

# **Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics/Aesthetics**

**Griselda Pollock**

## **Preface**

Most of us are familiar with Sigmund Freud's infamous signing off, in 1932, after a lifetime of intense intellectual and analytical creativity, on the question of psychoanalytical research into femininity. It is usually used as a stick with which to beat the old man. I introduce it once again for a different reason.

That is all I have to say to you about femininity. It is certainly incomplete and fragmentary and does not always sound friendly. But do not forget that I have only been describing *women in so far as their nature is defined by their sexual function*. It is true that its influence extends very far; but we do not overlook the fact that an individual woman may be a human being in other respects as well. If you want to know more about femininity, inquire from your own experience of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science will give you deeper and more coherent information.<sup>1</sup>

In our case, artists and poets might be a still relevant source, while feminism has also taught us to consult our own experience.

In October 1960, a young woman poet writes a poem to her six-month-old daughter. It starts: *Not easy to state the change you made*. This is the first line of Sylvia Plath's poem *Love Letter* written in 1960, six months after the birth of Frieda Hughes.

*If I am alive now, then I was dead,  
Though, like stone, unbothered by it,  
Staying put according to habit.*<sup>2</sup>

I suggest this poem is not merely a communication by a mother to her newborn child, which, given its date of writing, it clearly is. The poem holds the coming, but also the becoming, of this other responsible for a radical change in the woman-poet in that

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process. I suggest the poet is invoking the state of pregnancy rather than only postnatal maternity.

The poet-mother addresses an other, the child she calls *you*, creating a classic I-thou situation. *Not easy to state the change you made*. But this is not the usual dyad, the intersubjective exchange of mother and baby. The change was made by *you*, but in *me*, trans- rather than inter-subjectively, or rather the change is the fact that *you* – not yet a fully known other, the baby, but an other still unknown, and yet capable of changing its own unknown other – exist, and that existence affectively changes everything in and for what is now another kind of *me* – me-changed-by-you-existing. The change is making the *I* of the poem, the *I* who can later write this, changed. This *I* is now alive where before she was unaware of not being alive: deadness being represented in the poem as being like stone, unchanging, habitual, rooted. The other's coming has quickened her, she who is enlivened with the quickened other to come.

In a simple act that is at once the gesture of writing the poem and the poem written with its invocation of a moment of the *becoming alive of two at once*, mutually enlivened, in this distinctive and feminine-maternal, Sylvia Plath instantiates what Julia Kristeva has termed the sacred, that is so intimately connected with the feminine as the maternal: the joining of life and meaning.<sup>3</sup> The feminine holds the enigma of this joining, according to Kristeva, never knowing it, being in fact de-subjectified by the event, rendered temporarily psychotic, beyond signification, by this process of which only medicine, science and religion dare to speak.<sup>4</sup> But then her colleague at another Paris university told us to write our sexts, to write this body, to make the priests tremble by writing in white milk.<sup>5</sup> This is the feminist event of woman claiming writing to write her body in a succession of women's bodies, to write the join of life and meaning, as opposed to living in exile in the desubjectified body to which she is confined by patriarchal appropriations of meaning and of the word.

What follows in Plath's *Love Letter* is a long passage about the un- or pre- or non-mothering state of her former being: the non-maternal feminine. Here she invokes that state by using images of stone, winter, chiselled cheeks, basalt cheeks, frozen tears, dead

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heads with visors of ice, sleeping on with a bent finger. The change: you changed me. The child to come is already you, imagined before and after birth as an other, an addressee, a subjective entity, already subjectively transforming her own m/Other. As a result of what is intuited here as an *event-encounter*,<sup>6</sup> the poem shifts to a new set of imageries: of dew, fluids, unfolding, budding, and floating. This imagery reminds us in passing of Luce Irigaray's exploration of contrasting metaphors of solids versus fluids in masculine and putative feminine imaginaries.<sup>7</sup> The shift towards transformation also evokes in another register what painter, analyst and feminist theorist, Bracha Ettinger names as the aesthetic process associated with the Matrix: *metramorphosis*.<sup>8</sup>

