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# STABAT MATER\*

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## THE PARADOX: MOTHER OR PRIMARY NARCISSISM

If, in speaking of a *woman*, it is impossible to say what she *is* – for to do so would risk abolishing her difference – might matters not stand differently with respect to the *mother*, motherhood being the sole function of the “other sex” to which we may confidently attribute existence? Yet here, too, we are caught in a paradox. To begin with, we live in a civilization in which the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity. Under close examination, however, this maternity turns out to be an adult (male and female) fantasy of a lost continent: what is involved, moreover, is not so much an idealized primitive mother as an idealization of the – unlocalizable – *relationship* between her and us, an idealization of primary narcissism. When feminists call for a new representation of femininity, they seem to identify maternity with this idealized misapprehension; and feminism, because it rejects this image and its abuses, sidesteps the real experience that this fantasy obscures. As a result, maternity is repudiated or denied by some avant-garde feminists, while its traditional representations are wittingly or unwittingly accepted by the “broad mass” of women and men.

**FLASH – an instant of time** Christianity is no doubt the  
**or a timeless dream;** most sophisticated symbolic con-  
**atoms** struct in which femininity, to  
**swollen beyond measure, atoms** the extent that it figures therein  
**of a bond, a vision, a shiver, a** – and it does so constantly – is  
**still shapeless embryo, unname-** confined within the limits of  
**able. Epiphanies. Photos of what**

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is not yet visible and which language necessarily surveys from a very high altitude, allusively. Words always too remote, too abstract to capture the subterranean swarm of seconds, insinuating themselves into unimaginable places. Writing them down tests an argument, as does love. What is love, for a woman, the same thing as writing. Laugh. Impossible. Flash on the unnameable, woven of abstractions to be torn apart. Let a body finally venture out of its shelter, expose itself in meaning beneath a veil of words. WORD FLESH. From one to the other, eternally, fragmented visions, metaphors of the invisible.

the Virgin mother is not always evident, and we shall see later just how Mary is distinguished from the human race, for example by her freedom from sin. At the same time, however, mysticism, that most intense form of divine revelation, is vouchsafed only to those who take the "maternal" upon themselves. Saint Augustine, Saint Bernard, and Meister Eckhart, to name just three among many, assume the role of virgin spouse to the Father, and Bernard even receives drops of virginal milk on his lips. Comfortable in their relation to the maternal "continent," mystics use this comfort as a pedestal on which to erect their love of God; these "happy Schrebers," as Philippe Sollers calls them, thus shed a bizarre light on modernity's psychotic lesion, namely, the apparent incapacity of modern codes to make the maternal — i.e., primary narcissism — tractable. Rare and "literary" if always rather oriental, not to say tragic, are the mystics' contemporary counterparts: think of Henry Miller's claim to be pregnant or Artaud's imagining himself to be like "his girls" or "his mother." It is Christianity's Orthodox branch, through the golden tongue of John Chrysostom among others, that will consecrate this transitional function of the Maternal by referring to the Virgin as a "link," a "surrounding," or an "interval," thereby opening the way to more or less heretical attempts to identify the Virgin with the Holy Spirit.

the *Maternal*.<sup>1</sup> By "maternal" I mean the ambivalent principle that derives on the one hand from the species and on the other hand from a catastrophe of identity which plunges the proper Name into that "unnameable" that somehow involves our imaginary representations of femininity, non-language, or the body. Thus, Christ, the Son of man, is in the end "human" only through his mother: as if Christic or Christian humanism could not help being a form of maternalism (which is precisely the claim that has been made repeatedly, in a characteristically esoteric fashion, by certain secularizing tendencies within Christian humanism). Yet the humanity of

1. For information about matters not covered here, see the two books that provided much of the basis for the reflections contained in this paper, Warner (1976) and Barande (1977).

Many civilizations have subsumed femininity under the Maternal, but Christianity in its own way developed this tendency to the full. The question is whether this was simply an appropriation of the Maternal by men and therefore, according to our working hypothesis, just a fantasy hiding the primary narcissism from view, or was it perhaps also the mechanism of enigmatic sublimation? This may have been masculine sublimation, but it was still sublimation, assuming that for Freud imagining Leonardo — and even for Leonardo himself — taming the Maternal — or primary narcissistic — economy is a necessary precondition of artistic or literary achievement.

Yet this approach leaves many questions unanswered, among them the following two. First, what is it about the representation of the Maternal in general, and about the Christian or virginal representation in particular, that enables it not only to calm social anxiety and supply what the male lacks, but also to satisfy a woman, in such a way that the community of the sexes is established beyond, and in spite of, their flagrant incompatibility and permanent state of war? Second, what is it about this representation that fails to take account of what a woman might say or want of the Maternal, so that when today women make their voices heard, the issues of conception and maternity are a major focus of discontent? Such protests go beyond sociopolitical issues and raise “civilization’s discontents” to such a pitch that even Freud recoiled at the prospect: the discontent is somehow in the species itself.

#### A TRIUMPH OF THE UNCONSCIOUS IN MONOTHEISM

It seems that the epithet “virgin” applied to Mary was an error of translation: for the Semitic word denoting the social-legal status of an unmarried girl the translator substituted the Greek *parthenos*, which denotes a physiological and psychological fact, virginity. It is possible to read this as an instance of the Indo-European fascination (analyzed by Georges Dumézil) with the virgin daughter as repository of the father’s power. It may also be interpreted as an ambivalent, and highly spiritualized, evocation of the underlying mother goddess and matriarchy, with which Greek culture and Jewish monotheism were locked in combat. Be that as it may, it remains true that Western Christendom orchestrated this “error of translation” by projecting its own fantasies on it, thereby producing one of the most potent imaginary constructs known to any civilization.

