of normative inversion indicates that when something comes into being, it must necessarily wipe out what came before.

Adams: Divine Mother

According to this paradigm then, Freud would assumably regard Egypt as inferior in its association with the maternal realm. Yet, he exhibits a type of chiasmic structure through his claim that Moses was not Jewish, but Egyptian. He was not of lowly birth, adopted into Egyptian royalty able to lead his own people, but he was of a “higher caste” birth, someone high-born who chooses to turn around and lead a lowly people. It becomes evident that Freud, writing in the early twentieth century in Europe, offers an additional flip: Moses was not of Jewish birth, one of the chosen people who reigns over what had come before, as per-verbal/pre-oedipal, but instead he was Egyptian and rose from the maternal realm become abject to turn around and chose to lead the supposed civilized European Jewry. Freud’s “unconscious” haunting of such an anomalous narrative may be indicative of something with potentially greater significance. It is this significance of what plagued Freud and others regarding the topic, as well as the importance of a reversal in chiasmic structure, that I suggest the French feminist psychoanalytic theorist, with some help from one eastern tradition, may ultimately uncover.

DA!: Finding the Lost Feminine

Another of Freud’s texts helps to illuminate some aspect of an attempt at the repression of a divine feminine presence. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud refers to a letter by Romain Rolland describing what Rolland identified as the “true source of religious sentiments,” the “oceanic feeling” that is a “feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, ‘oceanic.’” Freud identified the oceanic feeling with an earlier phase of ego development when “an infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him.”¹⁰ During this time in a child’s development there is no sense of separation from the world around, as Freud declares: “. . . Originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive--indeed, an all-embracing--feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it.”¹¹

Even as Freud and later Lacan reasons that earlier phases of ego development may reside in a human mind, he does not seem able to allow for the “oceanic feeling” to be a true impetus for religious feeling. Here again, he turns to his master-thesis in identifying the human tendency to be religious as it only relates to a need for God the father and for his protection. Even as Freud was able to assign the “oceanic feeling,” which he admits may exist in many people, with what can be traced back to an early phase of ego-feeling, he is unable to associate this oceanic feeling, as it is correlated with the mother/creator, with “true” religious sentiment.

In trying to fit all experience, including, it appears, some aspect of the oceanic feeling clearly related to the infant’s time with her mother into his master thesis, Freud writes: “The derivation of religious needs from the infant’s helplessness and the longing for the father aroused by it seems to me incontrovertible, especially since the feeling is not simply prolonged from childhood days, but is permanently sustained by fear of the superior power of Fate.” Here Freud seems to connect an infant’s oceanic state in terms not of bliss, plentitude, or enjoyable feelings, but instead as the “need” for as well as fear

Adams: Divine Mother

of the father: "I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection." He then concludes: "Thus the part played by the oceanic feeling, which might seek something like the restoration of limitless narcissism, is ousted from a place in the foreground."

Earlier in the text Freud made it clear in relation to his comparison of the human ego development with the evolution of the city Rome, that "the same space cannot have two different contents."¹² Just as Freud was attempting to indicate, as in a form of recapitulation, an earlier phase in the history of western Jewry was not lost, but always remained as a residue or as traces like those left on a "mystic writing pad," he did not appear able to note an obvious contradiction: that Judaism could not inhabit the same space as the earlier, pictorial, pre-historical Egyptian culture. He here too exhibits an inability to face the lost, but not really lost, presence of the Mother or maternal realm in terms associated with God. He indicates as much when he suggests his thought processes have led him down a blind alley: "The origin of the religious attitude can be traced back in clear outlines as far as the feeling of infantile helplessness. There may be something further behind that, but for the present it is wrapped in obscurity."¹³ If there ever were a gap in a text, a lacunae indicating there is something missing, it may be in his words "wrapped in obscurity"; here he demonstrates his inability to explore the oceanic feeling as a time/space of significance in relation to the mother, particularly as divine creator.

