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Troublesome Practices
Mothering, Literature and Ethics

To link mothering and writing, as I want to do here, might already be considered daring. Maternal muteness and marginality, most often the rule, have traditionally been seen as prerequisites for the survival of culture: "We could locate in virtually all of the founding texts of our [western] culture a version of the myth (...) that the death or absence of the mother (...) makes possible the construction of language and of culture" (Homans, 1986: 2). This myth has by now been ably and amply challenged by feminists in various disciplines, whose work I wish to build on. I will argue not only that mothers can and should write literature, but that mothering and literary production—both profoundly relational practices—can be linked and deployed as challenges to traditional western ideals of rationality and individuality, in subversive and ethically compelling ways.

The idea of a maternal writing is troublesome because it unsettles many of the oppositions upon which motherhood in western culture has historically rested, such as that between maternity and creativity, or "the binary system that conceives woman and writer, motherhood and authorhood, babies and books, as mutually exclusive" (Friedman, 1987: 65-6). When this opposition is challenged, others, such as public/private and mind/body, are also upset. Maternal writing entails a publicizing of maternal experience, and it subverts the traditional notion of the mother as an instinctual, purely corporeal being. It is thus to be understood as a key tool in the redefinition of maternity in which feminists are engaged. Maternal writing—and maternal reading—also raise the question of relationality, casting doubt on the self/other opposition, as we will see.

This article is concerned firstly to offer a critical overview of how feminists have responded to the question of mothering and literature, and, secondly, to

put forward suggestions for further theorizing on the issues, while drawing on poststructuralist ideas regarding subjectivity and literary discourse. In particular, I am interested here in how the practices of literary production and mothering can be understood as ethical in analagous ways. Such an understanding involves a questioning of traditional masculinist ideas concerning (authorial) autonomy and authority, and it suggests new directions for feminist conceptions of relationality and of knowledge production.

Mothering and writing: feminist responses

Three main strategies have been adopted by feminists in thinking about mothering and literature. The first strategy which one can detect is the examination, or re-vision,[1] of pre-existing images of maternity; in Germany alone, there have been at least three recent publications pertaining to images of mothers (Kraft and Liebs, 1993; Möhrmann, 1996; Roebling and Mauser, 1996).[2] This strategy might be known as "Images of Mothers" criticism, for it complements and contributes to that branch of feminist literary analysis known as "Images of Women" criticism. This type of approach, an early phase of second wave feminist thinking about literature, was concerned to demonstrate the inadequacy and negativity of many depictions of women in literary texts. It was useful because it highlighted the inevitably partial nature of any cultural product. But it was also a problematic project; as Toril Moi points out, it was based on "the highly questionable notion that art can and should reflect life accurately and inclusively in every detail" (1988: 45). In addition, it suggested that "woman" was a fixed and graspable category, against which false depictions of womanliness could be measured, and thus it relied on essentialism. The term "woman" is now widely being viewed as shifting and contingent. Feminist literary criticism has become more attuned to the contexts of texts' production and operation, and "images of women" have increasingly been contextualized: a laudable move, from a poststructuralist point of view.

A second important strategy is represented by the feminist attempt to posit a matrilineal literary tradition, following Virginia Woolf's claim that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (1993: 69). This strategy corresponds to that branch of feminist criticism known as "gynocriticism," which unearthed and explored writing by women in order to combat the marginalization of female authors, and, further, to demonstrate the existence of a female artistic tradition, or genealogy (Moers, 1977; Showalter, 1982; Walker, 1984a; see here Humm, 1994: 10). Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, editors of the important *Lost Tradition*, exemplify the notions of rediscovery and revision which characterize this project: "When we seek the literature of mothers and daughters, we are looking for a lineage not traced in any genealogy" (1980: 2). The mother-daughter bond, which in Adrienne Rich's view constitutes "the great unwritten story" (1977: 225), has indeed been an important focus of feminist thought in general. A focus on mother-daughter relations opens the way towards a theory of narrative which, in contrast to

traditional masculinist models, allows for the articulation of female subjectivities. It also suggests the potential of literature to foster and shape relationships and communities—notions to which I will return in the next part of this article.