The history of the Christian cult of the Virgin is actually the history of the imposition of beliefs with pagan roots upon, and sometimes in opposition to, the official dogma of the Church. Admittedly, the Gospels acknowledge the existence of Mary. But they allude only in the most discreet way to the immaculate conception, say nothing at all about Mary’s own history, and seldom

depict her in the company of her son or in the scene surrounding his crucifixion. Thus we read, for example, in Matthew 1.20, that “the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.” And Luke 1.34 has Mary saying to the angel, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” These texts open a path, narrow to be sure but quickly widened by apocryphal additions, that leads to the possibility of pregnancy without sex, wherein a woman preserved from penetration by a male conceives solely with the aid of a “third person” or, rather, non-person, the Spirit. On the rare occasions when the Mother of Jesus does appear in the Gospels, it is in order to signify the fact that the filial bond has to do not with the flesh but with the name; in other words, any trace of matrilinearity is explicitly disavowed, leaving only the symbolic tie between mother and son. Witness, for example, Luke 2.48–49: “And his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them, How is that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” And John 2.3: “The mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come.” Or again, John 19.26–27: “When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own *home*.”

From this rather meager programmatic material an irresistible complex of images grew, essentially along three lines. The first involved attempts to establish an analogy between the Mother and the Son by developing the theme of the immaculate conception; by inventing a biography for Mary paralleling that of Jesus; and, by freeing Mary in this way from sin, freeing her also from death: Mary passes away in Dormition or Assumption. The second involved granting Mary letters of nobility, making use of a power which though exercised in the afterlife was nonetheless political, in that she was proclaimed queen, endowed with the attributes and paraphernalia of royalty, and simultaneously declared Mother of the divine institution on earth, the Church. Finally, the relationship to Mary and of Mary was revealed as the prototype of the love relationship; it consequently followed the development of those two fundamental subcategories of Western love, courtly love and love of the child, and thus became involved in the whole range of love-types from sublimation to asceticism and masochism.

#### NEITHER SEX NOR DEATH

The idea to model an imaginary life of Mary on that of Jesus seems

to have come from the apocryphal literature. The story of Mary's miraculous or "immaculate" conception by Anne and Joachim after a long childless marriage, as well as the depiction of her as a pious young woman, first appears in apocryphal sources at the end of the first century. It may be found in its entirety in the Book of James as well as the Gospel according to pseudo-Matthew (which became the inspiration of Giotto's frescoes). The "facts" were cited by Clement of Alexandria and Origen but not officially recognized, and although the Eastern Orthodox church tolerated the stories without difficulty, they were not translated into Latin until the sixteenth century. The West was not slow, however, to glorify the life of Mary, using methods of its own, albeit still of Orthodox inspiration. The first Latin poem on Mary's birth, entitled "Maria," was the work of Hroswitha of Gandersheim (d. before 1002), a poet and playwright as well as a nun.

In the fourth century the notion of an immaculate conception was further developed and rationalized by grafting the Church Fathers' arguments for asceticism onto the spirit of the apocrypha. The logic of the case was simple: sexuality implies death and vice versa, so that it is impossible to escape the latter without shunning the former. A vigorous proponent of asceticism for both sexes was Saint John Chrysostom, who has the following to say in *On Virginity*: "For where there is death, there too is sexual coupling; and where there is no death, there is no sexual coupling either" (Warner 1976:52). Though combatted by Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas, Chrysostom was not without influence on Christian doctrine. Augustine, for example, condemned "concupiscence" (*epithumia*) and asserted that Mary's virginity was in fact merely a logical prerequisite for the chastity of Christ. The Orthodox church, which was doubtless the heir to a more violent matriarchy prevalent in the East, was bolder in emphasizing Mary's virginity. A contrast was drawn between Mary and Eve, life and death, as in Saint Jerome's *Twenty-second Letter*: "Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary"; and Irenaeus wrote that through Mary "the guile of the serpent was overcome by the simplicity of the dove and we are set free from those chains by which we had been bound to death" (Warner 1976:54, 60). There were even some rather tortuous debates over the question whether Mary remained a virgin after giving birth: thus in A.D. 381 the Second Council of Constantinople, under the influence of Arianism, placed greater stress on Mary's role than did official dogma and proclaimed her perpetual virginity, and the council of A.D. 451 declared her *Aetiparthenos*, forever virgin. Once this position was established, it became possible to proclaim that Mary was not merely the Mother of man or Christ but the Mother of God, *Theotokos*, as the patriarch Nestor did, thus deifying her once and for all.

The strained eardrum wresting sound from the heedless silence. Wind in the grass, the cry of a gull in the distance, echoes of the waves, of sirens, of voices, or of nothing? Or his, my newborn child's, tears, syncopated spasm of the void. Now I hear nothing, but my eardrum continues to transmit this sonorous vertigo to my skull, to the roots of my hair. My body is no longer mine, it writhes, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, bites, slavers, coughs, breaks out in a rash, and laughs. Yet when his, my son's, joy returns, his smile cleanses only my eyes. But suffering, his suffering – that I feel inside; that never remains separate or alien but embraces me at once without a moment's respite. As if I had brought not a child but suffering into the world and it, suffering, refused to leave me, insisted on coming back, on haunting me, permanently. One does not bear children in pain, it's pain that one bears: the child is pain's representative and once delivered moves in for good. Obviously you can close your eyes, stop up your ears, teach courses, run errands, clean house, think about things, about ideas. But a mother is also marked by pain, she succumbs to it. "And you, one day a sword will pass through your soul."

bore him can only be preserved from sin "recursively," as it were, from her own conception up to the moment of that redemption.