Additionally it is worth noting that Freud twice states in the text how even though the oceanic feeling may be traceable to earlier phases of ego development, he is certain that this structure cannot be formulated pictorially: "The fact remains that only in the mind is . . . a preservation of all the earlier stages alongside of the final form possible and that we are not in a position to represent this phenomenon in pictorial terms."¹⁴ Freud shows his penchant for viewing psychoanalytic theory as a science in his inability to delve into the realm of what Kristeva would associate with the maternal realm. It, like the semiotic, is not associated with written language, but more with poetic/image-laden language. Even as Freud is referring to a specific issue in this case, more generally scientific analysis, culture, civilization, or in Lacanian terms the symbolic or Name of the father, is associated with verbal language, not images/pictures.

In turning to formulate a return of the divine mother through the works of some French psychoanalysis, I begin by referring to the well-known account in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In it Freud describes a game his grandson Ernst plays when the child's mother is gone for a short period of time. The game involves picking up an object and throwing it out of sight and saying the word "fort," the German word for forth or away. The child then searches to find the lost toy and says "da," the German word for there. Freud is able to identify this game as bringing solace to the young child, who appears to experience anxiety with the loss of his mother. The child repeats the game over and over. Certainly this repetitive compulsive type of behavior functions as a form of melancholy, or as a desperate longing to fill a void rather than directly facing the loss/emptiness, to mourn it in order to fully heal from the loss/trauma.

Many if not most attempts to "retrieve" the lost divine feminine or mother in western religion and culture have remained at the level of mother substitute, not

Adams: Divine Mother

allowing for the western psyche to face the loss, the lack of the divine feminine in western theology and culture, as that which is without the masculine cultural representation of the phallus. They instead function as Alfred North Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness, or as in the *Lankavatara Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism indicates, it is as those who are not able to go beyond words or theories mistaking their fingertip for what they are pointing at.¹⁵ In facing the real, I argue we may face what can be called the divine mother. The process is not so much a return, or recovery, a remembering, but an acknowledgement of the emptiness at the core of our being as it may lead to absolute plentitude. In assuming there was some object one may use to fill in for the lack/loss of the at-one-ment with the mother, one becomes distracted in repeatedly attempting to find what was lost to recover a sense of wholeness. As in Freud's reference to little Ernst's game of fort/da, or even as Lacan's notion of the *objet petit a*, it works as just another attempt to turn outward and try to fill the gap with an other, an object.

I do not find attempts to return the lost Goddess helpful in any way other than to provide a distraction; in fact I would identify them as functioning to support the status quo of patriarchal religion and society, for they focus on conceptual knowledge and language rather than a sense of vastness/emptiness or infinite potentiality. In my estimation there can be two ways the Divine Feminine may come to the fore in western theological traditions: 1) as a mother substitute, or *objet a* function, as in the fort/da game where there is an attempt to conceptualize a mother figure to replace the gaping loss/lack with some replica of the original maternal force, or as Jantzen would describe it, "God in a skirt"¹⁶; 2) as what Helene Cixous might refer to as a laughing Medusa, or Luce Irigaray would define as a woman becoming divine as she may arise to divinity in her own right. In the first of these approaches we find many attempts to reclaim, or remember the lost mother in western culture by turning to pre-historical, "Goddess culture."¹⁷ The second turns to explore what Freud was not able to do in his seminal texts. Julia Kristeva's reference to the semiotic *chora* will provide a bridge of sorts between western psychoanalytical as well as metaphysical perspectives and Luce Irigaray's recent directive to turn to the east to find wisdom concerning the return of the divine feminine; for, Irigaray utilizes eastern perspectives and traditions not just to study, but to practice in a manner that may enable women themselves, not just to study about the divine feminine, but to become it.

In reference to the first manner of return of the mother in western theology and philosophy of religion, I suggest efforts to replace the lost mother do little more than cover over the true loss of the divine feminine with a decoy of the security of a comfortable mother substitute. Rather than deal with the profundity of the original loss, these traditions instead use beautiful and loving images of an all-good, benign and accepting mother as a substitute object for not facing the true loss/trauma of the originary mother object. I argue that such attempts at retrieving a lost mother God do not provide an experience of mourning in a Freudian sense; I argue that through banal and superficial replications of a lost and idealized mother image they instead evoke a Freudian experience of melancholy.