Metramorphosis is the process of change in borderlines and thresholds between being and absence, memory and oblivion, *I* and *non-I*, a process of transgression and fading away. The metramorphic consciousness has no centre, cannot hold a fixed gaze – or, if it has a centre, it constantly slides to the borderline, to the margin. Its gaze escapes the margins and returns to the margins. Through this process the limits, borderlines, and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones.<sup>9</sup>

Plath's poem concludes with a phrase that rhymes with the opening:

*I knew you at once.  
Tree and stone glittered, without shadows.  
My finger length grew lucent as glass.  
I started to bud like a March twig:  
An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg.  
From stone to cloud, so I ascended.  
Now I resemble a sort of god.  
Floating through the air in my soul-shift  
Pure as a pane of ice.  
It's a gift.<sup>10</sup>*

I want to put this poem into a larger theoretical context framed by three key statements indicative of different feminist theorisations of the relations between creativity, femininity and the maternal. The first is a classic statement by Julia Kristeva:

Under these conditions 'female creation' cannot be taken for granted. It can be said that artistic creation always feeds on an identification or rivalry, with what is presumed to be the mother's *jouissance* (which has nothing agreeable

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about it). This is why one of the most accurate representations of creation, that is, of artistic practice, is the series of paintings by De Kooning entitled *Women*: savage, explosive, funny and inaccessible creatures in spite of the fact that they have been massacred by the artist.

But what if they had been created by a woman? Obviously she would have had to deal with her own mother, and therefore with herself, which is lot less funny. That is there is not a lot of female laughter to be found... In any case far from contradicting creativity (as existentialist myth would have us believe), maternity as such can favour a certain kind of female creation, provided economic constraints are not too heavy, as least in so far as it lifts fixations, and circulates passion between life and death, self and other, culture and nature, singularity and ethics, narcissism and self-denial. Maternity may thus be called Penelope's tapestry or Leibniz's network, depending on whether it follows the logic of gesture or of thought, but it always succeeds in connecting up heterogeneous sites.<sup>11</sup>

The second quotation is from the philosopher Luce Irigaray:

The womb, unthought in its place of the first sojourn in which we become bodies, is fantasized by many men to be a devouring mouth, a cloaca, or anal or urethral outfall, a phallic threat, at best reproductive. And in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with woman's sex (sexe) as a whole. There are no words to talk about it, except filthy, mutilating words. The corresponding affects will be, therefore, anxiety, phobia, disgust, a haunting fear of castration. How can one not also feel them on returning to what has always been denied, disavowed, sacrificed to build an exclusively masculine symbolic world?<sup>12</sup>

The third proposition is by Bracha Ettinger, whose theses about feminine sexual difference and subjectivity emerge at the intersections of painting, analytical practice and feminist theory. Ettinger's training traverses British object relations (D. W. Winnicott and W. R. Bion) and varied strands of French post- and anti-Lacanian psychoanalysis, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Piera Aulagnier, and Jean Laplanche. Building on this rich history of psychoanalytic theories that challenge the classical paradigms of subjectivity and drive-theory, and attending to intersubjectivity that acknowledges the subjectivity of the mother as well as that of the emerging child, Ettinger theorises a primordial encounter of the mutual but different, co-affecting but pre-maternal/prenatal severality, to which she gives the theoretical name *Matrix*.

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I propose the concepts Matrix and metamorphosis to describe certain aspects of human symbolic experience and to relativise the prevailing status of the concept of the Phallus in Lacan's (and Freud's) psychoanalytical theories. The Matrix is modelled upon certain dimensions of the prenatal state which are culturally foreclosed, occluded or repressed. It corresponds to a feminine dimension of the symbolic order dealing with asymmetrical, plural, and fragmented subjects, composed of the known as well as the not-rejected and not-assimilated unknown, and to unconscious processes of change and transgression in borderlines, limits, and thresholds of the "I" and the "non-I" emerging in co-existence. [...] The idea of a primary stratum in terms of matrixial subjectivity challenges several basic assumptions in psychoanalytical theory about the nature of different psychopathologies as well as about what is considered normal development, the difference between the sexes and the characterization of feminine and masculine.<sup>13</sup>

My work is strung out along this thread of psychoanalytically-informed and conceptually innovative feminist thinking which provides a context for my more extensive exploration and contextualisation of the contribution of Ettinger's matrixial theory into the extended debates about maternal aesthetics and ethics. In 1993 Bracha Ettinger stated:

I took the intrauterine meeting as a model for human situations and processes in which *non-I* is not an intruder, but a partner in difference. The Matrix reflects multiple and/or partial joint strata of subjectivity whose elements recognize each other without knowing each other.<sup>14</sup>

Two vitally important ideas are proposed here that are easily misunderstood by readers who may be immediately panicked by any mention of the intra-uterine. The Matrix is not about biological determinism, anatomical essentialism or any of the other bogeys that feminism fears. It is about a *model for human situations and processes*, psychically, imaginatively and symbolically built upon a primordial, ethical/aesthetical situation of human becoming in which there are subjectivising features distinct from those generated post-natally under the logic of castration (the necessary separation from and abjection of the maternal). Matrixial theory addresses partial elements or multiple and partial relations between unknown elements. This is not about cosy mothers and babies, symbiosis and fusion, nor fantasies of return to oceanic self-loss which are so common in phallic invocations of the maternal body as subjectless otherness and origin from which the subject must be separated to be a subject at all. It invokes a dimension of subjectivity, co-

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existing with, but shifting the phallic, in which the subject is fragile, susceptible, and compassionate to the unknown other who is, nonetheless, a *partner* in the situation, but a partner-in-difference.

One of the great paradoxes we inherit from the very sphere of theory and practice that promises us tools, ideas and concepts for feminist thinking about subjectivity and sexual difference – psychoanalysis – is the linking of that which gives life (the maternal-feminine) with death. The mother is sacrificed to the begetting of the phallic order: in Kristeva's terms she is massacred. That is to say, the giver of life is represented by a phallic Symbolic as a variously idealised lost object or abjected as a physical hole, bodily place, an alluring and suffocating entombment which does not contribute other than through its negation and abjection, to the constitution of human subjectivity and, by its lack, to sexual difference. Were we not so well schooled by what French analyst, Jean Laplanche, as early as 1970, already denounced as an imperialising 'phallic logic', were we not so afraid to step outside the comfort zone of the *phallic* model of the formation of the subject/subjectivity and a *phallic* Symbolic, we might have revolted sooner against the evident nonsense of such theories that characterise the giver of life as death.<sup>15</sup> The maternal may be linked with time, certainly, and hence with life and death, but not with the death and dearth of meaning, with non-sense, and with no poetic or creative contribution to the subjective dimension of the human at all.

There are many ways in which the maternal-feminine is linked with death and/or thereby murdered. The most obvious is the early Lacanian model in which Woman/Other/Thing are joined in their shared relegation to the unsignifiable zone of the Real.<sup>16</sup> Ettinger's radically different representation proposes 'pregnancy as a state of being alive in giving life' and she argues, that, in giving life, the maternal subject wants to live beside that given life.<sup>17</sup> Bracha Ettinger's contribution to thinking maternal aesthetics, ethics and subjectivity contrasts both to Kristeva's bleak vision and to that of Luce Irigaray. Resisting phallic foreclosure of the womb but without going beyond the phallic imaginary in which thinking about subjectivity still revolves around body parts and organs that may support metaphorisation (penis/phallus, placenta and so forth),

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Irigaray remains uncomfortably on the unresolvable borderline between a physiological understanding of actual bodily organs and the psycho-subjective which defies anatomical as well as perceptual realities. Ettinger declares: 'In my matrixial perspective, womb misericordiality–mercy–as pregnancy–emotion stands for compassionate hospitality in living inter-with-in-beside the almost Other.'<sup>18</sup> Thus Ettinger opens up a new field that radically introduces the concept of the pre-natal/pre-maternal situation of primordial *encounter* as a basis for recognising another dimension of subjectivity, fantasy and thought that is not at all about organs. It concerns structures, logics and affects, as well as garnered or remembered sensations, retroactively (*nachträglich*) caught up as the basis for both thinking ethics (relations to the other) and aesthetics (transmitted affects and transformations of/in/between the other(s)).