Pitting Jesuits against Dominicans, the battle that raged around the Virgin intensified on both sides, for and against, dogma versus clever logic, until finally, as is well known, the Counter Reformation overcame all resistance: from then on Catholics have venerated Mary in her own person. The Company of Jesus successfully concluded a

The highly complex relationship between Christ and his Mother served as a matrix within which various other relations – God to mankind, man to woman, son to mother, etc. – took shape; this relationship soon gave rise to questions involving not only *causality* but also *time*. If Mary is prior to Christ, and if he, or at any rate his humanity, originates with her, then must she not too be immaculate? For otherwise a person conceived in sin and carrying sin within herself would have given birth to a God, and how could this be? Some apocryphal writers suggested with imprudent haste that Mary had indeed been conceived without sin, but the Fathers were more cautious. Saint Bernard refused to celebrate Saint Mary's conception by Saint Anne and in this way attempted to impede the assimilation of Mary's life to that of Christ. But it was Duns Scotus who transformed this hesitation about promoting a mother goddess to a position within Christianity into a logical problem, in order to safeguard both the Great Mother and logic. He took the view that Mary's birth was a *praeredemptio*, based on an argument of congruity: if it is true that it is Christ alone who saves us by his redemption on the cross, then the Virgin who

process initiated by popular pressure filtered through patristic asceticism, and managed, without explicit hostility or blunt repudiation, to gain control of that aspect of the Maternal (in the sense I mentioned earlier) that was useful for establishing a certain equilibrium between the sexes. Oddly though inevitably, it was when this equilibrium was first seriously threatened in the nineteenth century that the Catholic Church, in 1854, gave the Immaculate Conception the status of dogma (thus showing itself to be more dialectical and more subtle than the Protestants, who were already engendering the first suffragettes). It is frequently suggested that the flourishing of feminism in the Protestant countries is due, among other things, to the fact that women there are allowed greater initiative in social life and ritual. But one wonders if it is not also due to Protestantism's *lacking* some necessary element of the Maternal which in Catholicism has been elaborated with the utmost sophistication by the Jesuits (and which again makes Catholicism very difficult to analyze).

That entity compounded of woman and God and given the name Mary was made complete by the avoidance of death. The fate of the Virgin Mary is more radiant even than that of her son: not having been crucified, she has no tomb and does not die, and therefore she has no need of resurrection. Mary does not die but rather — echoing Taoist and other oriental beliefs in which human bodies pass from one place to another in a never-ending cycle which is in itself an imitation of the process of childbirth — she passes over.

This transition is more passive in the east than in the west: the Orthodox Church holds to the doctrine of *Koimesis*, or Dormition, which in some iconographic representations has Mary becoming a little girl held in the arms of her son, who now becomes her Father; she thus passes from the role of Mother to that of Daughter, to the great pleasure of students of Freud's "Three Caskets."

Not only is Mary her son's *mother* and his *daughter*, she is also his *wife*. Thus she passes through all three women's stages in the most restricted of all possible kinship systems. Adapting the Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux in 1135 glorified Mary in the role of beloved spouse. But long before that, Catherine of Alexandria (martyred in A.D. 307) imagined herself receiving the wedding ring from Christ aided by the Virgin; and later Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) entered into a mystical marriage with Christ. Was it the impact of Mary's role as Christ's beloved and spouse that was responsible for the rapid spread of Mariolatry in the West after Bernard and thanks to the Cistercians? "*Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo Figlio*," exclaimed Dante, who perhaps best captures the combination of the three feminine roles — daughter-wife-mother — within a whole, where they lose their specific corporeal identities while retaining their psychological functions. The nexus of these three functions is the basis of immutable and atemporal spirituality: "the

fixed term of an eternal design,” as *The Divine Comedy* magisterially puts it.

By contrast, in the West, Mary’s transition is more active: in the Assumption she rises body and soul to another world. Celebrated in Byzantium as early as the fourth century, the feast of the Assumption came to Gaul in the seventh century under the influence of the Eastern Church, but the earliest visions of the Virgin’s assumption (all women’s visions, and most notably that of Elisabeth of Schonau, d. 1164) date back no farther than the twelfth century. The Vatican did not declare the Assumption to be dogma until 1950 – and even then (we may speculate) only to calm widespread anxieties over death in the aftermath of the most lethal of all wars.

#### FIGURE OF POWER

Turning now to the question of “power,” an image of *Maria Regina* dating as far back as the sixth century can be found in Rome’s Santa Maria Antiqua. It is interesting to observe that it is Mary, woman and mother, who takes it upon herself to represent the supreme terrestrial power. Christ is king, but it is neither Jesus nor his Father that one sees wearing crowns, diadems, sumptuous robes, and other external signs of abundant material wealth. The Virgin Mary became the center of this twisting of Christian idealism in the direction of opulence. When she later assumed the title of Our Lady, moreover, it was by analogy with the noble lady of the feudal court. The Church later became wary of Mary’s role as repository of power and tried to put a halt to it, but it nevertheless persisted in popular and artistic imagery – witness Piero della Francesca’s impressive painting *Madonna della Misericordia*, which was disavowed in its time by the Catholic authorities. Yet not only did the papacy venerate Christ’s mother increasingly as it consolidated its power over the towns, it also openly identified the papal institution itself with the Virgin: Mary was officially proclaimed Queen by Pius XII in 1954 and *Mater Ecclesiae* in 1964.