Adams: Divine Mother

In order to construct a philosophy of religion that functions as the second approach defined above, as a form of mourning versus melancholy, I return to acknowledging the early states of childhood development associated with Freud's "oceanic feeling," the maternal realm, or the semiotic *chora* as fundamental in the development of self. Kristeva identifies the western tradition as associating anything related to the pre-linguistic maternal realm as necessarily evoking a sense of the *abject*; anything associated with the "mother" must become cut off, or gotten rid of in the formation both of an individual psyche/subject, as well as in a cultural sense in the formation of society. Rather than treating the pre-ego maternal realm as the ordinary state of being, western culture as I have explored through an evaluation of some of Freud's writings, seems to have erased this time as not only abject, but also lost or forgotten altogether. Inherent in this perspective is the notion that what we have lost in western civilization is a presence of the mother, including, in western theology, the divine mother.

As noted above, from a masculinist perspective, what was lost or died, what was cut off, should naturally not have any voice or power. Hence when the female speaks, as subject, it produces a feeling of Freud's uncanny – it is an odd feeling of dis-ease as when, as Freud noted in a famous passage from his piece the "Uncanny," something one thinks is dead speaks, when "something repressed . . . recurs."¹⁸ Inherent in this perspective is the notion that we have lost, in western civilization, a sense of the beginning before the 'Beginning' associated with the maternal realm, or what is before or beyond the Phallus as structuring principle of the symbolic order or language.

Freud's two-page psychoanalytical critique of the Greek myth "Medusa's Head" further reflects as well as helps shape the assumed masculinist approach to the mother in relation to the Uncanny. Due to the castration complex, one (who is male) is simply not able to look directly, or to "face" the lack (of a phallus, or the cultural representation of a masculinist culture). Freud's discusses the uncanny in a manner that relates to Medusa's Head:

There is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. . . . In this case, . . . the unheimlich is what was once heimlich, familiar; the prefix 'un' is the token of repression."¹⁹

Freud indicates a most deeply imbedded terror of looking at the female body as represented in iconic fashion lacking a phallus. He simply could not face this loss directly and again in many ways his brilliance as a thinker, "scientist," and certainly writer was in his ability to write texts that appear to function as *mythopoetic* for contrary thought, or according to his commentary on Medusa's Head, as a speculum or mirror to use to veil direct perception.

Freud clearly articulated such archetypal imagery in the Greek myth in terms that evoked horror. Cixous plays on Freud's influential short reflection on the Greek myth Medusa. In her "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous does not simply describe another mother substitute to fill in for the silenced voice; instead when her Medusa laughs, she

Adams: Divine Mother

overflows with a type of feminist articulation of “woman as speaking subject” as *écriture féminine*, as jouissance.

Certainly notions of the divine feminine related to the maternal realm of the *chora*, in addition to Kristeva’s notions of semiotics join well with Cixous’s “Laugh of the Medusa” in articulating a lost feminine, but one that functions not as a mother substitute, or as a doll/toy that Freud would describe his grandson Ernst playing in the “fort/da” game. I claim it instead represents a mournful and healing return of the lost mother, one not reduced to idealized notions of a lost feminine/feminist utopia, but a realistic representation of empowerment and autonomy for women seeking for an ideal to emulate when Irigaray writes about “becoming divine.”

In order to seek a better understanding, or perhaps the “essential” nature of the divine feminine in the manner Freud was seeking the “essential” nature of being Jewish in his *Moses and Monotheism*, turning to a reference in the western canon, Plato’s *Timaeus*, Kristeva is able to draw out “earlier stages in ego development” of the western psyche, and not allow the masculinist master-thesis as oedipal paradigm to oust it “from a place in the foreground.” Kristeva acknowledges the early states of childhood development associated with the material realm, or Platonic *chora* as fundamental in the development of self. Kristeva begins to articulate the Real in this way, to provide some reference in western thought, to Plato no doubt, in showing some sign of the real as associate with feminine divinity: the *chora* is the “space” out of which everything arises. It is the foundation or “rock” of being. It is also, as Plato noted, and Freud later asserted in associating female genitalia with the word *Heim*, wrapped in obscurity. Even as such, rather than leaving it in obscuring as Freud did in *Civilizations and its Discontents*, or in a more analytical fashion on his commentary on Medusa’s Head, Kristeva turns to face it.

