

Shatter, Emptiness & Divine Indwelling Presence:

Beyond the ‘essentialism’ of Plato’s *Anima Mundi*

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ANSELM KIEFER *Die Schechina*, 2010 Painted resin dress, glass shards, steel, numbered glass discs, and wire in inscribed glass and steel vitrine, 179 1/16 x 82 3/4 x 82 3/4 inches, (455 x 210 x 210 cm) KIEFE 2010.0040

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

In the haunting sculpture entitled, “Shekhinah,”¹ contemporary German artist Anselm Kiefer has fashioned a wedding garment encased in glass that hangs shredded and tattered by shards embedded in the garment and lying in a heap on the floor beneath it. The wedding dress of Shekhinah is an allusion to the Kabbalistic “Sabbath Bride,” where, on Friday eve, the Hasidic community sing joyful songs of blessing and longing for union as they await her return.

The *Shekhinah*—a feminine gendered word from the Hebrew is translated as the *indwelling*, ‘Divine Presence’ that descends to our earthly plane of existence to be amongst us. Yet she is known by many names and descriptions, both immanent and transcendent. In the *Book of Proverbs* she is called *Chokmah*--Wisdom, co-architect of creation. She is known as *Rua Hakodesh*—‘Holy Spirit’--a trace of the Infinite without form or gender, and *Kavod*--the ‘Glory’—a fiery glow that dwelt over Mt. Sinai when Moses received the tablets of the Ten Laws. The Glory is said to have dwelt between the two cherubim on the lid covering the Ark of the Covenant containing the sacred tablets.

These ideas are beautiful and unifying. So why has Kiefer broken down all of her forms and violently penetrated us with his sculpture? His post-modern work has revealed a shocking and unspeakable truth from a dark historical period in modern times--the advent of the Holocaust and the shattering of European Jewry.

Shekhinah in her ‘immanent being’ seems to interject herself into the historical processes of humanity, descending upon humankind, as Franz Rosenzweig (1985, p. 409) writes,

¹ © Anselm Kiefer. Courtesy Gagolian. Photograph by Charles Duprat

“sojourning among men sharing in their sufferings . . . [setting] forth with [the people of Israel] into the agony of exile, [joining] their wanderings” The mass exile of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah was preceded by the destruction of Solomon’s Temple and the murder and enslavement of thousands by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. This exodus came to be known as one of the great “diaspora”—that is, the forced dispersion of the Jewish people across the earth. Her *divine presence* accompanied those driven into exile.

Shekhinah is, in a sense, the Kabbalistic representation for the ‘Soul of the World.’ She is not removed and above human suffering, but rather, she traverses eternity alongside humanity, through the catastrophes, uncertainties and creations. In turning to Kiefer’s metaphor, a certain act of faith is asked of those of us who allow in the impact of his broken and wounded Shekhinah. His art requires us to descend into the shatter and, as Harold Bloom (2002, p.7) writes, “the world of senselessness and confusion.” There are no absolutes in this kind of faith—certainly not of a religious or philosophical kind. But perhaps there is, as the art critic Varnedoe (2006, p. 271) writes, “[a] faith in possibility, a faith not that we will know something finally, but a faith in not knowing, a faith in our ignorance, a faith in our being confounded and dumbfounded, a faith fertile with possible meaning and growth.”^[1]

Lurianic Creation Story

The parable of creation envisioned by Isaac Luria and his school of Kabbalah in 15th century Palestine is a never-ending, paradoxical dialectic. He recognized an infinite creator described simply as the *absolute nothing--without end*. The universe would come into being only after the creator had contracted and withdrawn its light from creation, leaving a black void

from which the world could emerge. From this state Luria anticipated a continuing process of shattering of the unities in the created world and our subsequent, never-ending work of *Tikkun Olam*, or restitution and repair of the world. Luria's vision undermines all interpretations that conceive of a 'final truth' or foundational ground that forecloses on alterity and the many dimensions of meaning. Original 'Truth' is not absolute or unchanging but is continually subject to radical revision. The never-ending rupturing and repairing of the world's fabric is a force driving human history *and* individual psychology, reverberating through the foundations of today's cultural upheavals and fractures.

Luria's dialectic conceives of an *indeterminable* universe that more truly reflects the groundless ground that we as analysts, for example, must encounter in traumatized and shattered states of mind. It sharply contrasts with Plato's own creation story in *Timaeus*.

