

O N E



The Maternal in Its Natural Habitat

... the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes from held-in rage . . .

And yet at other times I am melted with the sense of their helpless, charming and quite irresistible beauty—their ability to go on loving and trusting . . . *I love them.*

—Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

Gender has been reworked and qualified, and sexuality has been reordered, so that the first statements of feminists about the oppression of the feminine may seem today rather dated. Feminist theory has played its part in the dramatic reshaping of women's lives with men, and with other women; workforce participation, financial enfranchisement, inclusion in public institutions (including the university), pursuit of pleasures.

But women's relations with children? Perhaps the fact that many more women are today sole parents might count as a "dramatic

reshaping,” but it wasn’t an aspiration of the movement. And still, the first “second wave” statements on maternity remain sharply observed, unchanged, and unqualified. Women, even in the Western world, are still overwhelmingly responsible for child rearing. It is striking that when one looks back to literature considered to be at the inception of the present movement—for example, Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*—one still finds the material there as fresh as ever.

Readers of Kristeva and Irigaray and their commentators may feel affronted at the assertion that there has “been no progress” in theory on motherhood. What about the analyses offered by psychoanalytic feminisms? But by “progress” I mean the accommodation of maternity into an intellectual practice, or even into a feminist practice. This has not happened. As Susan Maushart writes, in *The Masks of Motherhood*: “Feminism has only allowed women to evade maternity” (and cf. MacCannell 2000, 154). It has not taught women how to engage with maternity, in the way we have engaged with the production of other sites of our difference, in order to challenge them.

There has been “progress” in other practices of maternity. It is precisely as progress that the developments in the reproductive technologies are presently accelerating—as the inevitable destiny or, at the very least as the unstoppable temptation, of the technological world. The absence of a maternal *ontology* is a cause of anxiety—it should concern us that technology is supervening on a maternity that is not yet a feminist *habitus*.

Perhaps the reason for this is, on a practical level, depressingly simple. Most women must still choose between being mothers and theorists. The academy, where most theorizing is done and all theory must presently be enfranchised, is still designed along the traditional lines. It is a model of labor supported by a care-giving function performed elsewhere by someone else. This “professional” model of intellectual work assumes that academics can disappear into the library for hours at a time, stay late to teach their classes, hop off to conferences, and adjourn to the bar for congenial collegial linkage—which, as well as being pleasurable, cements the patronage of referees and publishing opportunities—finally to burn the midnight oil writing things down.

The effect of women working in the labor force, including the intellectual labor force, has been to highlight the “vulgar Marxist” point, that the circumstances that have prevented women from entering the workforce previously are not properties peculiar to gender, but a simple calculus of actions—women have been tied up doing something else, and in most cases looking after other people. Motherhood is that part of being a woman that is least amenable to the demands of intellectual

labor. This is not because a mother cannot think—it is not a case of the old gynecologists' lore that a woman “gives birth to her brain.” Anyone who has had the care of a child, and has done it conscientiously, knows there is no possibility of thinking sustained thought or losing oneself in concentration—care giving as a practise is extrovert in the extreme.

Indeed, as styles of labor, maternal and intellectual labor are almost diametrically opposed: one demands extroversion and action, and is contingent on circumstances to a high degree; the other is solipsistic, autonomous, and sustained. Consequently, the fantasy of being able to write while the baby is asleep is just that.

Actually, what this reveals is theory as *itself* a kind of labor, that is to say a kind of action, which is also to say that it is an aspect of *embodiment*. This embodiment may be effaced in its product, but is critical to its possibility. Intellectual labor is embodied to a very high degree, in that it demands becoming absorbed in the task to the exclusion of all else. It is not only that it is not possible to do philosophy while being a mother; it is also that it is not possible to do *anything else* while doing philosophy. But: “I can't do two things at once”—how often does one hear a mother say this?

Concentration on the task is a kind of focus that engages the whole being. This brings it close to the paradigm case of labor, as Marx imagines it in the *Grundrisse*, as the inalienable expression of the body's action. If it turns out that maternity and philosophy are incompatible—if “mother theory” is a contradiction in terms—it will be, ironically, because both are such pure forms of this unalienated labor.

And, seen in such terms, two possibilities might be explored. Firstly, that despite the undeniable wisdom in psychoanalytic observation, the “two-in-one” subjectivity of pregnancy is not the best emblem of maternity. Once a child is born, it becomes for the mother a more pressing case of *labor relations*. But secondly, the “two-in-one” conundrum of maternal identity may suggest that a different ontology is proposed by maternity, one in which a complication of the subject/object relation, and therefore of the whole mode of thinking that underwrites conventional ontologies, could be reconceived.