#### EIA MATER, FONDS AMORIS!

Ultimately, several fundamental features of western love converge in Mary. Initially, the cult of the Virgin, which assimilated Mary to Jesus and pushed asceticism to an extreme, seems to have contrasted sharply with courtly love for the noble lady, which constituted a social transgression but nothing of a physical or moral sin. Yet even in its carnal beginnings courtly love had this in common with Mariolatry, that both Mary and the Lady were focal points of men’s aspirations and desires. Furthermore, by dint of uniqueness, by the exclusion of all other women, both were embodiments of an absolute authority that was all the more attractive because it seemed not to be subject to the severity of the father. This feminine power must have

been experienced as power denied, all the more pleasant to seize because it was both archaic and secondary, an ersatz yet not less authoritarian form of the real power in the family and the city, a cunning double of the explicit phallic power. From the thirteenth century, helped by the establishment of ascetic forms of Christianity, and especially after 1328, when the Salic Laws — prohibiting inheritance by daughters — were promulgated, making the beloved lady quite vulnerable and tinging love for her with every shade of the impossible, the Marian tradition and the courtly tradition tended to merge. With Blanche of Castille (d. 1252), the Virgin explicitly became the focus of courtly love, combining the qualities of the desired woman and the holy mother in a totality as perfect as it was inaccessible. Enough to make any woman suffer and any man dream. And indeed one *Miracle of Our Lady* tells of a young man who abandons his fiancée for the Virgin after Mary reproaches him in a dream for having left her for an “earthly woman.”

The smell of milk, dew-drenched greenery, sour and clear, a memory of wind, of air, of seaweed (as if a body lived without waste): it glides under my skin, not stopping at the mouth or nose but caressing my veins, and stripping the skin from the bones fills me like a balloon full of ozone and I plant my feet firmly on the ground in order to carry him, safe, stable, unuprootable, while he dances in my neck, floats with my hair, looks right and left for a soft shoulder, “slips on the breast, swingles, silver vivid blossom of my belly” and finally flies up from my navel in his dream, borne by my hands. My son.

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A night of vigil, fitful sleep, the child’s gentleness, hot mercury in my arms, caress, tenderness, defenseless body, his or mine, sheltered, protected. Another wave rises under my skin after he falls asleep — belly, thighs, legs: sleep of the muscles not the

Meanwhile, alongside this ideal that no individual woman could possibly embody, the Virgin also served as a mooring point for the humanization of the West, and in particular for the humanization of love. It was again in the thirteenth century, with Saint Francis, that this tendency took shape, producing representations of Mary as a poor, modest, and humble woman as well as a tender, devoted mother. Pietro della Francesca’s celebrated *Nativity*, now in London, which Simone de Beauvoir was too quick to see as a defeat for women because it depicts a mother kneeling before her newborn son, actually epitomizes the new cult of humanist sensibility. For the high spirituality that assimilated the Virgin to Christ, the painting substitutes an altogether human image of a mother of flesh and blood. Such maternal humility has inspired the most widespread of pious images and comes closer than early images to women’s “real-

brain, sleep of the flesh. The watchful tongue tenderly remembers another abandonment, my own: decorated lead at the foot of the bed, a hollow, the sea. Childhood regained, recreated, dreamed-of peace, in sparks, flash of the cells, moments of laughter, a smile in the black of a dream, night, an opaque joy that holds me fast in my mother's bed and propels him, a son, a butterfly drinking dew from his hand, there, beside me in the night. Alone: she, I and he.

price to pay. And that price is all the more easy to bear in that, compared with the love that binds mother to son, all other "human relationships" stand revealed as flagrant imitations. The Franciscan representation of the Mother adequately captured certain essential aspects of maternal psychology, thus not only bringing large numbers of worshipers into the churches but also extending the Marian cult to a remarkable degree, as is shown by the large numbers of churches that were dedicated to Our Lady. The humanization of Christianity through the cult of the Mother also led to a new interest in the humanity of the man-father: the celebration of family life brought Joseph to prominence in the fifteenth century.

#### WHAT BODY

Of the virginal body we are entitled only to the ear, the tears, and the breasts. That the female sexual organ has been transformed into an innocent shell which serves only to receive sound may ultimately contribute to an eroticization of hearing and the voice, not to say of understanding. But by the same token sexuality is reduced to a mere implication. The female sexual experience is therefore anchored in the universality of sound, since the spirit is *equally* given to all men, to all women. A woman has only two choices: either to experience herself in sex *hyperabstractly* (in an "immediately universal" way, as Hegel would say) so as to make herself worthy of divine grace and assimilation to the symbolic order, or else to experience herself as *different*, other, fallen (or, in Hegel's terms again, "immediately particular"). But she will not be able to achieve her complexity as a divided, heterogeneous being, a "fold-catastrophe"<sup>2</sup> of the "to-be" (or, in Hegel's terms, the "never singular").