### **Maternal Subjectivities and Maternal Aesthetics**

What do maternal subjectivities and maternal aesthetics have in common? In what ways will we have to retheorise the maternal to arrive at a concept of an aesthetics qualified as *maternal*? Where is *maternal* subjectivity, and is it confined to a *maternal* subject? What could such a subject be? Is it singular? Is it the condition of being a woman who has a child or is it the process of becoming a *mother in the co-emergence with an unknown, co-affecting other*? Can the maternal situation, which implies transformation to a new or different condition of being as a result of a co-becoming, occur without an other, that/who, in the same process, is coming into being, and thus bringing about in a simultaneous *encounter-event* the complex that might be named the *maternal*? In this light might we redefine the maternal as an effect of both a primordial *prematernal-prenatal severality*, and a *co-naissance*?

Co-naissance in French allows for two meanings of equal importance. The idea of *naissance* (birth) is joined with the sense of knowing (*connaissance*) from the verb *connaître* (to know), and linked to *reconnaissance* (recognition), which, in English, has both the sense of acknowledging an other, and of cognitive understanding at a second take (re-cognition). The prefix *co-* before *naissance* introduces the sense of a

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complementary process, a shared, doubled, subjective event associated with a prolonged period of co-emergence. At the same time, the process of human genesis is to be understood as generating a specific kind of knowledge, or rather a knowing, which will show itself as re-cognition or re-co-naissance only in retrospect, since for the becoming-infant, the encounter happens too soon. It could be the condition for understanding premised upon a joint venture between co-affecting partners that occurs in what Lacan named the Real – the traumatic bodily events impacting on the psyche that come before a psychic apparatus is in place to fantasise and later think the event as memory, image, or idea. It also happens as this trauma of the archaic is retrospectively re-activated once a psychic apparatus of fantasy and thought develops and becomes the affective underside of certain aspects and dimensions of our relational modes with the world, our others, living and dead, alive and not-yet-alive, human and non-human, past and present.

In her gradually elaborated theoretical intervention into feminist theory and psychoanalysis over the last twenty years, Ettinger has invited us to think beyond a profound limit in psychoanalysis that only few have dared to breach (for instance, R. D. Laing, Donald Meltzer, and Luce Irigaray) and to think with those who have dared to speculate about the potential significance, for human subjectivity, of the pre-natal pre-experience of the becoming-human being.<sup>19</sup>

Going beyond the shift towards intersubjectivity in later twentieth century psychoanalytical thought, Ettinger proposes a starting point: *subjectivity as encounter*, subjectivity as primordially several. *Severality* means not one, but equally not many; at least more than one and neither in the status of a full subject versus another full subject. Thus we need to think about the *pre-maternal/pre-natal* as a shared event whose impact is different for each partial-partner of the primordial encounter. The pre-maternal subject is a becoming-mother only as a result of the encounter with the unknown pre-natal subject-to-come. Yet she was herself once in a comparable severality as a pre-natal subject, co-affecting with and co-affected by an unknown pre-maternal subject whom her own prenatal becoming was, as it were, *maternalising* just as the maternalised other was effectively humanising her. Thus, the deep and multi-layered time of the maternal as

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psychically inscribed memory of proto-subjectivising, transsubjective encounter, shifts attention from the banal idea of woman-as-mother as the replication of the reproductive body from generation to generation. Instead, the maternal can be grasped as a distinctive severality etched in the archaic dimension. It is proto-psychical yet garnered by a pre-natal subject-to-be which may be, differently, re-encountered when an adult woman finds herself initiating the process of becoming-mother with the pre-natal other whose existence transforms her into the becoming-mother. At the same time memories of the primordial condition of her own becoming and its long-term subjectivising legacies are newly reactivated from another position in what Ettinger has named: *the transsubjective matrixial encounter in transsubjectivising archaic environment*. This multiple, diachronous as well as synchronous transitivity is asymmetrical, regressive, remembering and at the same time, anticipatory and projective into living futures to come. It is what Ettinger wishes to bring into psychoanalytical debate as part of a broader feminist research into what might already be sensed, intuited, or imagined to be occurring beside, beneath, beyond the phallogocentric structures—*without knocking them out or replacing them*. Rather, this supplementary subjectivising track, the matrixial, complements and, in co-existing with it, shifts the phallic, allowing elements of subjectivity that phallogocentrism cannot articulate, fantasise or symbolise to come into play, opening up towards transition and transformation, and towards life.

