Between Death and Glory

I was expecting my second baby when, in that twilight of half-awake, half-asleep I found myself fully conscious, unable to move any part of my body and acutely aware of a black, nameless, shapeless void towards which I was being pulled. Every cell in my body along with my conscious ego wanted to flee from that depthless pit, the emotion that it evoked was primal fear; to succumb to its pull surely amounted to total annihilation of the self. A week later I found myself in hospital, at 27 weeks gestation with severe pre-eclampsia. Drugged and helpless, I was entirely at the mercy of the medical professionals who fought (and succeeded) to save my baby's life as well as my own.

What follows is an attempt to make some sense of that experience through exploration of art, literature and philosophy. It's a meandering journey calling on Plato, fantasy writer George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva and psychoanalysis, matricide, liminality, left and right brain functions, artist Ana Mendieta and the Eleusinian Mysteries….

My brush with death on both inner and outer levels has made me pay much greater attention to our attitudes towards death, particularly in the west, where the cultural norm is to avoid reflecting on our mortality and pay others to handle the deaths of our loved ones. At the same time, we display a compulsive obsession with mediated death through news channels and TV drama. In *Deeply into the Bone* Ronald Grimes reminds us that 'the dying process is implicit in being born. To be born is not only to be in the process of growing up but also to be on the road to death'.[1] In the late middle ages, the *Ars Moriendi* texts advised people (well, those that could read Latin) on the protocols and procedures of achieving a 'good death'. Too often in modern culture, we relinquish our capacity to consciously affect the dying process by deferring to doctors, undertakers and priests. For Grimes, a 'good death' is connected to ritual practice and offers us the means to exit gracefully: 'By ritualised means a grim necessity is transformed into a dignified and exemplary demise'.[2] This all sounds promising, but how do we start to

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[1] Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2000) p.221

[2] ibid p.223.

change patterns of behaviour that have dominated our culture and group psyche for possibly millennia? One starting point could be to locate when a shift in our attitudes towards death began to occur and why.

From the cyclical to the linear…and back again?

We tend to assume that fearing death is a quality of being human rather than a culturally determined attitude, but maybe it wasn't always like that. There is mounting evidence that prior to the shift towards agriculture, hierarchical city states and solar god worship, sophisticated small scale communities lived in harmony with the cycles of nature, worshipped moon goddesses and crucially did not fear death, but saw it as the natural and necessary aspect of a triple cycle of life, death and rebirth.

Plato can be regarded as a key figure in a transitional shift in consciousness that coincided with the rapid development of urban civilisations in the eastern Mediterranean in the second and first millennia B.C.E. At this time the memorised, rhythmic and poetic spoken word and mythological understanding of existence and history was being gradually distinguished and excluded from rational thought.
The earliest written records of creation stories in the West appear in the Sumerian *Eridu Genesis* and the Babylonian *Enuma Elish.* These two creation stories reveal a fierce battle which was taking place between the older world which was matriarchal and the new hierarchical and patriarchal order which was necessary in order for powerful city states to establish supremacy over land and subjects. In the *Enuma Elish*, the young god Marduk wrestles reproductive power away from the feminine goddess, towards the power of the male artisan, thus appropriating and controlling matter. The cosmos is fashioned from the dead bodies of the Great Goddess Tiamat and her consort Kingu; it is made, not begotten. This is further confirmed by the Hebrew Genesis story which is thought to have been written around 1000 B.C.E.[3] Here the Creator, who is recognised as male, co-exists with the primal stuff of the cosmos and is in serene control. There is

[3] Mary Condran, *The Serpent and The Goddess – Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* (Harper and Row: San Fransisco, 1989) p.7.

no strife between the Creator and a primal mother as she has already been reduced to formless malleable 'stuff'.