PHILOSOPHY'S MYTH OF ORIGIN

No doubt, there is as yet no mother theory in philosophy, because these two terms are nearly oxymoronic. One apparently refers to a natural state—indeed, the epitome of the natural. Maternity is about as natural as the human gets, in contact with its species-being, confronted by it.

Theory, on the contrary, is that ethereal production, the highest of cultural values, the most extruded and abstracted, even abstruse, state of humanity, its most *unnatural* act. So philosophers pride themselves upon; so they like to think. The ontology of the human is thinking, we are the thinking being, says Heidegger on our behalf.

Hume allows us a challenging possibility, not much explored, when he writes in the *Enquiry*: “A blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds.” If we are not “susceptible” to any species of sensation, then we lack susceptibility to the idea. Similarly, where an object or agent of sensation has never been met with, the idea is absent: “A Laplander or Negro has no notion of the relish of wine.” And this is true, by extension, for the affective realm, too: “A man of mild manners can form no idea of inveterate revenge or cruelty; nor can a selfish heart easily conceive the heights of friendship and generosity” (but cf. my argument in Ferrell 2002). This conception of thought makes it an experience, empirical in principle—“the only manner by which an idea can have access to the mind, to wit by the actual feeling and sensation” (ibid.). If mothers were also ontologists, then they might think differently from other philosophers.

Had de Beauvoir, for example, been a mother, she may not have observed one to be “taking her leisure” at the park with the infant. Simone de Beauvoir, childless and yet the mother of modern feminism, accepts the story about the privilege of philosophy lying outside natural states, and shares the conviction that maternity could never be philosophy.

Rejecting the prejudice that biology is destiny, de Beauvoir cites contraception as a demonstration that reproduction is not “at the mercy solely of biological chance” (501). But the choice to interrupt reproduction is the last expression of freedom the mother-to-be might make. “For she does not really make the baby, it makes itself within her; her flesh engenders flesh only . . .” and, “Ordinary life is but a condition of existence; in gestation it appears as creative; but that is a strange kind of creation which is accomplished in a contingent and passive manner.”

The labor of the body is not of the same ontological order as the labor of the mind. “With her ego surrendered, alienated in her body and in her social dignity, the mother enjoys the comforting illusion of feeling that she is a human being *in herself, a value*. . . . But this is only an illusion” (514).

This is because maternity does not have the appropriate relation between subject and object—and this, by its essential equivocation; “[S]he and the child with which she is swollen make up together an equivocal pair, overwhelmed by life. Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal . . .” (512).

This argument turns on a general, almost banal, commitment of the philosophical tradition, which seeks to differentiate the human from the animal-vegetal, on the ground of the mind-body distinction—its “thinking being,” and even of a particular thinking being that can be described as “technological thinking being.” That is to say, a style of thought that analyzes itself as capable of transcendence just because it is capable of insisting on the difference between itself as subject and its objects.

It isn't clear that this form of projection is the only form of thought there is. Indeed, even Heidegger, in reviewing *techne*, writes as though the category of creation is larger than the technological, although in danger of being overwhelmed by it. I don't need to labor the complaint already made against existential philosophy for its capture of de Beauvoir's thought. But I do need to dwell on it a little more, in order to bring into focus the ellision of maternity as essential in philosophy.

In attempting to answer the question of the *cause* of the inequality between the sexes, de Beauvoir tells us that: “This has always been a man's world, and none of the reasons hitherto brought forward in explanation of the fact has seemed adequate” (93). Dismissing the Marxist and the psychoanalytic accounts, she offers a myth of origin from the point of view of existentialism. “But we shall be able to understand how the hierarchy of the sexes was established by reviewing the data of prehistoric research and ethnography in the light of existentialist philosophy.”

“The woman who gave birth did not feel the pride of creation; she felt herself the plaything of obscure forces”; “The primitive hordes had no permanence in property or territory, and hence set no store by posterity; children were for them a burden, not a prized possession”; “Even in times when humans most needed births, when maternity was most venerated, manual labour was the primary necessity.” A fantastic portrait is offered, of feelings purported to have been felt by pre-agricultural woman thousands of years ago, but no doubt large also in the mind of the author. The story reflects any number of prejudices against maternity, but more particular is the definitional problem she presents for early woman: “But in any case giving birth and suckling are not *activities*, they are natural functions; no project is involved; and that is why woman found in them no reason for a lofty affirmation of her existence—she submitted passively to her biologic fate” (94).

