"What Hast Thou Done With Her?"

Anagogical Clues to the Lost Feminine

BY JUNE McMASTER-HARRISON

One can only imagine how differently western culture would have evolved if, in both the Judaic and Christian traditions, the feminine side of the deity had been allowed to survive. Referring to gnostic interpretations of the scriptures, McMaster-Harrison investigates the suppression of the feminine and how the sense of loss has echoed through our literature. This important article was first printed in Women and Media *(Vol. 8, No. 1, 1987).*

Women are now reclaiming a spirituality that reflects and celebrates the feminine. The recovery may well lead to a fuller understanding of the mystery of the human spirit.

In a scene from Herman Melville's visionary novel *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab stands on the deck of the Pequod during a violent electrical storm, in which the lightning rods attached to the masts glow, and raises his fist against the elements: "thou art but my fiery father," he cries, "my sweet mother, I know not. Oh cruel! what hast thou done with her?"

That scene has haunted me ever since I first read the novel many years ago as an undergraduate and it has become increasingly rich in meaning. I have had to ask myself why the words of one of the most masculine characters in all of literature, a scarred, weather-beaten old sea captain, in one of the most apparently patriarchal works in all literature, a tale of the whaling industry in 19th-century New England, should so deeply move me, a 20th-century woman; and why, specifically, should the old captain cry out in his desperation for a lost mother?

My subsequent reading in 19th-century American literature brought me further instances of this seeming paradox: in the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Walt Whitman I have also encountered what seems like a deep, if not fully conscious, longing for a feminine principle wholly lacking in the puritanical image of God. It is my belief that this feminine principle in fact has been lost to Western consciousness for over twenty centuries — lost not just through accident, but through a deliberate suppression of written allusions to her person.

Now we in the 20th century are existential orphans who have been told that God our father is dead. While we may not know whether to believe it, and in the meantime go on paying lip service to the memory of the deceased, there is another deprivation which we feel even more deeply. We do not know who our divine mother is, or indeed whether we have one, or where she is: we are told she never existed, but we feel her loss.

Yet in any age, visionaries such as Melville are able to make intuitive contact with the truth beyond repression, and to reveal it in their writing. To gain access to their revelations, I am convinced that we must read their texts in a new way, and learn to search for meaning on a new level that I call "anagogical."

Three contexts for this difficult term, anagogical, are most helpful in explaining my use of it here: (1) Northrop Frye uses the term to describe that phase of the literary displacement of myth when it passes into apocalyptic revelation; (2) psychoanalysts use it in reference to the interpretation of dreams; (3) in a letter that Dante wrote to his patron explaining how he meant the *Divine Comedy* to be read, he said that there are four levels of meaning in the work: literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical. The first two would seem to be accessible to rational analysis, perhaps even the third; but the fourth level of meaning, the anagogical, clearly goes beyond the reach of the conscious intellect, and has to do with the redemption of the soul. These terms "redemption" and "soul" sound strangely old-fashioned in the sophisticated intellectual milieu of the university where -ologies and -isms proliferate. We tend to be embarrassed by such concepts, to substitute the scientific "psyche" for the more elusive "soul." But there is one school of psychology which has not discarded the term, or the idea, of the soul: the school of Depth Psychology founded by Freud's recalcitrant follower, Carl Gustav Jung.

Jungian psychology is the only extra-literary discipline which throws light on that level of meaning in imaginative literature which I am calling anagogical, and the only one which does not, like other intellectual structures imposed on the interpretation of literature, reduce literature to its own terms. Jung himself remained in awe of the great imaginative writers such as Dante, Goethe and Blake, because he recognized that their work embodied mysteries a mere psychologist could only wonder at. "The question of what art is in itself," he said, "can never be answered by the psychologist." Yet he believed at the same time that the dialectic between psychology and the study of literature could bring about new levels of human consciousness. A visionary writer does not, he believed, speak privately, from personal consciousness, but collectively, from the impersonal unconscious. Something is brought to consciousness that meets the spiritual needs of an entire culture:

> *Whenever the collective unconscious becomes a living experience and is brought to bear upon the conscious outlook of an age, this event is a creative act which is of importance for a whole epoch. A work of art is produced that may truthfully be called a message to generations of men... Every period has its bias, its particular prejudice, and its psychic malaise.*

"A message to generations of men...;" every age has "its psychic malaise:" could Ahab's agonized cry be an anagogical clue to the uneasiness both sexes find in themselves today?