In the *Timaeus,* Plato attempts to further distance the relationship between science/rational thought and mythology by presenting an account of the origins of the universe from a metaphysical perspective. In so doing, he paves the way for a western dialectics based on a series of binary oppositions between (among others) the intelligible and sensible, the ideal and material, divine and mortal, masculine and feminine and the (perfect) world of rational thought and the (imperfect) world of matter, with the first term always privileged over the second.[4] Plato starts by defining the primal dualism that underlies reality: the eternal realm of thought (Perfect Forms or the Father) and the visible and temporary realm of corporeality. The invisible realm of thought is primal and original and in the beginning there existed alongside it the unshaped 'matrix' or *chora* – a maternal/nurse receptacle that acts as a bridge between the intelligible and the material but has no 'being' of its own. It is the remnants of the Great Mother Goddess and acts as an incubator from which matter arises but takes no active or creative role in its formation. It is not difficult to see in this context how the death of a human being can shift from being perceived as a 'natural' return to the womb of the Great Goddess to a terrifying annihilation of the self in a formless, nameless Void of nothingness.

And the rest, we could say, is His-Story.

When the feminine principle has no proactive creative function and is seen as an abyss, the maternal feminine in general becomes both the foundation for identity *and* a threat of its dissolution. Philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray in 'Body Against Body' recognises the patriarchal understanding of the maternal as the ' "dark continent" par excellence…it is night and hell'[5] but it is a principle that men and women cannot do

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[4] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Woman, Chora, Dwelling' in *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* eds. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (Routledge: London and New York, 2000) p.210-221 (p.212)

[5] Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1993) p.10.

without. She points to the earlier creation myths when she affirms that 'our society and our culture operate on the basis of an original matricide':

> When Freud, notably in *Totem and Taboo* describes and theorizes about the murder of the father as the founding act for the primal horde, he is forgetting an even more ancient murder, that of the woman-mother, which was necessary to the foundation of a specific order in the city.[6]

It's worth pointing out here that while patriarchy privileges the masculine principle, and clearly women have suffered as a consequence, it does not necessarily serve the best interests of men either, since only a stable, rational, fixed type of subjectivity is acceptable under patriarchy. Patriarchy will have no truck with fluidity, mobility, transcience and ambiguity - for men or women.

In 'Plato's Hystera' in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray exposes how a preference for light and visibility, articulated in Plato's parable of The Cave found in Book 7 of *The Republic* both relies upon and rejects maternal origins. Socrates describes a scene where men are chained inside a cave in such a way that they can only look at its back wall where images appear, which are shadows created by a fire in the centre of the cave, but which the men perceive to be real until they free themselves from bondage, become aware of the fire as the source of the false images and finally make their journey out of the cave via a passageway into the clarity of sunlight. Plato intends this as a metaphor for the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge of the 'true' nature of things and freedom from the oppression of illusion. Irigaray asks us to reconsider the myth as a metaphor for inner space: 'the den, the womb or *hystera*'.[7] As such, the cave is linked back to the original matrix, or *chora*. Read in this way, the parable describes the desperate scramble of men ('sex undetermined'[8]), from the maternal / material womb of origin into the light of reason, Logos and the realm of The Father as opposed to the mother 'whom he experiences as amorphous, formless, a pit, chasm in which he risks losing his form'.[9]

Rather than desiring to escape the cave, Irigaray wishes men and women to reengage

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[6] ibid p.11

[7] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 1985) p.243.

[8] ibid p.245.

[9] Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* p.59.

with it and to acknowledge it as the site where subjectivity emerges.[10] For her, escape from the cave is a wilful forgetting of origins which is literally deadly. She asks how can we recall the forgotten mother? When the Father aspires to absolute being, 'He no longer has any foundation, he is beyond all beginnings'.[11]

Blame it on the mother

For Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, subjectivity emerges from three registers: The Real, The Imaginary and The Symbolic. The Real is the fleshy resonance of things and cannot under any circumstances be represented. The Imaginary is linked to the pre-oedipal stage of infantile development, it is pre-language, pre-culture and signifies the stage where the child has not yet come to distinguish itself properly from its mother and its surroundings. The symbolic is represented by The Law of The Father, entry into language and the social order and the distinction between self and (m)Other. Failure to enter the symbolic stage is, for Lacan, failure to become a subject.