A contrast is then drawn between maternal and masculine labor; “[H]e furnished support for the group, not in the manner of worker bees by a simple vital process, through biological behaviour, but by means of acts that transcended his animal nature” (95). His hunting is a creative act. “Man's activity had another dimension that gave it supreme

dignity: it was often dangerous”; “life is not the supreme value for man, but on the contrary that it should be made to serve ends more important than itself”; “For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills” (95–96). If there have been suspicions nurtured that de Beauvoir wrote much of Sartre’s philosophy, we might here rather suspect that Sartre was writing de Beauvoir’s.

This myth of origin is disturbing for feminism; One can wonder that misogyny engenders a new wave of feminist emancipation, and ask what values that feminism unconsciously has taken on from its conception. But for philosophy, on the other hand, the myth is humdrum; here is a summary of a whole history of philosophy which distinguishes humanity from animal life. It catches one up in discussion of human being, through a distinction within humanity between two kinds of human being, the sexes. Humanity becomes something that distinguishes itself *from* life, through a project rather than through a fate, in the terms of the myth. We have “the key to the whole mystery”; and the definition of humanity has played an important part in it.

This is a Platonic myth; the *counternatural* act defines the human. The perpetuation of life is a natural function according to de Beauvoir, according to the history of philosophy. But the taking of life, and the worship of death, even—these are the prerogatives that belong to humanity (read: to philosophy). Just as for Plato, in the *Symposium*, it is proper to philosophy to put aside even love for its own sake and use it in its tutelary function; so life will exceed itself in a transcendent imagining that specifies itself as beyond the merely lived.

We have become entangled in many myths of origin, not only of the sexual relation, but of human being and the thinking being, too. By this, we know the extent of the problem presented by maternity for philosophy, and the involvement of sexual difference generally in an ideal of rationality.

In some sense, the whole project of *The Second Sex* is undermined from here. Giving a liberatory account of the sex of woman can only now proceed by giving an account of her *as a man*. Because masculinity has been equated with humanity and humanity with rationality, what is left over of the human after rationality will be demoted to an animal function, and the second sex is by definition adjunctive.

Why is giving life any more natural than taking life? And must the discussion of sexual oppression proceed via affects of species pride? Take the example of the lioness; does she make the distinction, between biological function and project, when she suckles her cubs or

slaughters the gazelle? Why is this story of de Beauvoir's so plausible, so that we overlook the extravagant interpretation made of the *natural* world, as one in which death takes priority over life, or the aggressive over the nurturant?

Just how does philosophy accomplish this transcendence? How is it that projects are not projections, or if they are, why are they not themselves "illusions"? And: Why is *philosophy* presented as an *existential* state at all? Why is philosophy too not understood as a kind of labor?

THE MATERNAL IN ITS NATURAL SETTING

Kelly Oliver has expressed the contradiction well, when she comments, in *Family Values*:

But in both philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, it turns out that the paternal authority that legitimates culture and breaks with anti-social nature is founded on the father's *natural* authority because of his *natural* strength and aggressive impulses. The paternal authority of culture is founded on the father's naturally stronger body: might makes right. (1997, 5)

She further argues that the opposing of the maternal and paternal as distinctions between antisocial body and disembodied culture, which itself is a version of the mind/body distinction, renders love impossible: "Western images of conception, birth, and parental relationships leave us with a father who is not embodied, who cannot love but only legislates from some abstract position, and a mother who is nothing but body, who can fulfill animal needs but cannot love as a social human body" (3).

Oliver uses Kristeva, among other theorists, to provide the alternative of an embodied culture that allows for an ethics founded on love. And, of all contemporary accounts of sexual relations used or criticized by feminist theorists, Kristeva's is perhaps the most detailed and most rehearsed. Irigaray stimulates critique with her utopian and increasingly aphoristic engagements with sexual different and philosophy. But Kristeva labors over the elements that structure the present cultural scene, and has offered an analytic discourse on maternity which presents its profound opportunity as well as its burden.

Criticism of Kristeva's theory is generally directed at what is seen as her capture by psychoanalysis, whose structural descriptions are said to essentialize the mind/body and culture/nature splits. And it is true,

as Oliver points out in the passage quoted above, that philosophy and psychoanalysis are both conventionally understood as one on this point.

But it isn't clear that Kristeva's description of the maternal as a semiotic space underpinning culture serves to uphold the opposition of mind to body so much as to implicate one in the other. Kristeva offers, for example, a possible *discourse* of maternity, one that would replace the fantasized comfort of the Virgin Mary with a secular recognition of maternity's infolding of identity in the other. (This argument is outlined by Ewa Ziarek, among others: cf. Ziarek 1992. Irigaray's elaboration of the need for a feminine divine explores a similar intuition.)