Plato's *Anima Mundi*

In *Timeaus*, Plato depicts how the creator *demiurge* desired to bring order from the Chaos of the visible world. He pre-arranged a mathematically unchanging universe in the shape of a perfect globe, to bring 'the Good' into being through *Nous*—Intellect. The essential, eternal 'Truths' could be comprehended only by reason, whereas things conceived through nature and the senses were 'always becoming,' imperfect, and would perish. Plato (2010, p. 1762) writes, ". . . for nothing can be beautiful which is like any imperfect thing." The Creator endowed the center of this perfect world with a soul—*Anima Mundi*, personified by Robert Fludd's alchemical visualization from 1617. Older than the body, the timeless and unchanging world soul became its ruler and mistress.

In the grand design, the universe emanated from the original Perfection, and human souls were meant to restore the First unity by emulating its ideal forms inscribed in the *anima mundi*--*Beauty, 'The Good,' Truth*. These were the motivating power behind the goal of each soul to reach a perfected completion, or *telos*.

This dualistic, aesthetic split in Platonism leads to an unreal attitude that privileges spiritual beauty and inner purity over and above raw imperfections in the natural, temporal world. Gnostic and neo-platonic foundations of Western religious and philosophical traditions, from Augustine to Kant, and later, Freud and Jung, helped maintain the split.

***Anima Mundi* in Analytical Psychology—a critique**

Jung felt that it was his calling to recover a unifying sense of soul for our times that would heal the split between *Physis* and *Nous*. However, his incorporation of Neo-Platonic foundations--of 'eternal forms' or archetypes--severely hampered his project. The implications of such 'truths,' existing outside of time, exemplify a fantasy of restoration of a universal mythos transcending history and culture. The result is that Jungian psychology has often failed to engage the empirical and ethical realities of everyday life.

James Hillman endeavored to re-imagine a new vision of Plato's *anima mundi*, to bring it down from the 'timeless' yet remote place of "archetypes and principles transcendent to [all] things." Inspired by the Neo-Platonic Renaissance scholar, Ficino, Hillman (1982) describes the world soul as a "soul-spark . . . [offering] itself through each thing in its visible form."

When Hillman speaks about the *anima mundi* as a "presence" and "psychic reality" directly available to the human 'imagination' as a positive reality, he appears to take images literally, reifying them. Anima has become a thing that is known. The totality of Psyche has appropriated

the exterior universe of things in themselves through the inner spark of the *imaginal*.

Levinas and Plato

Returning to Plato (2010, pp. 1841-2), Timaeus portrays inner and outer circles of the *Anima Mundi* that move in “uniform revolution upon the same axis.” The motion of the outer circle he named the *Same* and the inner, he designated as the motion of the *Other*. The Creator formed the corporeal universe within her, and “he gave dominion to the motion of the same,” leaving it “single and undivided.” The Same orders the universe, forcing the ‘dis-ordered’ Other to conform with it. The reduction of the Other into the Same meant that human reason would overcome Chaos.

Emmanuel Levinas (1969), the French-Jewish philosopher, renews, yet radically transforms the meaning behind Plato’s dyad in his first major opus—*Totality and Infinity*. Levinas portrays the Same as the subject’s inner psychic life that attempts to reduce all *exteriority*—all irreducible, unique otherness—into what it knows. Ego assimilates, *appropriates*, and subjugates, all things different from itself into ‘things to be used’ for one’s own needs. To Levinas, the egotistical need for the other to be the same is the origin of all violence.

In a radical reversal, the *Other* is that which exists *prior* to our own being, and our subjective core comes into existence through its impact, like earth to the sun. The Other is infinitely unknowable, transcendent, yet we glimpse its ‘trace’ in the ‘face’ of the (*human*) other who is revealed in (her) vulnerability and nakedness. (Peperzak 1993, p. 89)

For Levinas, one’s responsibility emerges from the trauma he feels for the useless suffering of the one now standing before him. He is taken hostage to the guilt of surviving when the other is stricken. This is the torment of which Levinas speaks—the

unavoidable responsibility to another invoked by the confrontation with *the* Other that shatters him. With the wounding that pierces the ego's grandiosity, the suffering psyche—stricken, outraged—is loosened and released from its identity with the Same. (Kimmel 2011a, p. 181)

Levinas would likely consider any notion that a subject might be filled by 'grand, inner truths' to be anathema. Our privileging of the inner world as a discipline of Depth Psychology is called into question by Plato's over-valuation of the interior 'realm of the Same.' Contemporary thinking in Analytical Psychology and inter-subjectivity has begun to cast doubts on the traditional view of a singular center of the psyche—the Self—that is inherently grounded as a function of an *isolated* and solitary mind.

Wolfgang Giegerich (1996, p. 9) warns of this as well. “. . . Jung, when he spoke of the process of individuation, did not intend to advance a one-sided individualism. Even though the telos of individuation is the development of the Self, the Jungian Self must not be viewed as solipsistic, nor set in contradistinction to mankind, or to the world at large.” As Jung once claimed, “. . . [T]his self is the world.” (CW 9,1, par. 46).