Referring to Plato’s *Timaeus*, Kristeva utilizes the *chora* as the receptacle of becoming. There is a notion here of a space that is not empty, but teeming with wild energy. The *chora* may be useful in articulating the return of the divine mother as laughing medusa vs. substitute mother; for the *chora* cannot be reduced to concept language.

Maria Margaroni notes the proclivity in Western metaphysics as well as contemporary engagements with the metaphysical tradition in postmodern continental philosophy to question Kristeva’s concern with the origins of language and subject. Margaroni indicates that for Kristeva the *chora*’s function “is to displace the speaking subject, retracing its emergence not only ‘before’ logos but also, in returning it to the maternal body, beyond the Phallus as the structuring principle of the symbolic order.”²⁰ In considering such a move, one may critique Kristeva’s use of the *chora* as just an attempt at seeking an object to fill in the gap of the unceasing sense of lack we see demonstrated in finding a replacement of the lost mother, by returning to her in the *form* of *chora*. Margaroni argues against some of Kristeva’s critics that the *chora* may offer some “utopian promise . . . [as] an escape from logos, culture, and history.”²¹ The *chora* does not, for Kristeva represent a position, but rather, as Margaroni notes “it resists any theoretical reification – even as a fugitive pre-originary origin. The *chora* is in fact as Freud asserts, the oceanic feeling; it is not something to recover or remember; it cannot, therefore be reduced to what some critics call the “quasi-mystical realm.”²²

Adams: Divine Mother

Margaroni brings up a narrative point in the *Timaeus* that addresses the notion of *chora* as “space” in relation to Freud’s assertion that “the same space cannot have two different contents,” a point representative of western thinking for both the Greeks and the Hebrews, as well as in terms of Freud’s questionable notion of the “evolution” through recapitulation from the Egyptians and the Greeks and Hebrews. Margaroni makes the following comment concerning a “narrative that Critias shares . . . in the opening of the dialogue”: “Critias tells us of how the archaic history of Athens came to the Greeks through Salon’s encounter with an Egyptian priest. Critias recalls the priest’s reprimand to the Greeks for ‘remaining children’ in their tendency to erase what has preceded them, the very scene of their production. It is precisely this forgetting, it seems that has allowed the Greeks to posit themselves at the site of logos.”²³ Margaroni likewise situates Kristeva’s reference to and use of the *chora* temporally, as “the beginning before ‘the Beginning,’ the mobile origin ‘before the imposition of ‘the Word’,” as it correlates also with Slavov Zizek reference to the “the beginning of beginnings.” I argue this would only continue the dialectical back and forth of Freud’s fort/da game; it offers nothing more from what I can see than another form of repetition compulsion. It does not, in other words help to first face the erasure in order to mourn the loss. Further, it encourages a type of repetition of the endeavor to return to the origins that post-modern continental thought disparages as encouraging more of a philosophy of the same.

What I suggest instead is recognizing a point Margaroni makes concerning the *chora*; it addresses “the means for what, in the context of the Western logocentric tradition has repeatedly been given the status of nothing.” She continues: “The task of psychoanalysis, according to [Kristeva], is to return to this nothing, exposing it as the ‘underlying’ but forgotten ‘causality’ of language and the subject.”²⁴ It is this nothing, or that which has been identified as nothing that is in fact not nothing, but filled with fecundity and possibility. Although some may claim that the *chora*, even in Kristeva’s use of it, is always contained within language, or the symbolic, clearly one must acknowledge that the subject was not created *ex nihilo*, but instead was formulated out of a womb, as that out of which the symbolic order arises.

Plato attunes his description of *chora* as receptacle and as space. The word space implies nothingness. Although Kristeva utilized Plato’s *Timaeus* in her attempt to go back before the beginning, to seek an origin, I find Irigaray’s more recent work turning to eastern spiritual and philosophical traditions to explore alternative metaphysics in a manner that may involve not just theorizing about what the divine mother may be for the west, but to actually embody it, to live it. She not only walks up to the gate of divine love, but she enters the promised land. Undergirding the direction she takes, that of working with spiritual teachers from the “east,” not following academic protocol in her study of Indian Tantra and Buddhist teachings, and not focusing on text and historical traditions, is a notion of true autonomy. There is a distinction to make concerning her “break,” not just as in “anything goes,” but as in a manner of revolution, breaking free as Nietzsche describes in his three metamorphosis; she says no like a lion, but only after being like a camel, learning the traditions of her time as well as the conventional modes of study and academics. The question to ponder in relation to our present concerns,

Adams: Divine Mother

however, is how she may finally embody Nietzsche's third metamorphosis, that of being like a child, living fully and freely in the present.