The third significant strategy involves the exploration of the mother as writing subject. This exploration has, firstly, been concerned to expose why mothers have not written, why it is that "until recently almost all distinguished [literary] achievement has come from childless women" (Olsen, 1986: 56). The reasons for the widespread absence of creative achievement on the part of mothers are in part practical and financial. As Woolf observed, maternity is a time-consuming and unprofitable business (1993: 20). But the reasons are also ideological, with women's story-telling having traditionally been subjected to scorn: "Old wives' tales—that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it" (Carter, 1990: xi). Writing, in particular, has been conceived as a male preserve, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note in their examination of the pen as a metaphorical penis. Exploring analogies made between paternity and artistic creation, they assert: "In patriarchal Western culture, (...) the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 6). And women's marginalization and silence have been sanctioned by literary theory (Hirsch, 1989: 54). Harold Bloom's concept of "the anxiety of influence," in particular, has been challenged, and its partiality noted (Diehl, 1978: 587).[3] In response to Bloom's model, one critic has developed the idea of "the intimacy of influence" (Lord, 1999), a concept to which I will come back in my concluding remarks.

As a reaction to maternal silence and marginalization, new narratological models have been developed, then: a second aspect of the "third strategy" which I have detected. As in feminist psychoanalysis, an important focus of feminist literary criticism has been the pre-oedipal phase of the child's development. This emphasis may be seen as a reaction to traditional psychoanalytic theories of creativity which "tend to identify the place of the mother as the very absence which lies at the point of linguistic origin" (Hirsch, 1989: 52). Susan R. Suleiman sums up what she views as the underlying assumption of most psychoanalytic theories about writing and about artistic creation in general, thus: "*Mothers don't write, they are written*" (1985: 356). In response to such theories, feminist literary critics have sought to read texts by women in new ways. Elizabeth Abel, for example, draws on the psychoanalytic work of Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein. Abel develops and extends Chodorow's influential discussion of the mother-daughter relationship as intensely intimate to highlight the importance of female friendship, and she deploys this notion in her examination of several texts by women (Abel, 1981). Margaret Homans also detects Chodorowian impulses in writing by women (1986: 16).

French feminist ideas of creativity are also concerned with the pre-oedipal and with bonds between women. Hélène Cixous asserts that "woman must

write her body," and write with "white ink" (Cixous and Clément, 1986: 94). She thereby links maternity, corporeality and expressivity. In "Breaths," Cixous associates the maternal body and the pre-oedipal with ideas of plenitude and wholeness. She suggests here that the maternal voice could offer a substitute for conventional forms of expression: "If I had such a voice, I would not write, I would laugh" (1994: 49). Julia Kristeva links the presymbolic, what she terms the "semiotic," to the maternal body (1980a; 1984); Luce Irigaray, similarly, posits the existence of a presymbolic mother-daughter language (1981; 1985). Homans draws on such ideas in her reading of nineteenth-century English women's writing (1986).

But, as has been argued, there are problems with this emphasis on the maternal as a source of pre-oedipal language. This strategy could serve to perpetuate maternal marginalization: "If the only maternal language imaginable, or at least admissible, is a preoedipal, nonverbal one, then mothers are effectively silenced and barred from public discourse" (Daly and Reddy, 1991: 7). There are other problems involved in the linkage of mothering and artistic practice. According to Nina Auerbach, this association ignores the willed nature of the creative act, and perpetuates a view of women as irrational and as always and inevitably motherly. Where women writers may once have sought to justify themselves and their audacity in writing by taking refuge in conventional definitions of femininity—a sort of strategic essentialism—"this pious metaphorical association" is, in the view of Auerbach, both spurious and oppressive (1978: 4-5; see also Friedman, 1987: 50).

This perspective is supported by that of Roland Barthes, who, in his *Mythologies*, deconstructs a photograph which appeared in the French magazine, *Elle*. The photograph depicted seventy novelists and mothers who were labelled, for example, "Jacqueline Lenoir (two daughters, one novel), Marina Grey (one son, one novel)." The message behind the photograph is read by Barthes thus: "Women are on the earth to give children to men; let them write as much as they like, let them decorate their condition, but above all, let them not depart from it" (1993: 50). He thereby highlights the dangers of fusing maternity with creativity, a move which may serve to reinstate the traditional conflation of femininity with maternity, and the denial to women of creativity. Similarly, imagining a maternal aesthetic may have been empowering to contemporary women writers, but "a specifically 'female' poetics that links itself to the maternal gets too easily recuperated into the biologistic equation between 'female' and 'nature' that has positioned both as antagonists to subjectivity" (Kahane, 1988: 90).