Rooting out the Impure

The shattering of what I consider an individual's narcissism--and Levinas, egoism—awakens the ethical subject to his singular place in the movement of time and culture. The 'opus parvum' of Levinas was informed by the Holocaust, having lost his entire Lithuanian family during the war. The greatest historical atrocities have always been perpetrated in the name of the search for purity, perfection, and 'higher truth'—essentialist ideals twisted and frozen by fundamentalism that eradicates *otherness*—all which is left out from what is collectively asserted and absolute. We see the destructiveness done to those marginalized souls when totalitarian

nation-states ‘root out their differences from the garden.’ It brings into serious question the obsolescence of the Platonic *anima mundi* as a guiding soul for our post-modern world--a world searching hopelessly for some way to grasp the meaning of horrors that cannot be grasped—things such as nuclear and environmental devastation, terrorism, and genocide.

It is an unbearable task to glimpse the ‘truth’ of the *Real* that erupts unbidden into cultural consciousness. In *aletheia*, the Greeks capture the uncanny moment of ‘unconcealment’ arising from the negative, where apparent shadow contents serve the function of truth. Lacan conceived of the *Real* as spaces between what we can know--the primal enigma that defies our capacity to *symbolize* it. Žižec provides a cultural context for the *Real* as the horrors that lie ‘beneath’ ‘worldwide catastrophes,’ their meaning incomprehensible to thought or word.

As analysts we confront this enigma in our most traumatized patients, where the inner experience of deadness, of being ‘stillborn’ remain their deepest truth. Our wish as analysts to hold fast to those glimpses of rebirth and moments for optimism in our patients’ lives may be perceived as forms of disavowal and betrayal, thinly-veiled need for our own relief from the unbearable deadness and negation (Kimmel 2011b, p. 571). Could this hoped-for *telos* of healing and rebirth be our own form of comforting essentialism?

***Shekhinah* in the Ruins**

Shekhinah rustles in and out of our world through the impact of temporality upon history, genealogy, memory, and things ‘to come.’ These are the dialectical processes that comprise the ephemeral ‘body’ of *Shekhinah*: immanent ‘presence’ and the ‘absolute nothing’ *beyond* being; shattering and restoring; exile and return. In respect to Plato’s undivided and timeless world soul, things that are always in temporal process never remain the same. Meanings that arise from the

following two folktales may lead us to certain implications that prove useful to contemporary clinical thought.

A third century, A.C.E. Talmudic tale recounted how a traveling rabbi stopped to pray in the ruins of Jerusalem. Upon leaving, he encountered the spirit of the great prophet Elijah outside its entrance, who warned him of the dangers of being there. He inquired further as to whether the rabbi had heard any voice within the chamber. He answered yes, “I heard a ‘daughter of a voice from heaven’ whose crying sounded like the cooing of a dove.” (Babylonian Talmud, Berakot 3a). This was the voice of *Shekhinah*, the divine presence, lamenting the burning and destruction of the second Temple of Jerusalem, and the exile of her people by the Romans in 70 AD.

The prophet evokes the overwhelming tragedy, warning against going near the burnt-out and razed ruins *too soon*. Ruins embody the uncanny—their shadow contents giving rise to the unconcealment of ‘truth’ too *hot* to bear. *One cannot touch it*, like the skin of a burn victim, or the ovens of Auschwitz. One cannot get too close to the destructive power underlying such things as abuse trauma or mass violence, lest the survivors’ fragile minds shatter. The story raises the question of what we can do in the face of destruction, negation and suffering.

Metaphorically, ruins are the historical remnants of what once were, structures that have broken down over time, the emptying out of all concepts without certainty of something new coming into being. Paradoxically, the rabbi who enters this place bears witness to cries of anguish and the pain of utter loss. By his presence in the ruins, can new meaning be brought to the past? Is this the ‘still, small voice’ in the shatter that asks of the present that it retroactively redeem the fullness of the past, to “make whole what has been [irreparably] smashed,”

(Benjamin 1968, p. 257) to awaken history through our memories?

Prayer requires intention, which in Hebrew is *kavana*. Its root is *keva*, “bearing tension.” In this place of shatter he holds the tension between what is too-much to bear, yet is simultaneously the most fertile of places. In the rabbi’s story we are called to be where we are in the ruins, in the negation, in death--to not fly off even when things get too hot. To do less would be a lack of ethics.

The Lost Princess: Negation and the Dialectical Process

The biographer of Hasidic Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, depicted the brief lifetime of this tortured young master as one spent in a “life and death battle between faith and doubt.” (Green K 1992, p. 3). The Russian born Nahman first recited his tale of the “Lost Princess” in 1806. His ‘mythological autobiography’ resonated deeply with the suffering of his people, embodying Hasidism’s soulful longing for return of *Shekhinah* “from the bondage of exile” and an imagined hope for a messianic age, always *to come*, but never here. (Band 1978, p. 9). The following is an abbreviated version of the tale.