Facing East: Recognition of the Never *Really* Lost Mother

And why not interpret one face of the Other, the god face, as based on feminine jouissance?

Jacques Lacan, *Book XX*

*The goddess with an empty form, not anything at all,
And the great bliss, clear radiance that appears as anything,
The magical illusions that maybe are and maybe aren't—
In just these themselves, there is something to understand.*

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, "A Symphony of Great Bliss"

Following Irigaray's lead in turning to philosophy outside of the western tradition, there are teachings in certain lineages of Tibetan Buddhism that explore what is at issue in Plato's *chora*, Lacan's real, or Kristeva's maternal realm. Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche played an important role in bringing the esoteric Vajrayana Buddhism to the west. Tibetan Buddhist teachings on the feminine principle provide words for, as well as expand upon not only what the *chora* as maternal realm may be, but more importantly how it is actually the ground of being.

The feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism is related to the experience of "emptiness." Emptiness refers to a vast space of potentiality. Certain meditative practices allow for a recognition not so much of new concepts, plans, theories, formulas, narratives, but rather for a recognition of the gaps in thought, or space. Such spaciousness, which may seem like a void to the western mind, is actually the fertile, fecund, and vast womb out of which we are all born. In many ways, therefore, it represents the divine mother, offering a type of access to what is missing in western thought/theology, that of the presence of this vast womb-like emptiness of the maternal realm.

The masculine principle in Tibetan Buddhism relates with the movement out of the vast expanse of originary, primordial emptiness out of which all thoughts, feelings, and beings arise. Meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche describes the result of focusing on the masculine principle over the feminine principle as "knowing the all while blocked in one." Opening up to the feminine principle he describes as "knowing the one while freed from all."²⁵ I would associate the masculine principle as movement outward not with Freud's notion of libido or Eros as some may ascribe, but instead with Thanatos, or the death drive; for it is this impulse that reaches outward, not in giving, but in order to find a sense of being/fulfillment within. As noted above, the problem in a western perspective is that, as it is associated with the masculine principle it supports a form of repetition compulsion in striving outward in order to find some sense of peace,

Adams: Divine Mother

without recognizing any existence prior to, in both the ontological as well as the chronological sense, thought/feeling/being.²⁶

In an effort to remedy the masculine principle in forever seeking fulfillment from without, I refer to Buddhist scholar Reginald Ray's description of the Heart Sutra, the main *Prajñāpāramitā* or Great Mother Sutra of Indian Mahayana which dates from the second century B.C.E., in terms that help expand upon the experiential transition that takes place when a practitioner has a direct perception of the feminine principle as the inherent "empty" nature of reality. The Heart Sutra includes the seemingly redundant and Kōan like notion that form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form. Through the experiential awareness of this realization, one may, as Ray depicts, come to a face-to-face encounter with truth. He describes two approaches to reality in the following manner:

Ordinary people live on the level of relative truth where 'form'—as a metaphor for what we normally experience—is taken as self-evident and real. When one sees, however, that form is in fact empty of any characteristic of 'form,' that its essential nature is emptiness, then one has come face to face with ultimate truth, the truth of emptiness.²⁷

To have grappled with the Heart Sutra, and understood the inherent empty nature of reality allows for a face-to-face encounter with emptiness as ultimate truth.

Emptiness as truth, although perhaps quite difficult for a western mind to contemplate, offers one avenue toward approaching the great Mother, or that vast womb out of which everything arises. A westerner assuming that emptiness not as a vast womb of potentiality, but as nothingness may, from a psychoanalytic perspective, likewise associate the "maternal realm" with nothingness, abject, lost, forgotten, or dead. Instead we find in these Buddhist reflections of the feminine principle that that which seems to be nothingness is in fact a potent and powerful primordial vast fecundity of possibility. As everything exists in it, it is always present in all being.