The notion of a maternal aesthetic is, however, a useful one, if we consider it a "political strategy" (Gilbert, 1986: xv), operative in specific contexts. As suggested before, it serves to undermine key binary oppositions "between word and flesh, creativity and procreativity, mind and body," and to "reconstitute woman's fragmented self into a (pro)creative whole uniting word and flesh, body and mind" (Friedman, 1987: 51, 75). The idea of mothering as not only

compatible with art, but also as conducive to it, constitutes a strategy of subversion. Whilst attention has often been focussed on the difficulties faced by mothers who are also artists, as I have shown, there have also been suggestions that maternity can foster creativity (Daly and Reddy, 1991: 8; Suleiman, 1985: 366; Walker, 1984b). In a culture which has relied on the public/private, mind/body distinctions, such affirmations could prove subversive.

Theories of a maternal creativity are produced and circulated in particular sociohistorical contexts, then, and will depend for their meaning upon the status of both maternity and creativity in a given culture (see Friedman, 1987: 51). This point ties in with a poststructuralist conception of both theoretical and fictional texts. Such texts, in this view, emerge in particular contexts and depend for their resonance upon dominant contemporary discursive and material practices which they are able to "trouble," where "trouble" is understood, as it is by Judith Butler, as a healthy source of subversion (1990). As Chris Weedon expresses it: "We need to look at fictional form as an historically discursive construct effective in different ways in different contexts" (1987: 172). My own conception of maternal writing—and of theories of maternal writing—rests upon this insight. In what follows I will offer some starting-points for a theory of a maternal literary practice—involving both writing *and* reading—which I believe may be ethically "effective" in the context of Western capitalism.

A maternal literary ethics: subjectivity, relationality, "ways of knowing"

As we have seen, feminist responses to the issue of mothers and writing have been concerned with foregrounding embodied maternal subjectivities and stressing bonds between women, while revealing how these have historically been oppressed. I share these concerns, which I want now to link to notions of subjectivity and modes of relating and knowing. Firstly, I will show how the poststructuralist notion of the subject can help us here.

A poststructuralist conception of literature helps us theorize maternal writing in ways that free such discourse from confinement to the babbling or silent semiotic and allow its troublesome possibilities to emerge. It suggests that writing by mothers is not "before" culture, but rather that it takes place in, and may even shape, particular cultural contexts. Poststructuralism also offers us ways of conceiving maternal writing as not only potentially subversive, but also as ethical. In particular, poststructuralism—in some of its forms—stresses relationality over autonomy and interdependence over authority: a move that has obvious and urgent implications for feminist conceptions of both mothering and ethics.

In contrast to the liberal humanist notion of the subject as unified and rational, poststructuralism states that subjectivity is "precarious, contradictory and in process" (Weedon, 1987: 33). Subjectivity is constructed by discourses

in particular social contexts; it is, therefore, a group affair, the product of myriad social and institutional networks and relationships. Similarly, poststructuralist literary criticism alerts us to the situatedness of particular literary texts, to their anchorage in specific contexts. Aesthetic practice, then, involves relationality, constituting participation in a particular culture. If texts are understood as citational responses to other texts (see here Butler, 1993: 14; Bakhtin, 1988), then traditional liberal humanist ideas of authorial autonomy and authority are discredited, and the way is clear for an understanding of the writing subject as engaged in a relationship with other writers and with readers.

Relationality is a key concept in recent feminist thinking about maternity. Sara Ruddick's (1989) notion of a "maternal thinking," with mutuality as its key feature, has contributed significantly to the current and growing feminist awareness of mothering as a complex and changing relationship. The work of psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin is also crucial here. Benjamin challenges traditional psychoanalytic paradigms, which place the mother in the position of object, and posits an "intersubjective" view of child development (1990: 15-24). According to this view, the child develops in and through interaction with the mother, who must also be a desiring subject. The child seeks recognition, and that recognition must be given by someone who is herself an agent.

An emphasis on women's relationality could be viewed as dangerous from a feminist point of view. It could lead to a reinscription of ideas of women as unstable, excessively emotional and "naturally" inclined to care for others. Solidity and self-containment would thus remain the preserves of men. But the idea of relationality may also be understood as subversive. To posit reciprocity as an ideal is to challenge the notion of the rational, autonomous subject dominant in modern capitalist societies—a fiction which fosters the marginalization of those who do not make the grade, the denial to these "failures" of any kind of state support, and the continuing fragmentation of community. The idea of mutuality is also not to be understood in essentialist terms, as pertaining only to "actual" mothers. Rather, I wish it to be understood as a figuration which may serve as a paradigm for modes of relating to others.