Psychoanalysis, maternity, and poetry are opportunities—if there can be a discourse of maternity, it is possible in the *fold* of maternity, in the problem of two-in-one of which the pregnant woman is living emblem. As Ziarek outlines it: “Unlike the clear separation of and noncoincidence between the signifier and the signified, the subject and the Other, the maternal body renders the fundamental notions of identity and difference strikingly insufficient—these crucial philosophical categories indeed no longer ‘hold up.’ Therefore, such an inescapable imprint of otherness makes the maternal body impure, turns it into a ‘catastrophic fold of being.’” (Ziarek 1992, 102).

“Herethics” names an opportunity in motherhood for an “outlaw ethics,” one “conceived in love and not law” (Oliver, 182–83). And pregnancy is an everyday metaphysical enigma, an indeterminacy in identity which proceeds within daily life without psychotic consequences or logical contradiction. (And see Iris Marion Young's more phenomenological critique in “Pregnant Embodiment” in Young 1990.)

The *discourse of maternity* would name not only a new ethical but a new discursive possibility, since it takes place differently around the subject/object distinction. This distinction is elsewhere in psychoanalytic theory analyzed as necessary to the logic of the “Symbolic.” Even in other discursive worlds, such as that proposed in existentialism and discussed above, the subject produces a distinction from his objects, not just as a prelude to transcendence, but also to thought.

This may be why “object-relations theory” harbors an obsessive anxiety about the maternal and defining its proper place. All this may be unconscious, except in the work of Klein, whose mordant recounting of fantasy does not mistake the symbolic for the real (cf. Doane 1992). For Winnicott, Chodorow, and others in this tradition, the mother guarantees the subject's passage into the human social, that is, “distinctive” world, on pain of psychological disturbance. But from a general perspective one can see that this is a failure to understand the conceptual stakes in the subject/object distinction—a psychology

premised on the governing “technological” ontology is already at the outset battling myopia.

Thus, even the important feminist work of Nancy Chodorow entrenches a sexual distinction that at the same time causes it concern. In *Family Structure and Feminine Personality*, she notes that the early experience of bonding is different for each sex, and explains personality differences in terms of it. She argues that “psychoanalytic” understandings of this, rather than the usual sociological, can be illuminating by outlining the structural, internalized “object-relations” underpinning personality. These are unconscious, but constitutional of personality (47), and lead her to her critique, which is that early object-relations for children in the Western nuclear family yield unworkable sexual differences.

Chodorow claims a psychoanalytic account can give an understanding of why sex difference is indelible without obliging one to subscribe to biological determinism (54). It allows her to offer discussion of more traditional societies, where ego strength is given in different, and by implication psychically healthier, contexts of connection. This may be mere nostalgia, but Chodorow’s analysis allows her to raise the possibility that the modern personality is not the best suited to women’s reproductive lives, which implies a critique of Western subjectivity as masculine in its very conceptuality (59).

Women’s biosexual experiences (menstruation, coitus, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation) all involve some challenge to the boundaries of her body ego (“me”/“not-me” in relation to her blood or milk, to a man who penetrates her, to a child once part of her body). These are important and fundamental human experiences that are probably intrinsically meaningful and at the same time complicated for women everywhere. However, a Western woman’s tenuous sense of individuation and of the firmness of her ego boundaries increase the likelihood that experiences challenging these boundaries will be difficult for her and conflictual. (59)

This tenuousness, a personality trait, is produced by the arrangement of exclusive parenting by the mother, while the father exists as a fantasied figure who fails to provide a “reality constraint” for the projections of either sexed child. There is a strong ambivalence expressed in the theory about the subject’s relations to objects as a result. The pathological state identified as masculine—in which the milieu of emotional connection is repudiated as feminine in favor of a masculine identification with an absent ego-ideal—is nevertheless relied on to

produce the “strong ego boundary” required of the subject whose object relations these are.

This is because parenting that includes an identification with the child is most at risk of producing the lack of individuation: “It seems likely that from their children’s earliest childhood, mothers and women tend to identify more with daughters and to help them to differentiate less ...” Not to identify, while producing the differentiation required, nevertheless leads to a masculine subject who is isolated in his fantasied connections to objects: “On the other hand, a mother tends to identify less with her son, and to push him toward differentiation and the taking on of a male role unsuitable to his age, and undesirable at any age in his relationship to her” (49).

This last rider seems to suggest that the maternal relation remains an exception, in which it is psychically healthy to maintain some lack of differentiation.