Tibetan Buddhism does not dismiss the primordial maternal realm, on either a cosmological or individual level. On a cosmological level it is in fact the primordial "emptiness" out of which the all reality arises. Anne Klein writes of Buddhist cosmology in the following manner:

In Buddhist traditions . . . the womb that is an 'expanse of reality' is a ubiquitous matrix, participating in and pervading all that is born from it. It is never left behind—as is the maternal womb of contemporary description. In contrast, most Jewish and Christian traditions understand God to have created the world *ex nihilo*, that is, from a nothing that, like the maternal womb, is left behind. In Buddhist understanding, there is no dead space left behind when existence manifests. The womb of the expanse is an ever replenished resource, and the wish to renew association with it is not regarded as regressive but potentiating.²⁸

According to Tibetan Buddhism, the world was not created out of nothingness. It was created out of the all. Tibetan Buddhist cosmology can inform a feminist theology

Adams: Divine Mother

suggesting that the time prior to being, or pre-ego, is not abject at all, but is the fertile “emptiness” out of which all being arises. It is emptiness as vast womb or home, not as nothingness or void.²⁹

Judith Simmer-Brown writes of the Great Mother, or “the feminine principle as mother” in Tibetan Buddhism as it “was drawn from . . . the *Prajñāpāramitā* –sutras.” Simmer-Brown describes *Prajñāpāramitā* as ‘penetrating insight’ (*prajna*) that is perfected or has ‘gone beyond’ (*paramita*) which means that it has transcended concept, expectation, or conventionality of any kind.³⁰ It is associated with “emptiness, “not [as] an object of knowledge—since it is not a thing— *Prajñāpāramitā* is associated with the dynamic way in which one directly realizes the unborn nature of phenomena.”³¹ Simmer-Brown continues:

Prajñāpāramitā is the symbolic mother of all those who realize this nature; that is, this insight is the beginning of the practitioner’s uncovering of awakened nature. Finding no inherent essence in phenomena awakens non-dual wisdom in the practitioner, and this is the seed of buddhahood. For this reason, ‘prajna which has gone beyond,’ or *Prajñāpāramitā*, is an experiential discovery that becomes at that moment the mother of All Buddhas.³²

Accordingly, it would make sense that Simmer-Brown describes references to Great Mother as *aniconic*, or that which cannot be represented in physical form. It cannot be presented for worship in any type of form or image. Inasmuch, as that is also, it may be helpful to utilize a certain aniconic representation of *Prajñāpāramitā* in order to suggest some type of archetypal pattern or paradigm that may help enable human experience of the divine. What arises through the experience is not through human reason or cognition, as through a “re-discovery” of the great Goddess, but instead a recognition of a reality that is the ontological as well as chronological origin of humanity.

Buddhist scholar Andrew Holecek addresses the sublime origin as mother. He writes in his chapter “Hardship as the Loss of the Feminine” of the Great Mother in image filled language:

The saving grace is that no matter how far the child seems to get away from the lap of the mother, from emptiness, it is impossible to actually leave her. You can't actually leave the mother, . . . It is the aggressive gesture of moving away, of looking out, that creates the illusion of duality.³³

Holecek refers to accessing the Great Mother through recognizing the divinity within. Holecek writes about the outward gaze through the incessant efforts or actions, there arises a sense of dualism. There arises a tension between within and without. If one is attempting to be a good woman, one must not realize one’s inherent goodness already. If one is attempting to be a divine women, one must not realize one’s inherent divinity already. Holecek describes how one may overcome the dualism by turning inward:

Adams: Divine Mother

You have run away from home so long ago that it feels like the return is hopeless. But you only have to stop. Stop dead in your tracks and take a look within. Stop looking out, turn your gaze back in, and you will discover that which you truly seek. No matter how far off you seem to be, the mother of emptiness is always holding you. You are sitting in her lap right now.³⁴

Rather than looking outward, through the recognition of “emptiness” one turns inward to the source of all phenomena, to the “unborn quality of basic space,” free, as Simmer-Brown describes it “of any dualities, conceptualities, or notions of existence or nonexistence altogether.” It is the ultimate absolute divine; it is “indestructible and primordial.”³⁵

Through insights from Tibetan Buddhism, feminist western philosophy can find the vocabulary to speak its truth. I offer a look at some Tibetan Buddhist texts not so much to find “role models” for divine empowerment, for this too would be another attempt to “reach outward.” What I offer instead are insights in Tibetan Buddhism that could help uncover the power of “emptiness” as the feminine principle. *Prajñāpāramitā* as Great Mother is the origin.

