

Dark Light of the Soul

Kathryn Wood Madden, Ph.D.

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By Dennis Patrick Slattery, Ph.D.

One of many exciting qualities of Kathryn Madden's new book is that it is daring, bold and innovative. I say this because in her exploration of the 17th century mystic writer, Jacob Boehme's (1574-1624) *Ungrund* and C.G. Jung's (1875-1961) grasp of the Pleroma, she promotes a new field of study, depth theology. Its archetypal space is Abyss; its journey to it is through the underworld of psyche. No longer content with reinforcing the split between psyche and spirit, she engages a comparative reading of the two writers 1) to see where they found common ground in the realm of spirit, and 2) what their thought suggests about the formation of a spiritual psychology. The still center around which this conversation largely takes place is the images of "Other" and "Otherness" and the Abyss. Her work holds a particular fascination for me in large measure because of my interest in the possibility of a mystical psychology that engages both the poetic and the mythic impulses of psyche in and through embodiment.

She begins early in her study by revealing that both Boehme and Jung believed in a unitary reality underlying all psychic experience (2008, p. 18), an assertion she returns to repeatedly with different inflections of how this is so. At the outset Madden has more than just a series of ideas to compare in her study. Rather, she has a vision, a new way of apprehending psyche through the teachings of depth psychology and mystical experience that implicates as well the psyche's poetic impulse.

One of the author's motives for choosing to compare and extend the thought of Boehme and Jung is central to her study. Both of them took intense and life-altering

personal journeys into the depths of the psyche, their own Odyssean Nekyias. Both experienced breakdowns of what traditionally supported them (2008, p. 71). Boehme was persecuted by orthodox theologians of the 17th century in Germany, while Jung suffered a sustained dismantling of his sense of self that lasted 6 years. Both men felt that they were being called by a higher will to pursue their respective visions. Further, each gave expression to his individual journey to the Underworld through the terms Ungrund or Abyss (Boehme) and Pleroma, symbol of nothingness and fullness (Jung) (p. 78). Madden realizes that both men experienced a “unitary reality,” which prompted or compelled both of them to “create an enormous body of work” (p. 87).

According to the author, Boehme’s insight came initially through his Lutheran tradition by means of what he called *theogenesis*. What makes this such a radical idea is that it suggests, for Boehme that “it is God himself who is brought into being from pre-being” (p. 92), which grows directly from his own “inner journey” (p. 92). For Jung, by contrast, a comparable experience was the consequence of his extended Nekyia, which was haunted by demons; but it is also the region where is revealed the *prima materia* of one’s life work” (p. 93). One who has the requisite courage, it is implied here, to journey that deep into the unconscious, risks both the agony of dismemberment and the joys of a treasure discovered. Jung would later, Madden asserts, call this journey “individuation” (p. 94). Growing directly out of this experience, the unitary reality that resides antecedent to psyche can also be the origin of psychosis (p. 98). Both men were swallowed by the whale and inhabited its belly for some time before being deposited back on land. From their respective moments of return from the Abyss, their deepest work began.

Madden's punch line for her study follows quickly on the heels of the above observation: "If, as I contend, a unitary reality underlies all psychological experience, then as clinicians we ignore the 'spiritual realm and the divine' at the risk of the total psychic health of those in our care" (2008, p. 99). It seems to me that all leads to this observation and all emanates out from it. It is the hub of the spoked wheel of her many and complex theses. The spokes that extend from this center include mysticism, clinical practice, poetry, metaphysics, theology, epistemology and depth psychology.

Another quality of her study that I found most fascinating and convincing, if I step back a bit to survey the entire landscape, is Madden's insight that psyche is not the totality of our being; rather, antecedent to psyche is another realm, just as the writers she explores believed that beyond psyche was a nether region from which consciousness arises: the A-byss, a region without ground, without material reality, but in fact antecedent to matter and psyche. While Jung in his autobiography is emphatic about "all that is comprehended is in itself psychic, and to that extent we are hopelessly cooped up in an exclusively psychic world" (1963, p. 352), Madden continues quoting this same page in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Ibid.) that opens one up to another consideration:

Nevertheless, we have good reason to suppose that behind this veil there exists the uncomprehended absolute object which affects and influences us—and to suppose it even, or particularly, in the case of psychic phenomena about which no verifiable statements can be made (p.352). What lurks shimmering behind the veil, it seems to me, is what this study of the soul's dark light has as its concentrated focus.

For Boehme, according to Madden, the divine Sophia is what exists “before being, before time” (2008, p. 117). Sophia is the analogue to Jung’s Self or Self-field. Madden paraphrases Boehme’s insight that “The forming Sophia out of the abyss, is God’s first creative act” (p. 117), what Boehme himself writes as “the true Divine Chaos, wherein all things lie, namely, a Divine Imagination...(Ibid., 2008, p. 117). Both Sophia and the Self-knowledge gained from entering and descending into the abyss embody “a process of making unconscious into the conscious, the ‘hidden treasure’ into the ‘known’” (p. 127), which is the primary act of the Transcendent Function. Perhaps then the Divine Sophia is Boehme’s version of the same function Jung saw as a necessity in the individuation process.

Madden is guided in her exploration of Jung’s Pleroma by his own observation in 1932 that the second half of life seemed to reveal a constant in all his patients: “... there has not been one whose problems in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook in life” (Madden, p. 144). Her argument is that such a quest is also one of depth, of deepening one’s engagement with spirit in matter, spirit *as* matter.

The two case studies that Madden relates from her own practice add a very helpful and engaging story line, a psychic plot to her theories. As a non-therapist, I found them immensely helpful to ground her complex and rich discussion in the struggles of two women clients. Both examples illustrate how painful it is for an individual to live in a culture that moves almost exclusively and one-sidedly horizontally to the neglect of verticality, to depth, to the symbolic and to the transcendent, each of which adds richness of meaning to human experience. The imagination yearns for more than distraction and consumption.

The soul, she claims late in her study, yearns to return to the “psychoid, archetypal layer of the collective unconscious as a deep layer of existence in which a breakthrough experience of the numinous points to a pre-differentiated reality” (2008, p. 241). This deep desire in each of us comes with a cost of suffering into and through what comprises the texture of our lives. Without this wounding, however, Madden believes, a life may be only partially lived.

Inspired by her wisdom and moved by the contents of this study, I wrote the following poem to synthesize for myself the power of her insights.

Soul’s Dark Light

Do go gently into that
good night

where dark light awaits
humming across the outlines

of a Narcissus flower
streaming
on down the green leaves of
a beckoning bower—

The dark light of a soul’s shining
gaze
sees back in time to origins
of a unitary place.

Inside, the lotus springing forth
nourishes
by dark light, luminous tubers

its petals glowing a conscious
response
in the orbit of an idea
or a mirror that snags a spark

and sends it through a narrow

air hole
whirling towards a galaxy
from which it was composed.

Stay the dark light—walk in the forest
of a dark night
a gentle stroll
whose end path is an ancient memory
continually unfolding back into
itself.

Nowhere but through Gilead's walls
will the haze of grandeur
see itself, its spark, the fire's defiant seed
abundant in the milky swatch

of stars—

ceilings of a firmament
plump with joy's nurturing speed.

I walk along the lip of
mystery outlining wounds that
compose the abyss of
a single
hour.

In it rests glowing embers
There--the entire
Milky Way.

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