Her feminist conclusion is to prescribe a maternity in which ego-strength is given through psychical connection with both parents offered to children of both sexes. The underlying idealism in this model of the maternal function does not differ from Winnicott et al., despite its explicit feminist bent. It still understands the maternal on the model of a container in which subjectivity is grown, an “environment” in which the “object” status of the container is not theoretically challenged. Chodorow’s innovation perhaps is to extend the “maternal” as a conceptual ideal for *both* parents; the paternal function as a function of *law*, central to other psychoanalytic accounts and indeed to Freud’s, is obscured.

In effect, there is no inherent sexual difference, at the level of the psychical, for this paradigm. And although it idealizes the connective maternal as a model for both sexes, it still assumes the subject/object relation which in fact describes Western *masculinity*, as it does technological rationality. In this way, this “feminist psychoanalysis” repeats the progression pursued in second wave “feminism of equality” generally, toward a sexual indifference that is implicitly masculine. Indeed, the affinity with the liberal politics this implies is expressed in the conclusion that

satisfactory mothering, which does not reproduce particular psychological problems in boys and girls, comes from a person with a firm sense of self and of her own value, whose care is a freely chosen activity rather than a reflection of a conscious and unconscious sense of inescapable connection to and responsibility for her children. (59)

Despite their deep differences, Chodorow shares with Kristeva’s reflections on the Virgin Mary, and Irigaray’s on the feminine Divine, a

yearning in feminist psychological theory and feminism generally; the search by daughters, theoretical and otherwise, for mother figures. For Kristeva, a woman's maternity brings her in close psychical contact with the figure of her own mother. For Irigaray, the childless woman, too, seeks a feminine "ego-Ideal." But it is also true to say that feminism has not yet provided that figure for women's maternity, although other elements of femininity are sought to be celebrated (for example in the recounting of the life of de Beauvoir herself). This lack of figuration points toward the implicitly gendered account of the formation of the superego, as expressive of a paternal law governing masculine desire.

As Oliver puts it, "[I]n a few passing passages and interviews, without explanation, Kristeva almost whispers that perhaps it was also 'necessary to be a woman to attempt to take up that exorbitant wager of carrying the rational project to the outer borders of the signifying venture of men'" (Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, quoted in Oliver 1993, 115) In reference to her own theoretical prose, Kristeva has resisted the temptation to write theory as an "avant-garde literature" (Oliver, 114), arguing instead for a specificity given to psychoanalysis to confront the question of the signifier. The Lacanian phallus, in whose shadow this nascent discourse about discourse languishes, is by definition an oppression, "this untenable place where our species resides, threatened by madness beneath the emptiness of heaven" (*Desire in Language*, xi). But in Kristeva's conviction, it is still psychoanalysis, and not philosophy—that is to say, language used in the echo of its own semiotic resonances, not in the repression of all but its "cognitive content"—which would open the pathology of the paternal law to rational critique.

Jacqueline Rose argues, in *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, that one of the burdens the mother is given to bear is the paradox of an unconscious communication where there theoretically can be no communication. Citing Kristeva, she comments:

Belief in the mother is rooted in our fascinated fear with the impoverishment of language. If language is powerless to situate me for, or speak me to, the other, then I presume—I yearn to believe—that someone somewhere will make up for that impoverishment. Someone, or rather someone female, before there was speech, before it—before the unconscious—spoke, before . . . (2003)

Near the start of her essay, she writes:

Let us call "maternal" that ambivalent principle that is bound to the species on the one hand, and on the other, stems

from an identity catastrophe that causes the proper Name to topple over into the unnameable. It is that catastrophe which we imagine as femininity, non-language or the body. (158)

Rose concludes: “One could then say that, if mothers know anything—to give them back their subjectivity in the matter for a moment—it is the travesty of that projection” (159). The asymmetrical and idealized place given to the mother’s subjectivity in the object relations picture means that the mother’s contribution must itself therefore be the object of anxious concern, since it is impossible, even while it is being insisted upon. Rose makes an insightful assessment of this tradition through the work of Christopher Bollas.

She argues the failures attributed to “bad mothering” by the work of the Independent School are attributed in Bollas to *empirical* circumstance; for example, to “an actual family setting with which (the child’s ego) cannot cope” or to parents who can’t “identify with their child’s needs,” etc. But Rose points out it is inconsistent with the commitment to the unconscious to refer to an empirical “reality” completely outside psychical investment. Why has the mother, of all objects, suddenly become a product of an externality, a “fact of the matter”? As she remarks, what one feminism would read as “the ideological prejudice of the whole tradition,” Lacanian psychoanalysis “would see a failure to acknowledge the absence at the heart of being, a way of laying at the door of the mother what is irredeemable about human desire” (152).