The attempt to recover the lost feminine divine may not be in seeking Goddess imagery as a new role model to live by. For this to repeat, would provide another beautiful model of becoming divine. Instead through having a face-to-face encounter with emptiness as the ultimate truth a sublime woman may become divine, and then speak her mind. Emptiness, as it relates to the feminine principle, also relates to acknowledging, and in some way, creating space, Buddhist teachings help validate Irigaray’s notion that humans have divinity within; one need only recognize it. It is always already there; it was never lost.

Being Divine: Entering the Cave as Promised Land

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche writes of the Vajrayana formulation of space and how to become aware of its existence, for, as referred to above, the western mind is conditioned to view the ground, space, air, the sky, and as a corollary the maternal ground as womb, as nothing, or as abject. In understanding, one must open to face emptiness. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche describes a type of meditation on shunyata as emptiness:

Shunyata can be explained in a very simple way. When we perceive, we usually attend to the delimited forms of objects. But these objects are perceived within a field. Attention can be directed either to the concrete, limited forms or to the field in which these forms are situated. In the shunyata experience, the attention is on the field rather than on its contents. By ‘content,’ we mean here those forms which are the outstanding features of the field itself. We also might notice that when we have an idea before our mind, the territory, as it were, delimited by the idea is blurred; it fades into something which is quite open. This open dimension is the basic meaning of shunyata.

Adams: Divine Mother

This openness is present in and actually presupposed by every determinate form. Every determinate entity evolves out of something indeterminate and to a certain extent also maintains its connection with this indeterminacy; it is never completely isolated from it.

In uncovering the ground of being as emptiness, western metaphysics is flipped on its head. Likewise, Margaroni points out, the maternal realm, in the “logocentric tradition, has repeatedly been given the status of *nothing*.” She notes that for Kristeva the “task of psychoanalysis . . . is to return to this nothing, exposing it as ‘the underlying but forgotten ‘causality’ of language and the subject.’”

Judith Simmer-Brown focuses on Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s teachings referring to the power of the recognition of a potent underground, this fecund space related to the feminine principle:

Space is very powerful, for it cannot be manipulated, moved or shaped. Every situation is affected by space, and even the most elaborate structures, administrations, and bureaucracies are built on nothing. Sunyata [emptiness] in its Vajrayana formulation as space has the power to undermine ambitions and delusions of grandeur.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche describes it as ‘the black market of the mother, a

spiritual atomic bomb that’s been manufactured in the basement. . . . [It] is not so much . . . a resigned passive thing – but it is unable to be controlled by any efficient organization of anything. The overlay of reality is unable to detect the underlayer of reality anymore. The surface may go quite nonchalantly, it usually does, but the undercurrent is extraordinarily powerful. It begins to manufacture a world of its own, in the feminine principle of potentiality, embryonic and resourceful and glamorous at the same time.

Such is the status of a radical transvaluation of reality. This is the place, so to speak, of the land of the free; the “cave” as Irigaray points out, the womb from which all things are born, offering not just a transvaluation or reversal still stuck in dualisms such as nature/culture, matter/spirit, feminine/masculine, Goddess/God, but a true chiasmic reversal. Irigaray describes the story of the case as such:

the story goes, men . . . are living in one, same, place. A place shaped like a cave or a womb.

*Turned Upside-down and Back-to-front.*³⁶

What we have is a tradition that is consciously aware of such a reality that most western metaphysics views as nothing. This is the return of the Mother, the great mother *Prajñāpāramitā*. There is much potential in teachings and practices in Tibetan Buddhism that relate to Irigaray’s exploration into eastern teachings and practice, articulating not a sense of dualism, but a woman being divine in returning home only to realize that she has never left.