Here Ettinger shares with Irigaray a deep sense of the profound damage to all subjects, and notably feminine subjects, of an exclusively phallic culture which forecloses feminine specificity in this dimension (Freud's sexual function, Kristeva's join of life and meaning). Ettinger, however, does not remain locked into the binary of masculine/feminine because her matrixial theory is not grounded in physical organs (a way of thinking which remains phallic because one may have an organ or not and lose it, for instance, in birth where one leaves the womb and is separated from the placenta). Ettinger's concept of the matrixial feminine is a sexual difference, a sexual specificity that is, however, non-gendered. It is not shaped by the Oedipal and hence phallic paradigm in which the feminine can only be derived, negatively, from the positivised

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masculine (+/-). In the Matrixial the feminine is not relative to the masculine. It is not ruled by the phallic signifier of presence/absence, active/passive, masculine/feminine. The matrixial feminine refers to the co-affecting, co-emerging difference-in-proximity of the pre-maternal/pre-natal conditions of human genesis which bequeaths a matrixial legacy to subjects whatever sex, gender or sexuality they later assume under the impact of phallic subjectivisation (i.e., Oedipalisation and the castration complex).

This is so important and so hard to make absolutely crystal clear. It is why queer theory is beginning to show an interest in Ettinger's work which dares to share with Deleuze and Guattari a desire to shift the phallic/Oedipal logic, but not at the expense of once again erasing any understanding of the gift that feminine sexual specificity makes to human subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> The matrixial, as a structure or logic of subjectivity, is from the beginning several, an encounter-event, co-emerging and co-affecting, between partners in difference that remain unknown to each other but share in this pre-birth incest an intimacy that may lay the psychic foundations for our capacities for ethics: hospitality and compassion for the other in their otherness and in my own alterity (radical unknownness).

This may appear a dense, odd and perhaps impenetrable argument for those just encountering Ettinger's now well-developed, twenty-year body of theory. The apparent torturing of language required in order to articulate the matrixial shifting of established theories, bears witness to how deeply alienated the specificity of what the feminine brings to human subjectivity has been made by the dominance of the phallic and its universe of meaning encoded in language. Indeed, in the current climate, even daring to speak of the feminine usually solicits anxiety or outright condemnation. What do you mean by the *feminine*, I am often asked. Is it not reductive, essentialist, Freudian, dangerous, inimical to queerness and all the new post-gender politics? But let me ask, are we being too precipitate in refusing to allow ourselves to take up Freud's sign off and perplexity before we even give ourselves some space to think, to take wrong turns, to revise and explore if there is any thing to be said about the feminine *qua* feminine? Might we not allow ourselves to take the risk and find out if it has any specificity or contribution to human

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subjectivity, rather than policing any exploration before it has even begun, through phallically induced fear? Given what we know psychoanalytically about negation, might we not be suspicious about how swiftly even women, and feminists too, retreat from thinking about the feminine and especially the maternal. What might be the foundations, psychically, of such renunciations and anxieties towards any serious consideration of the maternal?

The very logic of the prematernal/prenatal as a co-affecting, asymmetrical, repeating, and poietic severality appears bizarre, mystical and unthinkable within systems of language that are premised on thethetic rupture that creates the subject only through a dramatic break dividing the monadic subject from confusion with the archaic Mother. Here the journey into subjectivity is achieved only by means of separations (birth, weaning from the breast, the voice, the gaze, the body of the mother) and then the symbolic cut (castration) which retrospectively catches up and redefines all preceding separations into its dominating logics of on/off, presence/absence. The modelling of subjectivity and of sexual difference in many psychoanalytical traditions has been intricately linked by a shared phallic logic: to become a sexed subject is to be severed from the maternal in the real (birth), in the imaginary, and, by the signifier. The maternal is reduced to being the other of meaning, of individuation, and thus remains only body: womb-container, full breast, holding and mediating chora. In this extreme model, the maternal, pre- or postnatal, is not considered as a subject, affecting and affected by a shared, severalising event with an other.