...a poet or seer lends expression to the unspoken desire of his times and shows the way, by word or deed, to its fulfilment...[1]

Perhaps out of Melville's soul there arose a collective cry of bereavement not only on behalf of 19th-century America, but on behalf of the whole of Western culture for more than two millenia? This idea has been coming into focus for me over a long period of time from clues gleaned from the three areas of my intellectual interest — literature, depth psychology and religion: Western culture has suffered almost irreparable psychological damage in being deprived throughout most of its history of the feminine principle in the godhead.

The question that surely troubles women who have reached maturity during the Women's Movement is: why is the deity of Western culture, in contrast to the religious traditions of other cultures, exclusively masculine? The god of the Old Testament is very much an authoritarian tribal father preoccupied with meting out reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience, but is in fact quite arbitrary. And this *imago Dei*, in spite of the modification brought to the image by the compassionate self-sacrificing Christ, has persisted throughout our history. The Renaissance Dr. Faustus, after sixteen centuries of Christianity, is self-condemned by his fear of God's wrath, and three centuries after that Melville hurls his harpoon in counter-revenge at his fiery father.

Yet the suppressed goddess has left traces of herself in products of the literary imagination from at least the *Book of Job* on. Each time the word "Almighty" occurs in the English version of the *Book of Job*, it is actually a translation of the Hebrew word *Shadai*, "all-nourishing," from *Shad*, which means female breast. The translation took liberties, but even this much of the evidence suggests that the writer of *Job* had, through poetic intuition, glimpsed a side of the godhead which his patriarchal, legalistic culture had suppressed. Most of us are familiar from our Sunday school lessons with the dynamic god who speaks to Job out of the whirlwind and seems intent on impressing Job with his power by comparing it to the mighty and violent beast of the deep, the Leviathan; but a careful examination of his speech hints at another side of the divine nature:

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Who watched over the birth of the sea, when it burst in flood from the womb? — when I wrapped it in a blanket of cloud and cradled it in fog,

Whose womb gave birth to the ice, and who was the mother of the frost from heaven,

Do you know when the mountain-goats are born or attend the wild doe when she is in labour?

He is attributing to the godhead the characteristics of midwife and mother.

Another intriguing trace of the suppressed goddess can be glimpsed in the *Book of Job*. God himself makes it clear that he and Wisdom are not identical:

But God understands the way [to Wisdom],

He alone knows its source.[2]

There is an implication here that Job, in contrast, is ignorant of Wisdom — which in both Greek and the original Hebrew, is feminine (*Sophia* and *Hokhmah*). Part of God's final reply, in which he so effectively puts Job in his place and reminds him of his inferiority, seems based on the premise that, not 'knowing' Wisdom, man therefore cannot be guided by the divine feminine principle.

The existence of a Hebrew tradition of the *Sapientia Dei*, God's coeternal feminine partner, lends support to this hypothesis. According to both Jung and to Gilles Quispel (the Biblical scholar involved with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts in Egypt), the tradition of the feminine in the godhead can be traced back to fertility goddesses such as Isis and Ishtar. While there are clues to her existence within the Old Testament itself (*Proverbs* 8, for example, as well as *Job*), the most telling evidence has been omitted from the Bible. From a heretical work called the *Ecclesiasticus* of about 200 B.C., we find Sophia saying of herself:

I was exalted like a cedar in Libanus, and as a cypress tree upon the mountains of Hermon.

I was exalted like a palm tree in Engaddi, and as a rose plant in Jericho, as a fair olive tree in a pleasant field, and grew up as a plane tree by the water.

I gave a sweet smell like cinnamon and yielded a pleasant odour like the best myrrh...As the vine brought I forth pleasant savour, and my flowers are the fruit of honour and riches.

I am the mother of fair love, and fear, and knowledge, and holy hope:

I therefore, being eternal, am given to all my children which are of him.[3]

Jung argues that the detailed comparison of herself with trees such as cedar, palm, olive and cypress identifies her as the Semitic mother-goddess whose symbols were these trees.

We've so far been dealing with the esoteric tradition of the mother-goddess in the Hebrew culture. But what has happened to her in the Christian tradition? This subject has been dealt with exhaustively by a number of female scholars, the most recent of whom is Elaine Pagels in her book *The Gnostic Gospels*.[4] Her thesis is that out of a vast body of gospel writing, some of which were brought to light as late as 1945, a select few were chosen by the Church Fathers for inclusion in the New Testament, and that the selection was made for political reasons. An investigation of what they left out, then, is very revealing: according to Pagels, all the gospels which made reference to a feminine component in the divine psyche were omitted.