2. The allusion is to René Thom's theory of catastrophes. (Translator's note.)

The lover gone: now comes oblivion, but the pleasure of the sexes remains, and nothing is missing. No representation, sensation, memory. The brazier of vice. Later, forgetfulness returns, but now as a fall – of lead – gray, pale, opaque. Oblivion: a blinding, choking, yet tender mist. Like the fog that devours the park, swallowing its branches, wiping out the rusty new sun and clouding my eyes.

Absence, brazier, oblivion. Scansion of our loves.

Leaving, in place of the heart, a hunger. A spasm that spreads, that travels down the vessels to the ends of the breasts, to the tips of the fingers. It palpitates, bores a hole in the emptiness, erases it, and little by little takes up residence. My heart: an immense, beating wound. A thirst.

Anxious, guilty. The *Vaterkomplex* of Freud at the Acropolis? The impossibility of existing without repeated legitimation (without books, map, family). Impossibility – depressing possibility – of “transgression.”

Or of the repression in which *I* passes to the Other, what I desire from others.

Or this murmur of emptiness, this open wound in my heart which means that I exist only in purgatory.

I desire the Law. And since it is not made for me alone, I run the risk of desiring outside the law. Then, the narcissism thus awakened that wants to be sex, wanders inflated. In the transport of the senses, I come up

The virgin mother’s ample blue gown will allow only the breast to be seen of the body underneath, while her face will gradually be covered with tears as the stiffness of the Byzantine icons is slowly overcome. Milk and tears are the signs *par excellence* of the *Mater dolorosa* who began invading the West in the eleventh century and reached a peak in the fourteenth. From then on she has never ceased to fill the Marian visions of all those, men and women (or frequently male child, female child) who suffer the anguish of some maternal frustration. That orality – the threshold of infantile regression – manifests itself in connection with the breast whereas the spasm that comes at eroticism’s eclipse is associated with tears should not be allowed to obscure what milk and tears have in common: both are metaphors of non-language, of a “semiotic” that does not coincide with linguistic communication. The Mother and her attributes signifying suffering humanity thus become the symbol of a “return of the repressed” in monotheism. They reestablish the nonverbal and appear as a signifying modality closer to the so-called primary processes. Without them the complexity of the Holy Spirit would no doubt have been mutilated. Returning through the Virgin Mother, they instead found fertile soil in art – painting and music – of which the Virgin would of necessity become both patron and privileged object.

empty-handed. Nothing reassures because only the law makes permanent. Who calls this suffering ecstasy? It is the pleasure of the damned.

aspires to achieve and at times transcends, to the extralinguistic realms of the unnameable, the Virgin Mother occupies the vast territory that lies on either side of the parenthesis of language. She adds to the Christian Trinity, and to the Word which gives it its coherence, a heterogeneity that they subsume.

The ordering of the maternal libido is carried farthest in connection with the theme of death. The *Mater dolorosa* knows no male body except that of her dead son, and her only pathos (which is sharply distinguished from the sweet and somewhat absent serenity of the lactating Madonnas) comes from the tears she sheds over a corpse. Since resurrection lies in the offing, and since as the Mother of God she ought to know that it does, nothing justifies Mary's anguish at the foot of the cross unless it is the desire to feel in her own body what it is like for a man to be put to death, a fate spared her by her female role as source of life. Is the love of women who weep over the bodies of the dead a love as obscure as it is ancient, nourished by the same source as the aspiration of a woman whom nothing satisfies, namely, the desire to feel the thoroughly masculine pain of the male who, obsessed with the thought of death, expires at each moment of ecstasy? Still, Mary's suffering has nothing of tragic excess about it: joy and indeed a kind of triumph supplant her tears, as if the conviction that death does not exist were an unreasonable but unshakeable maternal certainty, upon which the principle of resurrection must have rested for support. The majestic figure of this woman twisted one way by desire for the male cadaver and the other by a denial of death — a twisting whose paranoid logic should not go unmentioned — is served up in magisterial fashion by the well-known *Stabat Mater*. All belief in resurrection is probably rooted in mythologies dominated by the mother goddess. True, Christianity found its vocation in the displacement of this bio-maternal determinism by the postulate that immortality belongs primarily to the Name of the Father. But it could not achieve its symbolic revolution without drawing on the support of the feminine representation of biological immortality. Is it not the image of Mary braving death depicted in the many variations of the *Stabat Mater* which (in the text attributed to Jacopone da Todi) enraptures us even today in musical compositions from Palestrina to Pergolesi, Haydn, and Rossini?

Listen to the "baroquism" of the young Pergolesi (1710–1736) dying of tuberculosis while writing his immortal *Stabat Mater*. His musical invention, which, conveyed through Haydn, would be heard

Thus we witness the emergence of the "virginal Maternal" function in the symbolic economy of the West: from the high

Christic sublimation which she

transcends, to the extralinguistic realms of the unnameable, the Virgin Mother occupies the vast territory that lies on either side of the parenthesis of language. She adds to the Christian Trinity, and to the Word which gives it its coherence, a heterogeneity that they subsume.

again in Mozart, is no doubt his only form of immortality. But when we hear the cry, "*Eia mater, fons amoris!*" ("Hail, mother, source of love"), referring to Mary confronting the death of her son, is it merely a residue of the baroque era? Man surmounts death, the unthinkable, by postulating instead – in the stead and place of thought as well as of death – maternal love. That love, of which divine love will be no more than a not always convincing derivative, is psychologically perhaps just a memory, prior to the primary identifications of the primitive shelter that guaranteed the survival of the newborn child. Logically in fact, that love is an unfurling of anguish at the very moment when the identity of thought and the living body breaks down. When the possibilities of communication are swept away, the last remaining rampart against death is the subtle spectrum of auditory, tactile, and visual memories that precede language and reemerge in its absence. Nothing could be more "normal" than that a maternal image should establish itself on the site of that tempered anguish known as love. No one is spared. Except perhaps the saint or the mystic, or the writer who, by force of language, can still manage nothing more than to demolish the fiction of the mother-as-love's-mainstay and to identify with love as it really is: *a fire of tongues*, an escape from representation. For the few who practice it, then, is modern art not a realization of maternal love – a veil over death, assuming death's very place and knowing that it does? A sublimated celebration of incest. . .