Literary production is also a relational business, as I have already indicated. Reading and writing involve an imaginative engagement with others, a process which might strategically be linked to the idea of "maternal thinking." Such an engagement has subversive potential. The imaginative engagements which reading and writing foster might not accord with those sanctioned by dominant institutions, such as those of heterosexuality and the family. They might therefore lead to a disruption of dominant narratives and constructs, just as—to pursue my analogy of mothering and literary processes—mothers can be challenging with regard to the cultures in which they mother.

Not that I am equating reading and writing with changing diapers, at least not in any simple way; rather, I am suggesting that both acts involve or could involve "maternal thinking." That is, they constitute activities which produce and encourage a relational mode of subjectivity which might, as Mielle

Chandler and Patrice DiQuinzio suggest with regard to mothering, help challenge and overcome Western capitalist models of individualism (Chandler, 1998; Chandler, 1999: 21).[4] I was helped here by Gayatri Spivak's notion of "teleopoesis," developed in a lecture held at the International Women's University in Hannover, Germany.[5] "Teleopoesis" consists of an imaginative engagement with other ways of seeing and acting which is brought about by reading. It is a concept with important implications for understandings of knowledge production, as we will see.

According to Spivak, the practice of literary reading sets us on our way to knowledge, a condition which we never reach. Literary reading is "the permanent effort to get there." It involves also the desire to create a genuine fit between self and other, to "resonate" with and through that other in an act that is profoundly ethical. This resonance stands in contrast to the othering practised by the academy, according to Spivak, who herself advocates "cultivating the reflexes of the ethics of alterity." Reading, according to her, must be "set to work" on this project, described as a "work of patience" which is oriented, however uncertainly, towards an undecidable future.

I wondered then if I could link this idea to the issues of maternal relationality and creativity. As I have suggested, reading and writing constitute ethical acts, which also foster new "ways of knowing," a term taken from Evelyn Fox Keller. Keller argues for the peculiarly masculine character of modern scientific objectivity (see Benjamin, 1990: 189), suggesting that because men originally define themselves in opposition to the mother, they reject experiences of merging which challenge the boundary between subject and object, and cling to the position of master, of knower (see Benjamin, 1990: 190). This unhappy masculine concern with controlling others raises questions as to how knowledge and understanding might be reconceived in ways that avoid reinscribing the subject/object binary inherent in masculine scientific thought.

Literary production and literary studies, I suggest, offer methods of developing and practising such a "way of knowing," involving as they do the "teleopoesis" described above. I mentioned before the idea that literature can produce modes of relation that are not necessarily sanctioned by dominant discourses, such as intense intimacy between women. Catherine Lord develops the idea of the "intimacy of influence," an ardent form of artistic dialogue which she detects at work in and between the fictions of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson. Drawing on the work of, in particular, philosopher Lorraine Code, she expands on this idea of shared understanding: "knowledge comes less through individual strides than dialogues between different 'persons'" (Lord, 1999: 7). It is my contention that if we understand relational, maternal "ways of knowing"—manifested, for example, in reading and writing—as models or paradigms, we are better equipped to research and live in fruitful intimacy.

What I propose, therefore, is further exploration into writing and reading as processes in which a "maternal" mutuality is at work. I believe the relation-

ship between reader and writer to be a site at which the boundaries between self and other are negotiated, challenged, drawn and redrawn in ways that could be instructive to theorists of maternity in such disciplines as psychology, philosophy and literary criticism. I am particularly concerned with the development of models of relationality which allow for conflict and anger as well as for care and support. Such new understandings of intimacy will, I contend, further our shared knowledge about shared knowing.

[1]"Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (Rich, 1979: 35).
[2]The author's Ph.D. was in German Studies.
[3]"Bloom's model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 47).
[4]"Mothering is an important site at which the individualist ideological formation is elaborated and imposed, but it is also a site at which this ideological formation can be contested and reworked" (DiQuinzio, 1999: xv).
[5]Gayatri Spivak, "Culture alive is always on the run," lecture given on August 8, 2000.

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