Individuals or groups who continued to use the rejected texts were branded heretics and had to form their own sects outside the Church. These groups were known as the Gnostics, from the word "gnosis" (knowledge), because they claimed to possess secret knowledge. One of the Gnostic leaders, Valentinus, claimed that the visions he received of the divine being appeared in female form. Another source regards God as a dyad, a being that con-

sisted of both masculine and feminine energies: "a great power, the Mind of the universe, which manages all things, and is male... (and) the other... a great Intelligence... is a female which produces all things." (The masculine manages but the feminine produces!) Still another source identifies the third member of the Trinity as feminine. If the Father and Son form the masculine component, then according to the Apocryphon of John, the Holy Spirit is feminine. John describes a vision in which:

the [heavens opened and the whole] creation [which is] under heaven shone and [the world] was shaken. [And I was afraid, and behold I] saw in the light... a [likeness]... with three forms...

He said to me, "John, John, why do you doubt, and why are you afraid?... I am the one who [is with you] always. I [am the Father], I am the Mother; I am the Son."[5]

Pagels suggests that the author of this gospel probably had in mind the Hebrew word for the spirit, *ruah*, which is feminine, rather than the Greek word, *pneuma*, which is neuter, because the *ruah* is described thus:

Her light [is the likeness of the] light, the [perfect] power which is [the] image of the invisible, virginal Spirit who is perfect... she is prior to them all.[6]

Let me quote a few more excerpts from these Gnostic gospels. Here is a version of the flood — cited by Iraneaus, bishop of Lyons, writing c. 180 — which again makes reference to the Hebrew tradition of Sophia:

because they did not worship or honour him as Father and God, he sent forth a flood upon them, that he might destroy them all. But Wisdom opposed him... and Noah and his family were saved in the ark by means of the sprinkling of the light that proceeded from her, and through it the world was again filled with humankind.[7]

According to this version God had a partner who advised him against the total destruction of mankind. Another text unearthed in Upper Egypt in 1945 opens with the following words:

[I] am [Protennoia the] Thought that [dwells] in [the Light]... [she who exists] before the All... I move in every creature... I am the Invisible One within the All.

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The *Trimorphic Protennoia*, which literally means the 'Triple-formed Primal Thought,' continues:

I am perception and knowledge, uttering a Voice by means of Thought. [I] am the real Voice. I cry out in everyone, and they know that a seed dwells within [me].

Now I have come the second time in the likeness of a female, and have spoken with them... I am the Womb [that gives shape] to the All by giving birth to the Light that [shines in] splendor... [I am] the fulfillment of the All... the glory of the Mother.[8]

Still another Gnostic text consists of a poem spoken in the voice of a feminine divine power, describing her own paradoxical nature:

I am the first and the last.
I am the honoured one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am (the mother) and the daughter...
I am she whose wedding is great,
and I have not taken a husband...
I am knowledge, and ignorance... I am shameless; I am ashamed.
I am strength and I am fear...
I am senseless and I am wise...
I am godless,
and I am the one whose God is great.[9]

These gospels reflect a heretical tradition, of course, existing outside the pale of the established Church. What about the Church itself? What happened to the feminine divinity there? It could be argued that the reason Mary, Christ's earthly mother, played such an important role in Medieval Catholicism was that there was no Heavenly Mother as there was a Heavenly Father: the missing feminine component in the godhead had to be filled by a human woman. Notwithstanding her human stature, she can be regarded, according to Jung, as an incarnation of the Old Testament Sophia, just as Christ is regarded as the incarnation of the masculine Yahweh. The human Mary was never, however, accorded the status of a place in the godhead, and with the coming of the Reformation, even her semi-divine status fell to Protestantism. With her there was lost, furthermore, her mitigating effect on the authoritative patriarchal god of Western tradition, so that Renaissance man in much of Europe was left motherless.

Getting back to Melville, this is what I believe to be the source of Ahab's agony. The character of Ahab is the product of the Protestant imagination at its most extreme. Ahab's creator, Herman Melville, was descended from the New England Puritan theocracy whose spiritual roots were 17th-century Calvinism. Calvin's deity, you will recall, was a ruthless, power-hungry sadist who was supposed to have pre-ordained the damnation of certain of his children before they were born. Is it any wonder that poor old Ahab, suffering from the wounds inflicted by this sadist, should feel compelled to defy him?

I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance...I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional mastery in me.

He recognizes his longing for love:

In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here... the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. Come in thy lowest form of love and I will kneel and kiss thee; but come as mere supernal power, and though thou launchest navies of full-freighted worlds, there's that in here that still remains indifferent.

And reiterates his defiance: "Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire I breathe it back to thee."

But later in the same passage he says: "There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical."