Adams: Divine Mother

Perhaps through some Buddhist teachings and practice, the very potent, powerful, fecund, realization in contemplating the Heart Sutra, that “form is nothing other than emptiness and emptiness is nothing other than form” may provide an opening toward not just becoming divine through the perfection of actions, but also through cultivating a contemplative awareness of the feminine principle. Again, the attempt to recover the lost feminine divine may not be in seeking Goddess imagery as a new role model to live by. For, this would provide another model for becoming divine. Instead through having a face-to-face encounter with emptiness as the ultimate truth a sublime woman may become divine, “mourn” the loss of some hope for a mother substitute, and then speak coming from the place of emptiness as it relates to the feminine principle.

For the divine woman to laugh, for a woman to adhere to her own sense of energy not according to the masculinist zero-sum formulation of libidinal economy, but from the black market of the mother, and not be excluded from academic discourse, there must be a transvaluation of western metaphysics that has gone beyond or rather slides underneath contemporary continental post-modern thought. In a return to the reference to chiasmus regarding Freud’s seeming compulsion, in however masked or even unacknowledged a fashion to identify the father of the Jewish tradition as actually associated with the Mother of western civilization, one way to approach a quite revolutionary transvaluation is to suggest that the pre-Oedipal is not always and already contained in the symbolic (for, how else could we articulate, or rather bring into existence, its being), but rather the symbolic arises out of the pre-Oedipal as *chora*. What appeared to be “nothing” is actually everything.

NOTES

¹ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 62.

² Diane Jonte-Pace, “At Home in the Uncanny: Freudian Representations of Death, Mothers, and the Afterlife.” *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 1 (1996): 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1939), 70.

⁵ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 208-9.

⁶ Freud, *Moses*, 69.

⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), 6.

⁸ Richard J. Bernstein, preface to *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), xi.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” *S.E.* 17:241.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Civilizations and Its Discontents,” *S.E.* 21:64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

Adams: Divine Mother

¹² Ibid., 70-1.

¹³ Ibid., 72.

¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵ *Lankavatara Sutra*, trans. by D. T. Suzuki (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932), 196.

¹⁶ Grace Jantzen writes of the return of the Goddess “God in a skirt.” She writes: “For women to project a divine horizon, a ‘God according to our gender/genre,’ . . . it is necessary that this female divine [be] thought of in female terms This is why substitution of ‘Mother God’ for ‘Father God,’ while leaving the concept of God otherwise the same (‘God in a skirt’), it itself does not change very much.” Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 267.

¹⁷ For a critique of the historically tenuous nature of the Goddess movement rediscovering an idealized past see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddess and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Just as Ruether questions the tenability of some utopian matriarchy in history, so too would I question the tenability of a utopian primordial oneness filled with bliss. Philosopher Ken Wilber’s notion of the “pre-trans fallacy,” mistaking pre-ego for trans-ego, is most appropriate in exploring this issue.

¹⁸ Freud, *Uncanny*, 241.

¹⁹ Ibid., 245.

²⁰ Maria Margaroni, “‘The Lost Foundation’: Kristeva’s Semiotic Chora and Its Ambiguous Legacy.” *Hypatia* 20, no.1 (Winter 2005): 79.

²¹ Ibid., 84.

²² Ibid., 79.

²³ Ibid., 83.

²⁴ Ibid., 81.

²⁵ Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, “A Symphony of Great Bliss.” Taught at the “View of Mahamudra: Song of Realization Program” by the Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche, Boulder, CO October 9-11, 2009.

²⁶ Another way to address this tendency to disregard any existence prior to being/ego, we may note in associating the “maternal realm,” with “nature.” In the gendered binary associating women with nature and men with culture, culture has been privileged over nature. See Sherry Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” In *Woman, Culture, and Society*, M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974) 68-87.

²⁷ Reginald Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 95.

²⁸ Klein, *Bliss Queen*, 178.

²⁹ In “A Symphony of Great Bliss” Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche writes of such nothingness in the following manner: “To be a barren woman’s daughter, negation that’s always nothing.”

³⁰ Judith Simmer-Brown, *Dakini’s Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 85.

³¹ Ibid., 86

³² Ibid., 87.

³³ Andrew Holecek, manuscript for *Power and the Pain* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2010), 273.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Simmer-Brown, *Dakini*, 107.

³⁶ Luce Irigaray, *The Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca UP, 1974), 244.