Indeed, you could argue that the emphasis on the adequacy and inadequacy of the mother—what she can and should do—has served to make safe or occlude this space: not the space of a necessary lack-in-being in Lacanian terms, but the opposite, a space too full, a space that will become our dream of the mother, but which is in fact a space with no single origin, and for which no one is accountable, where the divisions inside my own mind, and between me and the other, are unclear. (154–55)

This view of the question highlights the relationship between maternity and epistemology; Rose provides a subtle argument that engages the investment in the mother as an investment in knowledge as such, when she writes:

It seems to me therefore that there are two very different mothers, or fantasies of the mother, at work in Christopher

Bollas's writing. Mother as fact, the one safe haven of interpretation (the way one was treated as a child); but then mother, or her space, as the vanishing point of all identities, where no form of knowing could ever reach. (156)

Bollas is known for "the unthought known," his postulate of unconscious knowledge that captures the sense of what is unrepresented but nevertheless experienced, thereby necessarily unconscious (for example, the experience of trauma). Within this category might also lie experiences that predate the possibility of symbolized representation, namely, those of the pre-Oedipal child, and the semiotic of Kristeva's schema. But the insight of the "unthought known," Rose argues, also "spells the end of the fantasy that subjects could ever know each other, or be known" precisely because such communication remains unconscious (156).

Hence my sense that the most immediate feminist response to this tradition, crucial as it is, is too limiting. For if you simply demand that the Winnicottian image of the mother be modified—saved from her total accountability, recognised even more fully than he did in its radical ambivalence—or more simply demand that she be given her own voice (when does a mother get to speak, where are the case studies of women as mothers in the work?), you none the less remain essentially in the same referential frame. *As long as the question remains: what would be a truer representation of the mother, the limits of knowledge as knowledge remain untouched.* (157, my italics)

LABOR RELATIONS

Even in these semiotically attuned psychoanalyses, maternity is imagined as a *property* of the feminine rather than as a *practice* endemic to it. The insights of Kristeva (and Irigaray, too) as to the significance of maternity still locate it within the claustrophobia of the family, where it has been since Freud, and where it continues to be funded by the masculine anxieties of the Lacanians and contemporary object-relations, discussed above.

However, Irigaray visits Marx through the exchange model of kinship and woman as commodity, in her essay *Commodities Amongst Themselves*. And if the sexed body is to be reintroduced into culture—and the paternal to the body—might not the direction come just as plausibly from a concept of labor? Marxist feminism of the seventies

made it plain that women's work was unvalued and uncommodified, as the invisible support of the public domain of capital, where labor was exploited as a kind of commodity. Marxist feminists have long observed the theoretical compatibility of capital with the overhaul of patriarchy—capital being quite prepared to exploit all labor, whatever its gender.

Admittedly, Marxism has had its own troubled relationship with feminism—in the pithy words of Judith Allen, there will be no Marxist feminism until there is a “man” question to go with the “woman” question (Allen and Patton 1983, 92–93). But the insight that is intuitively right about Marxist feminist approaches is that the oppression of child rearing comes not only from the psychosocial *role* that the mother plays in developing subjectivity, but the sexual division of labor in caring for it. The psychoanalytic apparatus of the maternal is fascinating but irrelevant from the point of view of the mother, while what looms large in the phenomenology of motherhood is how much *work* it takes to raise a child.

In this sense, pregnancy is discontinuous with caring for a baby and child, and is not a useful paradigm for maternity at all. From when the baby is born, the mother in no way resorts to a “natural instinct,” but works long and hard on behalf of her infant's welfare. This hard labor can be experienced by conscientious fathers, too, since care giving appears at least from this perspective not to be gender determined.

The analysis of the maternal as the ground of subjectivity considers mothering as an extension of gestation. But the reality is arguably far different. In pregnancy, the body will exhibit an astonishing capacity of synthesis and organization to bring about the growth of a foetus to term in the womb, and will then engineer its passage into the world. But from then on, the nurturing of the child is an act of agency burdened with the same choices and limits as other human agency: limited resources, conflicting priorities. That maternity is unlike pregnancy, and is not a product of instinct, is clear from the fact of it being possible to *neglect* a baby or child, but not a foetus.