A king had six sons, and a daughter whom he cherished. Once he grew angry with her and said, “May the Not-Good take you away.” The next morning they discovered she had disappeared. The king’s viceroy went searching for her, his journey taking countless years, over great distances. Finally, he located her in a palace--the place of the ‘Not-Good.’ In typical fairytale fashion, he had to undertake trials to prove his unwavering yearning to free her. However, on the eve of completing each test, he slipped-up, falling into years and decades-long sleep. Broken-hearted, the princess left word that she had been taken to a “pearly castle on a golden mountain,” and when he awoke he could find her there.

He endured great misery over years of fruitless searching, enlisting the aid of all the

animals and birds of the earth, three giants and the four winds, but to no avail. Still he persisted. Exasperated, the last giant drove him to tears, bellowing, "Don't you see. . .? *She who you seek does not exist!*" Even that could not weaken his faith.

Just then the last wind arrived, claiming, "I was detained because I had to transport a princess to a golden mountain and a pearly castle." The wind whisked the overjoyed viceroy to his destination. At the gates, he knew he would need all his wit and intelligence to free the princess. Finally he freed her. (Nahman of Breslov 1806).

‘Dialectical movement’ underlies the viceroy’s persistent attempts to find, then repeatedly lose the princess, *Shekhinah*. It is the *soul* that orchestrates the attempts and failures of consciousness to redeem her from the ‘Not-Good,’ bringing about the ‘emptying out’ or *negation* of the ego. Through *faithlessness* the viceroy slips down into deep slumbers. But paradoxically, through *faith* he perseveres without promise of success, moving beneath the ego’s superficial search for a *utopian future resolution*. Transcendence can only be entered into through the process of *sublation*, or the ‘negation of a negation.’ Through resulting, repeated failures, the movement up is frustrated by return to oneself; a "staying put"--a 'space' of 'no-space.' In coming down to common ground through ego’s negations, Princess *Shekhinah* has returned. In a sense she was never lost—only concealed--the completion of her process never final (Giegerich 2005, p. 5). We can think about it psychologically as the continuing dissolution of the ego’s *sameness*.

If the Viceroy had located the Princess on the first try and the quest had not been fraught with multiple slips and failures, then a literal, missing person would have simply returned home; a positivistic transcendence in external life or within the unconscious would be achieved—and not the dialectical movement of soul. (Giegerich 2005, p. 16).

The strange, abrupt conclusion is the most impressive part to the story. There is no glorious end that leads to union or *apotheosis*. The story is absent of any ultimate Truth—just simple truths subject to endless conjecture and revision. The paradox in the story is its return to everyday existence, as if life goes on, with the ending always *to come*. The Viceroy's dedicated striving to find the Princess over a century of searching, and the frustration over his repeated failures, embody the return to one's humble self, or what philosopher Rosenzweig calls, "immanent transcendence" (Santner 2001, p. 10)

CONCLUSION

Luria's Kabbalah envisioned a universe 'gone wrong,' a creator who lost control of the process. Sacred vessels of divine light--the *sephirot*--shatter, their sparks falling and scattering about the earth, becoming encased in shells--the origin of all evil. Yet the Hasidim reasoned, "if there are sparks in the shells, then [the material world itself] may contain the possibility of sanctity--the presence of the sacred in everyday life." As the world is still being created and destroyed, perhaps the *Shekhinah* is present in it somehow—"in the melody, the sunset," in treasured human moments, and in the darkest and most fragmenting of times. (Potok 1991, xi).

If our contemporary *anima mundi* is not reflective of a wounded soul, if 'her still, small voice' is not heard 'mourning in the ruins' for all the nameless ones lost in the endless acts of inhumanity marking our history, then 'she' is no soul at all. We have simply adorned her in Platonic Ideals—paradisiacal, obsolete illusions of the child-ego, removed and immune from the traumatic *Real* of the world. There is great danger in refusing to recognize the destructiveness beneath too much 'goodness.'

Psychologically, the basis for our denial of the other is the dread of life's enigmas—the spaces between what we can know. Ladson Hinton (2015, p. 13) writes, “There is a profundity of experience in the everyday that we tend to miss because of our ego's defenses against the gaps and discontinuities of the unknown.” He is speaking about moments of immanent transcendence, experienced not in holding fast to foundations beneath our “psycho-spiritual platitudes” (Mogenson 1998, p. 2), but in a faith without reason in what cannot be named and what is not yet. This is the dialectical “cure” within the “utter poison” that infects the spirit of our time. This is the dialectical process of *Shekhinah*.

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