But where does this leave the Mother? There is no genuine attempt in Freud or Lacan to articulate the mother's subjective position, although, as E. Ann Kaplan has pointed out, 'one could hardly discuss anything without falling over her - but always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration'.[12] The Freudian / Lacanian account of the development of subjectivity can be seen as analogous to Plato's account of the creation of forms. For Plato, forms come from the Father (The Perfect Forms). They are incubated by the feminised *chora* but are ordered, regulated and given form by The Father. Lacanian subjectivity emerges through the first two registers: The Real (the mother's body) and The Imaginary (the pre-oedipal symbiotic relationship with the mother) but only with the entry of the Father's Law is subjectivity truly attained. If Lacan insists that subjectivity and language emerge together, then it follows that language is always already masculine. While Freud assumed that the child possessed an

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[10] See Irigaray, 'Plato's Hystera' in *Speculum* pp.243-364.

[11] ibid p.307.

[12] E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (Routledge: London and New York, 1992) p.3.

ego from the outset, Lacan believed that the ego was constructed in the passage from The Imaginary to The Symbolic, in what he called The Mirror Stage. This ego is bought at great cost to the child as it is forced to accept the mother as 'not self', as not always present and as not able to fulfil its every desire. In the entry into language, the child surrenders its deepest attachment: the Mother. In its frustration, this first love-object then becomes the focus of its aggression, which it learns to repress. The passage into language is the entry into an endless stream of signifiers which defer desire from the first love object and allow the ego to master desire (and the Mother). For Lacan language as a symbol is a substitute for the real thing and thus constitutes the metaphorical murder of the thing, starting with the mother.[13]

In *Revolution in Poetic Language,* Julia Kristeva focuses on the extent to which language, both written and spoken is in the first place physical. She makes a distinction between two 'modalities' of language: the semiotic and the symbolic. The symbolic is the chain of signifiers through which culture, under The Name of The Father is mediated and through which we become subjects. The semiotic, which is prior to signs and meaning, is the foundation of language, its rhythms, cadences, silence, tone and rupture that originate in the body. For Kristeva, these two modalities are co-existent, but one may be given greater emphasis than the other in different contexts, for example poetry is more semiotic while theoretical text is more symbolic.[14] There can be no symbolic without the semiotic. Kristeva uses Plato's term *chora* to describe the flow of rhythm and energy that constitute the semiotic. *Chora* is linked to the maternal feminine, and the Imaginary register:

> The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organising social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*, which is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death.[15]

While for Lacan, language is masculine and feminine subjectivity does not exist, Kristeva points out that the symbolic order is rooted in the maternal body, without which there would be no possibility of speaking subjects.[16]

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[13] Grace M Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1998) pp.34-36.
[14] ibid p.195.
[15] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1984) p.26.

In an intriguing essay titled "George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva and the Black Sun", William Gray discusses the fairytale book *Phantastes* by fantasy writer George MacDonald first published in 1858. Gray sees the book as "a quest for the beginnings of being or identity in "the primary maternal matrix" – or what we might call, following Kristeva, the "semiotic *chora*".[17] Gray suggests that Fairyland in all of MacDonald's writing has to do with the pre-linguistic, and is very much the realm of the mothers. Our hero, Anodos (which means "pathless") finds that the 'real' world, or the realm of the symbolic begins to slip and slide as he enters Fairyland, which is evoked in sound, rhythm, colour, music and poetry. Anodos encounters a series of 'mothers'; some terrifying in the form of trees that attempt to devour him, some benign such as the old woman that he encounters in a house who is reading aloud from an ancient little volume what amounts to a kind of hymn to darkness. Gray reads the novel through the lens of psychoanalysis: Anodos must successfully relinquish the mother if he is to enter the symbolic and achieve anything 'great'. As we have explored, under patriarchy, symbolic matricide is the condition of the possibility of subjectivity and speech. According to Kristeva, this loss, must be *felt* and consequently there occurs mourning and melancholia. Anodos acquires a shadow that becomes so pervasive that it shoots out rays of darkness that eventually blot out even the sun, (prefiguring Kristeva's Black Sun). For Kristeva, depression results from the failure to successfully mourn the lost mother. The subject is faced with a terrible choice: identity bought by matricide or suicide that brings with it pleasure of reunion with the mother but renounces the possibility of becoming an individuated thinking, speaking subject. In order to protect mother, I kill myself. The depressive sits on the fence, failing to make a clear choice either way.