This marks a possible ontological break between nature and culture (supposing this idea is coherent at all) at birth, and not at the “entry into language,” as conventional psychoanalytic wisdom has it. It is common to hear argument on the place of the “chora” and other constructions in the scheme of socialization, yet this “prelinguistic” postulate can strike one who interacts with a baby as remarkably artificial. The prelinguistic is just as commonly substituted in discussion for the “discourse of maternity” that would make sense of it. By contrast, Daniel Stern's descriptions of infant-mother interactions stress their social character; the baby is learning about “what it is like to be with someone” by engaging with his mother's gaze and chatter from earliest

infancy. That these are social interactions is most clearly understood when, as he describes, there are “mis-steps in the dance,” that is, a mother and child who do not always synchronize their stimulation and attention in such a way as to satisfy each other.

Stern notes the fine line between individuality and idiosyncrasy in this relationship. He warns that experts should be wary of intervening too quickly to pathologize the interactions that are, he says, experienced by the mother as “highly personal and individual to her and her baby, exclusively and unsharably so. Creating and performing in a continually improvised and often idiosyncratic social interaction can be a lonely, even alienating process” (1998, 146).

This loneliness and alienation, also testified to in Rich and other feminist writers writing on maternity, and echoed in many women’s experience of motherhood in contemporary life, needs to be explored further in terms of a specifically alienated labor, that is, one alienated from its social character, even when its social character is its primary feature. Indeed, the best analogy Stern can find for this labor is creative work: “I suspect that being a primary caregiver is more like being a creative artist than anything else, performing in your own work as you create it: a choreographer-dancer or a composer-musician” (145).

While this analogy is unsatisfying, for reasons that relate to my introductory discussion of the difference between maternal and intellectual labor, and tends to idealize maternity as a form of art (the maternal being commonly either idealized or abjected in psychological accounts of the child’s development), it does place a useful emphasis on *collaboration*. The art forms that Stern is drawn to, in outlining his analogy, are music and dance. As such, Stern’s analogy observes maternal labor to be *a labor on the social relation*.

If maternity could be understood on the analogy of creative work, it might be in the sense that creative work, too—and some forms of intellectual labor—all reflect a way of laboring that is, in Marx’s terms, “unalienated” (and inalienable).

In *Capital*, Marx outlines the mechanism by which the capitalist must take something more from the labor he purchases, if he is to succeed, that is, he must take “surplus-value.” “The self-expansion of capital resolves itself into having the disposal of a definite quantity of other people’s unpaid labour” (544), as Marx pungently puts it. Unpaid labor is accumulated from production, and is called ironically “productive labor”; that labor which is exerted above and beyond the necessary effort for making the product and selling it, productive of nothing but surplus value and donated to accumulation. By this reasoning, Marx can observe that the poet is not engaged in productive labor.

“Milton writes *Paradise Lost* like a silk worm spinning silk.” And if perhaps the poet sells his manuscript to a publisher, he has merely become a merchant in a chain of production.

The concept of labor, which has its specialized maternal meaning, has also in Marxian theory an ontological place, as activity founding an order that necessarily brings together the individual and the social. The political-economic character of labor is preceded in his taxonomy by undifferentiated yet useful activity by which the human specimen produces the means of subsistence. The “mystical character” of the commodity is missing from these “productive activities” since “it is a physiological fact, that they are functions of the human organism . . . ,” which is to say, most purely bodily as distinct from social, “and that each such function, whatever may be its nature or form, is essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, &c” (Marx 1996, 82).

The same reasoning causes Marx to reflect (without irony) that “wherever the want of clothing forced them to it, the human race made clothes for thousands of years, without a single man becoming a tailor” (Marx 1996, 52). But “from the moment that men in any way work for one another, their labour assumes a social form” (82). Women working for men, that is, sewing shirts, for example, are not laboring nor are they thereby included in the social realm.

Can Marx’s view of labor before it enters into capitalism illuminate maternal, or for that matter intellectual, labor? As his utopian imaginings depict it, labor is always the working out of subjectivity through activity in relation to nature. He writes eloquently of the satisfactions of labor in an ideal social world:

Supposing that we had produced in a human manner; each of us would in his production have doubly affirmed himself and his fellow men. I would have [1] objectified in my production my individuality and its peculiarity and thus both in my activity enjoyed an individual expression of my life and also in looking at the object have had the individual pleasure of realizing that my personality was objective, visible to the senses and this a power raised beyond all doubt. [2] In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have had the direct enjoyment of realizing that I had both satisfied a human need by my work and also objectified the human essence and therefore fashioned for another human being the object that met his need. [3] I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species and thus been acknowledged and felt by you as a completion of your own

essence and a necessary part of yourself and have thus realized that I am confirmed both in your thought and in your love. [4] In my expression of my life I would have fashioned your expression of your life, and thus in my own activity have realized my own essence, my human, my communal essence. (from a note often omitted from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, but quoted in McLellan 1975, 34)

Such a description is rich in resonance for the practice of *reproduction*. But under capital, the glamor of the commodity concentrates the love felt by the subject for his objects. “There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of relation between things,” he writes in *Capital* (43). This mirrored fascination is commodity fetishism, which reflects a labor that is of a “peculiar social character” (ibid).