#### ALONE OF ALL HER SEX

Incommensurable, unlocalizable maternal body.

First there is division, which precedes the pregnancy but is revealed by it, irrevocably imposed.

. . . Then another abyss opens between this body and the body that was inside it: the abyss that separates mother and child. What relationship is there between me or, more modestly, between my body and this internal graft, this crease inside, which with the cutting of the umbilical cord becomes another person, inaccessible? My body and . . . him. No relation. Nothing to do with one another. Nothing to do from the first gestures, cries, steps,

Among the many art objects and archeological curiosities that Freud collected were innumerable statuettes of mother goddesses. Yet in the work of the founder of psychoanalysis this interest is alluded to only discreetly. It does come up in his study of Leonardo, where Freud considers artistic creation and homosexuality and in so doing discovers the influence of an archaic mother figure, which is thus seen in terms of its effects on man, and more particularly on the curious function he sometimes has: that of changing languages. Elsewhere, in analyzing changes that occurred in monotheism, Freud emphasizes

well before *his* personality has made him my opposite: the child, *he* or *she*, is irremediably another. That “there is no relation between the sexes” (Lacan) is not much of a surprise in the face of this bolt of lightning that blinds me on the brink of the abyss between me and what was mine but is now irremediably alien. Try to imagine this abyss: dizzying visions. No identity lies therein. A mother’s identity survives only thanks to the well-known fact that consciousness is lulled by habit, wherein a woman protects herself along the frontier that divides her body and makes an expatriate of her child. A kind of lucidity, however, might restore her, cut in two, one half alien to the other — fertile soil for delirium. But also, and for that very reason maternity along its borders destines us to experience a frenzied ecstasy to which by chance the nursling’s laugh responds in the sunlit ocean’s waters. What is the relationship between him and me? No relation, except that abundant laughter into which some sonorous, subtle, fluid identity collapses, gently carried by the waves.

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From that time in my childhood, fragrant, warm and soft to the touch, I retain only a memory of space. Nothing of time. The smell of honey, the roundness of things, silk and velvet under my fingers, on my cheeks. Mama. Almost nothing visual — a shadow that plunges into black-

the fact that Christianity, in opposition to the rigor of Judaism, reduced the gap between itself and pagan myth by incorporating a preconscious recognition of a maternal feminine. But one looks in vain to Freud’s case studies for insight into mothers and their problems. It might seem as though maternity were a remedy for neurosis which *ipso facto* eliminated the need for a woman to seek that other remedy, psychoanalysis. Or that in this area psychoanalysis deferred to religion. Broadly speaking, the only thing that Freud has to say about maternity is that the desire to have a child is a transformation of penis envy or anal compulsion, which led him to discover the equation child = penis = faeces. This discovery does indeed shed a good deal of light not only on male fantasies concerning childbirth, but also on female fantasies insofar as they conform to the male ones, which they largely do in their hysterical labyrinths. Still, about the complexities and difficulties of the maternal experience Freud has absolutely nothing to say, though it may interest students of his work to note that he reports his mother’s efforts to prove to him one day, in the kitchen, that his body was not immortal but would eventually crumble like pastry dough, or to look closely at the bitter photographs of Frau Martha Freud, the wife, which tell a whole story without words. Thus Freud’s successors were in effect left an entire dark continent to

ness, absorbs me or disappears in a few flashes of light. Almost no voice, in its placid presence. Except perhaps, from a later time, the sound of quarreling: her exasperation, her being fed up, her hatred. Never direct, always restrained, as if, though deserved by the stubborn child, the mother's hatred could not be received by the daughter, was not destined for her. A hatred without a recipient, or rather, whose recipient was no "ego" and which, troubled by this absence of receptivity, attenuated itself by irony or collapsed in remorse before its arrival. In some women this maternal aversion can work itself up to a delayed spasm, like a slow orgasm. Women no doubt reproduce between them the peculiar, forgotten forms of close combat in which they engaged with their mothers. Complicity in the non-said, connivance in the unsayable, the wink of an eye, the tone of voice, the gesture, the color, the smell: we live in such things, escapees from our identity cards and our names, loose in an ocean of detail, a data-bank of the unnameable. Between individuals there is no communication but a matching of atoms, molecules, scraps of words, fragments of phrases. The community of women is a community of heirs apparent. Con-

explore, and Jung was the first to plunge in with his whole panoply of esoteric notions, which is not to say that he did not succeed in calling attention to certain prominent features of the unconscious that not only have a bearing on maternity but still have not yielded to analytic rationality.<sup>3</sup>

Those interested in what maternity is for a woman will no doubt be able to shed new light on this obscure topic by listening, with greater attentiveness than in the past, to what today's mothers have to say not only about their economic difficulties but also, and despite the legacy of guilt left by overly existentialist approaches to feminism, about malaise, insomnia, joy, rage, desire, suffering, and happiness. At the same time we can also try to gain a clearer picture of the Virgin, that prodigious structure of maternity that the West has erected; the foregoing remarks merely record a few episodes in a history that refuses to come to an end.