At one point, Anodos chooses suicide:

> I stood one moment and gazed into the heaving abyss beneath me; then I plunged headlong…A blessing, like the kiss of a mother, seemed to alight on my soul; a calm, deeper than that which accompanies a hope deferred, bathed my spirit. I

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[16] Jantzen, *Becoming Divine* p.195.

[17] William Gray, *Death and Fantasy – Essays on Philip Pullman, C.S.Lewis, George MacDonald and R.L.Stevenson* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) p.10.

> sank far into the waters, and sought not to return. I felt as if once more the great arms of the beech tree were around me, soothing me after the miseries I had passed through'.[18]

Gray says 'It is as if Anodos is plunging from the unbearable symbolic order back into the sweet annihilation of self in the primal chaos that Kristeva associates with suicide…as lethal as it is jubilatory'.[19] Anodos returns from his suicide attempt to achieve a subject position, but one that is precarious and ever-threatened.

Ana Mendieta – the search for origins

The stark choice between matricide and suicide that is articulated through psychoanalysis is enough to make anyone depressed. Surely there must be a another way to understand our human predicament? In hope, I turn to an extraordinary series of photographs by Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta.

In the *Silueta* series, executed in Iowa and Mexico between 1973 and 1980, Mendieta used a number of materials to inscribe a depersonalised human form into the land, in some cases by taking away something that was already there, for example grass, flowers, snow, mud, and sometimes by adding earth, flowers, cloth. Most of the works were executed in private, all were temporary, and exhibited as photographs. In many cases the human figure is extremely subtle and hard to detect. In all the works, the human form appears to be mobile, and subject to immanent decay. Anne Raine has said

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[18] George MacDonald, *Phantastes* in William Gray, ibid p.20.
[19] ibid, p.20

that they present a 'strange combination of stillness and unsettledness'.[20] In the *Silueta* series, Mendieta performed a series of actions in which her body was in some way reunited with the earth, then disengaged from it and the remaining trace was documented. As viewers, we only see the last activity and must piece together the preceeding events for ourselves. In an unpublished statement about her practice, Mendieta had this to say in 1981:

> I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth / body sculptures I become one with the earth.[21]

Beginning with a refusal to deny maternal origins, Mendieta also refuses to fix origins:

> There is no original past to redeem; there is the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning…There is above all the search for origin.[22]

Two sentences in this statement initially seems contradictory 'there is no original past to redeem…There is above all the search for origins', but in fact, Mendieta is making a distinction between historical origins, posited by a patriarchal linearity and origins in terms of subjectivity.



[20] Anne Raine, 'Embodied Geographies: Subjectivity and Materiality in the work of Ana Mendieta' in *Generations and Geographies in the visual arts: feminists readings* ed. Griselda Pollock (Routledge: London and New York, 1996) pp. 228-249 (p.229)

[21] Ana Mendieta in Raine, *Generations and Geographies* p.242.

[22] Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity and Exile* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1999) p.34.

As individual photographs, the siluetas do not have great power, but as a series, something else emerges. While the siluetas could be arranged chronologically, a linear narrative does not emerge. The works mark a constant return to origins, a ceaseless exchange between body and earth which is cyclical and challenges notions of linear development of the subject along already pre-ordained paths organised by dominant discourses. In some of the images, the figure is very distinct but in others it is barely present. The ambiguity provokes an uncanny undecidibility, and as a series the works force us as viewers to address the issues surrounding a return to origins, the mother, the neglected cave of becoming and raises questions about our fear of losing identity. But, as the repetition suggests, Mendieta does not advocate a once for all return to earth / mother as a solution to identity or gender problems. Stasis is never her objective, but to keep the figure mobile so that identity and subjectivity are a fluid part of the process of becoming. This approach is an effective challenge to the desire for stable identity which is always founded on the rejection and exclusion of what is perceived as not self: the Other, originally the Mother. The series points instead to inter-subjective relationships between subjects and reciprocal relationships between subjects and the earth.

To be or not be be – is that the question?

Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* works points towards a ceaseless flow between two states of being and consciousness – a different kind of subjectivity, one that is comfortable with ego dissolving oneness as well as individuation when we need to achieve certain goals, a subjectivity that can oscillate between these two states without anxiety, distress, or traumatic events to trigger the transition. In a TED lecture in 2008, Neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor presented a moment by moment account of the stroke that she experienced in 1996 in the left hemisphere of her brain, describing how the loss of the logical, practical left brain functions left her struggling to contact emergency services, meanwhile her right brain functions became acutely perceptible. She describes the sense of interconnectivity with all existence and the feelings of wonder and bliss that she experienced, while the left side of her brain attempted to intervene to ensure her

survival. It took her eight years to recover fully from the stroke, but what it gave her was the persistent awareness that alongside our sense of individuality and difference exists this other realm where separation does not exist. Most importantly, she stresses that neurologically, this realm is available to us whenever we want to experience it.

Fantastic, but how?

Grimes suggests that meditation may be one way to achieve this. He says that Buddhist meditation is in one sense a death rite. He describes the process as 'sitting attentively on the abyss between life and death without clinging to life as if it were good or fearing death, as if it were bad'.[23] In the beautiful film *The Lover and the Beloved* by visual anthropologist Andy Lawrence, we are taken on a journey into the heart of Tantra in northern India. The practice of Tantra enables the seeker to face and overcome their fear of death through understanding that the ego is not the real Self. If we can truly see this, death no longer becomes something to fear and we are able to live life fully. A similar message is communicated through the documentary film *Griefwalker* by Tim Wilson, who follows the work of Stephen Jenkinson, a palliative care counsellor in Toronto. Jenkinson creates a space of presence for the dying where they can perhaps see their fear and move beyond it.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were one of the major initiation rites of ancient Greece. By the time the rites were being practiced around 1400 B.C.E, patriarchal culture was already denying cyclical rebirth. The Rites were abolished and the temple destroyed in the fourth century C.E, at the same time that the council of Nicea denounced reincarnation as heresy.[24] The Rites gave participants an experience that enabled them to overcome their fear of death. The Greater Mysteries lasted for nine days in memory of Demeter's wanderings in search of her daughter Persephone who had been abducted by Hades and carried into the underworld. Each day had its own ceremony with the seventh and eighth days being the highest stage of the Mysteries and taking place in the Telesterion,

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[23] Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone* p.224

[24] Demetra George, *Mysteries of the Dark Moon – The Healing Power of the Dark Goddess* (HarperOne: New York, 1992) p.242

a womblike cave, where the initiates' eyes were 'opened'. Participants were given a drink called *kykeion,* it is believed that this barley meal drink contained a hallucinogenic fungus that grew on the grain and induced visions. Then, in a state of hypersensitive expectation induced by the previous days' ceremonies and the drink, the initiates began to cross through the kingdom of death. According to Clement of Alexandria, what occurred provoked fear and terror, and the initiates experienced the physical symptoms of nausea, trembling and cold sweats and witnessed terrifying visions. After this, they were suffused by an embracing loving energy, understood to be the Goddess. Each person felt as if they had returned from Hades and been reborn.[25] This description is similar to the accounts that people describe of their experiences of taking *ayawaska* or hallucinogenic mushrooms, when taken within a ritual context rather than for recreational purposes.

I am not suggesting necessarily that we revive the Eleusinian Mysteries, but we badly need some ritual practices that enable us to address our relationships with death and subjectivity. As Grimes says, 'We need occasions and places in which to contemplate death before it arrives'.[26] We need to spend more time in the 'in-between' - the liminal space of neither this, nor that, a space of potentiality where we can accept our identities as partial, fragmented, incomplete. If in my waking dreams I were to encounter that Abyss again, I will try very hard to overcome my fear and allow myself to succumb to its darkness, tempoarily. Perhaps, if the mystics are right, on the other side of fear is bliss, and rebirth. As human subjects, we need to constantly and consciously resubmit ourselves to this realm of oneness and non-being in an endless process of deaths and rebirths.

[25] ibid see pages 244-246
[26] Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone* p.227