Like Heidegger (1977) admiring the ambiguous aesthetic excess of the thing itself in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Marx observes the sheen on the material, which contributes to the simple implement or action its aspect of political economy. As noted above, the “physiological” aspect of labor is posited outside the realm of capital, beyond the reach of alienation and profit. No doubt he imagined bearing and raising children to take place in this twilight, if he thought of it at all.

But Marx also notes that continuing production demands also reproduction, for those elements used in the process must be replenished, and funded. These include “the instruments of labor,” and surely also the labor itself. There is, thereby, a reproduction that is the business of political economy. The contemporary success of the reproductive technologies highlights this unnatural labor—the political economy of reproduction has not itself stood still, and a many-faceted science transforms maternity into a technological event. But, despite its conceptual origin in *techné*, it is still not thereby a creative act.

AN ONTOLOGY OF THE MATERNAL

Daniel Stern promises to outline a different subjectivity for women after becoming mothers than before; but he doesn’t quite make his case in *The Birth of a Mother*. He shows the preparation of relations to others and objects, but maternal psychical structure is not imagined as changed by it. And yet, this is precisely what appears to be affected, when one reads Adrienne Rich. The accounts of motherhood there suggest that subjectivity is compromised by the demand of another

subject whose needs dictate her own space for reflection—her journal entries attest to her struggle to be a poet at the same time as a mother, and to the rage this contest brings out (1998, 21).

However, even what Stern does say in *The Birth of a Mother* attests to the reality that, as a subject, a mother thinks differently. The maternal relation is not the separating out of the subject in her subjectivity from her objects and others, so much as, in her child, the *production* of another not as an object, who is not readily objectifiable. It is the production of a style of embodiment that is nevertheless a social milieu; in its very bodily expression also a kind of labor. Therefore, the maternal suggests a different ontology, a logic not preoccupied by the habit of distinction, and a logic not riven by the law of the excluded middle. A way of thinking of being, which does not separate a subject from its objects, but rather tolerates various differentiation.

Relating the problem of maternity to the problem of the subject and its objects, can bring into focus the subject/object distinction that informs a dominant conception of thought itself. From this perspective, it would appear the maternal can provide not only an ethical but a logical example.

But what does this presage for the intellectual labor that is *ontology*, the theorizing of being, the practice of philosophy? Since mother theory would allow a different ontology for the maternal body, it would also imply an ontology specific to every different body, which is in itself a very different conception of philosophy. Perhaps maternity is not merely incompatible with theory, but puts the existing practice of philosophy, as a generalization and an abstraction, into question. A maternal ontology might show up the specificity of theoretical life, and challenge its claim to universality, just as other explorations of sexual difference have challenged other philosophical claims to the universal. The maternal is an important issue for philosophy, at least for this possibility.

Two questions arise from these reflections on the ontology of the maternal, questions that move in contrary motion, out of the subject/object distinction, and from the observation of this as the technological mode of thought. What follows for thinking and thought from the relaxation of the distinction? And, what happens to the philosophical character of maternity, to an ontology identified above, when reproductive technology commodifies it?

A kind of thought freed from the “copula” of subject and predicate is already imagined in the work of Deleuze (as a thought without image), of Kristeva in the semiotic, of Irigaray in the ethic of sexual specificity, and arguably as early as in Nietzsche, with the formation of self as a work of art. It gives rise to heterogeneous rhetorics that can

open philosophy up to the logic of dreams and rhythms. Arguably, it is also a possibility presaged in the cyborg, as contemporary feminists aspire to it, or at least in the excesses of technological innovation.

Meanwhile, a kind of maternity disciplined as a commodity and inducted into the capitalist-democratic mode, may result in more recognition of maternal labor divided between child care centers, nannies, and paid maternity and paternity leave. However, this may merely admit maternity to the dubious register of exploitation by capital, if it cannot also be opened to the technological as itself an ontological event.

It is because *techne* is ontological (to invoke Heidegger) that the advent of a way of thinking is also the becoming of a way of being. We are directed to the significance of thinking maternity, *the necessity of a maternal ontology*, however unimaginable, to meet the risks of these contrary moments.