What is it then, which, in this maternal figure who alone of all her sex departed from the customary ways of both sexes, allowed her to become both an object with whom women wished to identify and an object that those responsible for maintaining the social and symbolic

3. For example, Jung noted the "hierogamic" relations between Mary and Christ, as well as the peculiar overprotection of the Virgin with respect to original sin, which places her on the fringes of humanity. He also lays a good deal of stress on the acceptance of the Assumption as dogma by the Vatican, which Jung regarded as a significant advantage of Catholicism over Protestantism (Jung, 1964).

versely, when the other woman appears as such, that is, in her singularity and necessary opposition, "I" am seized to the point where "I" no longer exist. There are then two possible ways of carrying out the rejection that affirms the other woman as such. Either, unwilling to know her, I ignore her and, "alone of my sex," I amicably turn my back on her: hatred that has no recipient worthy of its virulence turns into indifferent complacency. Or else, offended by the other woman's obstinate persistence in believing herself to be singular, I refuse to accept her claim to be the recipient of my hatred and find respite only in the eternal return of physical blows, of hatred striking out — blind, heedless, but obstinate. . . . In this weird feminine seesaw that swings "me" out of the unnameable community of women into single combat with another woman, it is perturbing to say "I." The languages of great civilizations that used to be matrilinear must avoid, do avoid the use of personal pronouns: they leave it up to the context to distinguish the protagonists, and take refuge in tones of voice to recover a submerged, transverbal correspondence of bodies. A piece of music whose so-called oriental civility is suddenly interrupted by acts of violence, murders, bloodbaths: isn't that what "women's discourse" would be? Wasn't stopping the motion of that seesaw one of the things Christianity wanted to accomplish? Stop it, free women from its rhythm, and

order felt it necessary to manipulate?

I want to suggest the following hypothesis: that the "virginal maternal" is a way — and, I might add, not a bad way — of coping with female paranoia.

— The Virgin assumes her female denial of the other sex (of man), but subjugates it by setting a third person against the other: I am a Virgin, *I* conceived not by *you* but by *Him*. This results in an immaculate conception, untainted by man or sex, but still a conception, out of which comes a God in whose existence a woman does therefore play an important part, provided that she acknowledges her subservience.

— The Virgin assumes the paranoid desire for power by turning a woman into the Queen of Heaven and the Mother of earthly institutions — the Church. But she then suppresses her megalomania by kneeling before the child-god.

— The Virgin obliterates the desire to murder or devour through a strong oral investment — the breast; she attaches a positive value to suffering — the sob; and she encourages replacement of the sexual body by the ear of understanding.

— The Virgin assumes the paranoid fantasy of being excluded from time and death, through the very flattering image associated with the Dormition or Assumption.

— Above all, the Virgin subscribes to the foreclosure of the other woman — which funda-

install them definitively in the bosom of the spirit? All too definitively. . . . mentally is probably a foreclosure of the woman's mother — by projecting an image of the One, the Unique Woman: unique among women, unique among mothers, and, since she is without sin, unique also among humans of both sexes. But this recognition of the desire of uniqueness is immediately checked by the postulate that uniqueness is achieved only by way of exacerbated masochism: an actual woman worthy of the feminine ideal embodied in inaccessible perfection by the Virgin could not be anything other than a nun or a martyr; if married, she would have to lead a life that would free her from her "earthly" condition by confining her to the uttermost sphere of sublimation, alienated from her own body. But there a bonus awaits her: the assurance of ecstasy.

Striking a shrewd balance between concessions to and constraints upon female paranoia, the representation of virgin motherhood seems to have crowned society's efforts to reconcile survivals of matrilinearity and the unconscious needs of primary narcissism on the one hand with, on the other hand, the imperatives of the nascent exchange economy and, before long, of accelerated production, which required the addition of the superego and relied on the father's symbolic authority.

Now that this once carefully balanced structure seems in danger of tottering, the following question arises: to what aspects of the feminine psyche does this representation of the maternal offer no answer, or at any rate no answer that is not too coercive for women in this century to accept?

The weight of the "non-said" (*non-dit*) no doubt affects the mother's body first of all: no signifier can cover it completely, for the signifier is always meaning (*sens*), communication or structure, whereas a mother-woman is rather a strange "fold" (*pli*) which turns nature into culture, and the "speaking subject" (*le parlant*) into biology. Although it affects each woman's body, this heterogeneity, which cannot be subsumed by the signifier, literally explodes with pregnancy — the dividing line between nature and culture — and with the arrival of the child — which frees a woman from uniqueness and gives her a chance, albeit not a certainty, of access to the other, to the ethical. These peculiarities of the maternal body make a woman a creature of folds, a catastrophe of being that cannot be subsumed by the dialectic of the trinity or its supplements.