What is beyond this fiery, masculine power-hungry spirit? Ahab doesn't know, but the reader gets a hint from a very moving passage describing Ahab's state of mind just before the catastrophe that destroys the Pequod and her crews:

Slowly crossing the deck from the scuttle, Ahab leaned over the side, and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze, the more and the more that he strove to pierce the profundity. But the lovely aromas in that enchanted air did at last seem to dispel, for a moment, the cankerous thing in his soul. That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress him; the step-mother world threw affectionate arms round his stubborn neck, and did seem to joyously sob over him, as if over one, that however wilful and erring, she could yet find it in her heart to save and to bless. From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop.

Melville was not the only 19th-century Protestant writer who felt that something was amiss in his culture's understanding of the nature of the divine. His contemporary and friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, in the *Scarlet Letter*, created his anagogical symbol of the feminine principle in the form of Hester Prynne, who wears emblazoned on her bosom the mystical A that stands for Amor and Angel as well as Adultery:

In the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be looked upon with awe. People brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself come through a mighty trouble.

She is sought out particularly by women, wondering at the wretchedness of their lives:

Hester comforted and counselled them, as best she might. She assured them, too, of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world would have grown ripe for it, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness.

Hester foresees a Second Coming that will be marked by the dominance of a feminine principle, though her life has been burdened with shame and sorrow: "The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman... lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but (through) the ethereal medium of joy."

More blatantly feminist in the social and political sense than either of his two great Puritan contemporaries, Walt Whitman declared in *Democratic Vistas*, written in 1871, that women in America would become "the robust equals, workers and political deciders with men... great as man in all departments." In his poetry, however, he betrays a deeper concern about the role of the feminine. One of the poems in *Leaves of Grass* is called "Chanting the Square Deific;" it consists of four stanzas, each one embodying the words of one of four figures that make up the godhead. The use of the figure four, and the image of a four-sided square is especially interesting, because the traditional Christian image of the deity consists of three — the trinity — not four.

Why does Whitman make it four? Mytho-psychology offers a possible answer. According to Jung, the *quaternio*, the four-part image or a squared circle, appears throughout mythology as a symbol of wholeness. The Christian trinity then, as a three-part image, is incomplete. Whitman, with the intuition of a true prophet, would seem to have sensed this incompleteness. The fourth figure which he added was Satan, reincorporated into the godhead from which he was originally separated by the Christian myth; and he changed the Latin words for Holy Spirit, *Sanctus Spiritus*, to *Sancta Spirita*, reminding us of the feminine Sophia figure of the Gnostic gospels or the Sapientia of the Old Testament. Here are her words:

Sancta Spirita, breather, life,
Beyond the light, lighter than light,
Beyond the flames of hell, joyous,
leaping easily above hell,
Beyond Paradise, perfumed solely
with mine own perfume,
Including all life on earth, touching,
including God, including Saviour and
Satan,
Ethereal, pervading all, (for without
me what were all? what were God?)
Essence of forms, life of the real identities, permanent, positive, (namely
the unseen),
Life of the great round world, the sun
and stars, and of man, I, the general
soul,
Here the square finishing, the solid, I
the most solid,
Breathe my breath also through these
songs.

With these inspired lines Whitman restores the lost feminine to the insufficient triangle/trinity, completing his reformation of the *quaternio*.

So, in retrospect, we can see that the loss of the feminine has been felt deeply by many of the important writers of the past; and that in response to the extreme harshness of authoritarian Calvinism, certain visionary writers were able to perceive and articulate their entire culture's sense of loss and envision a coming age in which the lost feminine would be recovered and lead us to a new level of consciousness.

But before this second coming can come about we must identify the nature of our deprivation: we must recover the suppressed goddess within, retrieve the divinity lost to two millenia of domination by patriarchal values. The most important revolution is still to come — the revolution in consciousness that will restore the orphan to the mother.

[1] C.G. Jung, "Psychology and Literature," in *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, Vol. 15 of *The Collected Works*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, (Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 98.

[2] *The Book of Job*, *The New English Bible* (Penguin), Ch. 38, v. 8, 9, 21; ch. 39, v. 1; Ch. 28, v. 23.

[3] *Ecclesiasticus*, from *The Apocrypha* (Authorized version, Oxford University Press), Ch. 24, v. 13-18.

[4] Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, 1979).

[5] *The Apocryphon of John*, from *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: 1981), II, *1*:1, 32ff.

[6] *The Apocryphon of John*, II, *1*:4, 34ff.

[7] Quoted by Pagels, p. 55.

[8] *Trimorphic Protennoia*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, XIII, *35*, 1 ff.; *42*, 18-19; *45*, 7 and 11.

[9] *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, VI, *13*, 17-22; 25-26; *14*, 27, 30, 31; *15*, 30-31; *16*, 25-26.