Delphoi, the Geography of the Female Body, And Irigaray’s Amorphous

In 2004, Susan Guettel Cole began an exploration of the associations of Landscapes, Gender & Ritual Space. I would like to pursue these ideas as they are expressed specifically at the Apolline oracle of Delphoi. It is my contention that the geography of the female body at Delphoi, was, like the female body of real Greek women, considered dangerous; and that it was only through its subjection to the male, in the person of Apollo, that it could be rendered safe and useful. The goal of Apollo’s appropriation of the irrational oracle may be illuminated by referencing the psychoanalytical theory of Luce Irigaray.

According to Irigaray, the matrix of all conscious symbolizing is the imaginary—the formless, inarticulate, associated with the feminine.Greek philosophy and Western systems in general have valorized the conscious and rational, the symbolic as male, at the expense of the imaginary. Apollo has been called the most rational of Greek divinities, yet his famous oracle at Delphoi relied upon the ravings of woman, a curious recognition of the necessity of the amorphous, or feminine. A look at the geography of Delphoi, as it must have registered upon the unconscious of ancient viewers, may explain the development of the Apolline myth, which in turn was confected to explain and justify current societal praxis.

The Delphic geography suggests the association with the female body:

1. The cavern is a womb-like hollow in the body of the earth, consistently represented as a feminine divinity.
2. The *omphalos* or navel of earth is found at Delphi. This stone is sometimes associated with the deception played by Rhea against her husband Kronos.
3. The underground springs that emerge from Delphi parallel the fluids thought to moisten and burst forth from the spongelike body of the woman.
4. The female body and its effluents were thought to spread dirt and danger. So too from the crevice of the Delphic womb there flowed out a *pneuma* that provided the amorphous matrix of the oracle, but also was a source of mortal danger.

Mythologically, the dragon Python, whose defeat signified the Apolline appropriation of Delphi, was the nurse and foster mother of Hera’s monstrous parthenogenetic child Typhaon: again, the association with defiance of the patriarchal order.

The Pythia, virginal or re-envirgined in old age, is the female priest who speaks the oracle. She is hollow like the earth, like Pandora the deceptive: her womb is never closed to hold in a fetus, but remains an open *hodos* within her, according to the gynecologists. However, this should render her mute, a victim of hysteria, the virgin’s disease. The virgin’s womb, wandering within her hollow body like an animal, like the dragoness within the *delphys* of earth, may suffocate her, cause her to lose her voice, cause her difficulty in expressing herself. Her ravings are literally hysterical. Only intercourse and conception can relieve these symptoms, by closing the lower lips of the womb so that the upper ones may open again.