Nor is there any less silence concerning the mental and physical suffering associated with childbirth and, even more, with the self-denial implicit in making oneself anonymous in order to transmit social norms which one may disavow for oneself but which *one must* pass on to the child, whose education is a link to generations past. But, with the ambivalence characteristic of masochism, this suffering

goes hand in hand with jubilation, whereby a woman ordinarily averse to perversion allows herself to engage in “coded” perversity, a perversity that is absolutely fundamental, the ultimate basis of all social life, without which society would be unable to reproduce itself or maintain its notion of a normative household. This perversion does not involve a Don Juan-like fragmentation or multiplication of objects of desire. Rather, it is immediately legalized, not to say “paranoized” (*paranoisée*) by the effects of masochism: any sexual “profligacy” is acceptable and therefore insignificant provided a child is born to suture the wounds. The feminine “father-version” (*père-version*) lies coiled in the desire of the law as desire of reproduction and continuity; it raises female masochism to the status of a structural stabilizer — countering structural deviations — and, by assuring the mother of a place in an order that surpasses human will, provides her a reward of pleasure. This coded perversion, this close combat between maternal masochism and the law, has always been used by totalitarian regimes to enlist the support of woman, indeed, quite successfully. Still, it is not enough to “denounce” the reactionary role that mothers have played in the service of “dominant male power.” It is necessary to ask how this role relates to the bio-symbolic latencies implicit in maternity; and having done that, to ask further how, now that the myth of the Virgin is no longer capable of subsuming those latencies, their surfacing may leave women vulnerable to the most frightful forms of manipulation, to say nothing of the blindness, the pure and simple contempt, of progressive activists who refuse to take a closer look at the question.

Also neglected by the virginal myth is the question of hostility between mother and daughter, a question resolved in magisterial but superficial fashion by making Mary universal and particular but never singular: “unique of all her sex.” For more than a century now, our culture has faced the urgent need to reformulate its representations of love and hate, inherited from Plato’s *Symposium*, the troubadours, and Our Lady, in order to deal with the relationship of one woman to another. Here again, maternity points the way to a possible solution: a woman rarely, I do not say never, experiences passion — love or hate — for another woman, without at some point taking the place of her own mother — without becoming a mother herself and, even more importantly, without undergoing the lengthy process of learning to differentiate herself from her own daughter, her simulacrum, whose presence she is forced to confront.

Finally, the foreclosure of the other sex (of the masculine) can apparently no longer be done under the auspices of the hypostasized third person through the intermediary of the child: “Neither I nor you but he, the child, the third, the non-person, God, who in any case I am in the final analysis.” Since foreclosure does occur, what it now requires, in order for the feminine being who struggles with it

to hold her own, is not deification of the third party but counter-investment in “blue-chip shares,” i.e., in redeemable *tokens of power*. Feminine psychosis today sustains itself through passion for politics, science, art, in which it becomes engrossed. The variant of that psychosis that accompanies maternity may be analyzed, more easily perhaps than other variants, in terms of its rejection of the other sex.

The love of God and for God inhabits a hiatus: the space delineated on one side by sin and on the other by the hereafter. Discontinuity, lack, and arbitrariness: the topography of the sign, of the symbolic relation that posits all otherness as impossible. Love, here, is nothing but the impossible.

For a mother, on the other hand, curiously, the arbitrariness that is the other (the child) goes without saying. For her the impossible is like this: it becomes one with the implacable. The other is inevitable, she seems to say, make a God of him if you like; he won't be any less natural if you do, for this other still comes from me, which is in any case not me but an endless flux of germinations, an eternal cosmos. The other proceeds from itself and myself to such a degree that ultimately it doesn't exist for itself. This maternal quietude, more stubborn even than philosophical doubt, with its fundamental incredulity, eats away at the omnipotence of the symbolic. It sidesteps the perverse denial (“I know it, but *still*”) and constitutes the basis of social bonding in general (in the sense of “resembling others and, ultimately, the species”). Such an attitude can be frightening if one stops to

What purpose does this rejection serve? Surely it does not allow any sort of pact between “sexual partners” based on a supposed preestablished harmony deriving from primordial androgyny. What it does allow is recognition of irreducible differences between the sexes and of the irreconcilable interests of both — and hence of women — in asserting those differences and seeking appropriate forms of fulfillment.

These, then, are among the questions that remain unaddressed even today, after the Virgin. Taken together they point to the need for an ethics appropriate to the “second” sex that some say has recently been experiencing a renaissance.

Nothing guarantees that a feminine ethics is even possible, however; Spinoza explicitly excluded women (along with children and lunatics) from ethics. If it is true that an ethics for the modern age is no longer to be confused with morality, and if confronting the problem of ethics means not avoiding the embarrassing and inevitable issue of the law but instead bringing to the law flesh, language, and *jouissance*, then the reformulation of the ethical tradition requires the participation of women. Women imbued with the

think that it may destroy everything that is specific and irreducible in the other, the child: this form of maternal love can become a straitjacket, stifling any deviant individuality. But it can also serve the speaking subject as a refuge when his symbolic carapace shatters to reveal that jagged crest where biology transpierces speech: I am thinking of moments of illness, of sexual-intellectual-physical passion, death. . . .

*mater, fons amoris.* Let us listen again, therefore, to the *Stabat Mater*, and to music, all music. It swallows goddesses and strips them of necessity.

desire to reproduce (and to maintain stability); women ready to help our verbal species, afflicted as we are by the knowledge that we are mortal, to bear up under the menace of death; mothers. For what is ethics divorced from morals? Heretical ethics — *herethics* — may just be that which makes life's bonds bearable, that which enables us to tolerate thought, and hence the thought of death. "Herethics" is *a-mort, amour. Eia*

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