Beyond the phallic construct of sexual difference as the binary of sex or even the opposition of gender, Ettinger invites us to recognise, to re-cognise, a subjectivising partnership that is primordially *feminine*, in the Real and logically, in the imaginary/Symbolic. Let me be careful here. The feminine has different connotations for different readers. Some would run a mile from the feminine, understood to be the stereotype of woman from which feminism is in revolt. This is the femininity brilliantly identified by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.<sup>21</sup> But many leading French feminist thinkers have also reclaimed the feminine after de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Hélène

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Cixous amongst others. Here the term combines an understanding of a certain deforming imposition of negativised otherness onto the feminine as the cipher through which the masculine is positivised and rendered both dominant and universal, with, on the other hand, the need to write, to excavate, to create, an other femininity, through *deconstruction* of the phallic and the *writing* of feminine difference associated with corpo-Reality but *not* derived from or determined by, the body. Anatomy is not destiny in a deterministic and limiting sense. Yet the ‘body’—imaginatively understood as cycles, pleasures, sexualities, surfaces, contacts and even traumas—and the idea of an embodied subject is acknowledged as a resource and fantasmatic ground for inscriptions *in, of and from the feminine* as a sexual difference not defined only by the phallic negation of its consolidating other. In that tradition, between semiotics, philosophy and psychoanalysis, the feminine has been a term for serious research that has special interest in the aesthetic as the site of its poetic disclosure and even creation in a totally non-essentialist method that is, none the less, unafraid of asking about both the specificity of the female-sexed body and the sexed body’s place in the formulation and transformation of sexual difference and subjectivity.

Let me again anticipate feminist anxiety. Ettinger’s proposition does not reduce the feminine to a physiological, anatomical or biological essence. Ettinger’s concept of a matrixial feminine is not about deriving a gendered/sexed identity from a bodily organ: the womb. It is, in the Freudian tradition, *psychoanalytical*. That means attempting to think about subjectivity as a plaiting of the Real (the traumatic), the Imaginary (the realm of fantasy and images) and the Symbolic (words and thought), a weaving of the corpo-Real, the fantasised and the signified. In playful reference to the tradition of linking femininity and the uterus through the Greek term, *hysteron*, which gave us the very founding condition addressed by psychoanalysis (hysteria), Ettinger uses the Latin term, *matrix*, which does indeed mean womb, but in the same mixture of invoking something ‘real’ (not physiological) and fantasised. Ettinger uses the term matrix because it also has served, metaphorically and mathematically to signify a certain complex, or originary *composite of elements*. It is as if language has remembered, or unconsciously registered,

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in the double sense of the term matrix, that the maternal is a *generating structure* in the Real, but it is also an imaginative and intellectual potentiality, not the mere matter of an anatomical organ to which, ideologically and fantasmatically, the maternal-feminine is instrumentally reduced by misogynistic or phallogocentric thought. What Ettinger is inviting us to reconsider as we struggle to emerge from such definitions in which even the feminist imagination, and certainly our theories to date, have remained policed, is that we might acknowledge that the maternal-feminine could be a source of *meaning*. It could be understood as a thinking apparatus for human subjectivity that goes way beyond the utilitarian process of generating little humans. It is a matrix for other logics, for ethics, for aesthetics, for poetics, and even for social relations perhaps.

So much work is needed to clear the space to think about this re-orientation of both phallic foreclosure of the feminine (leaving its difference unsignified, hence unthinkable) and the resulting feminist anxiety and ambivalence about identifying with what might appear to be the old binary negative term, the feminine. Even more work is needed to link Ettinger's matrixial clinical and theoretical innovations to close, parallel but still distinct or incomplete moves in a similar direction by Irigaray, Laplanche, Françoise Dolto, and Guattari, that any brief introduction runs the risk of misrepresentation, or of soliciting immediate counter-arguments.<sup>22</sup> Ettinger's own texts are delivered in what can only be called her own matrixial poetics, not unlike the inventiveness Lacan allowed himself, or needed when writing, to breach the very resistances in language whose beyond psychoanalysis tries to trace and sometimes understand. Ettinger's *writing* is an *écriture féminine* in Cixous's sense, even as it elaborates a theoretical intervention. It involves shifts, moves, repetitions, circlings and a poetic language of created terms. What she is offering is a passionate admiration and energetic defence of the possibility of there being *humanly significant* meaning in what she names 'the feminine' not as the attribute of woman defined as the opposite of man but rather as a supplementary, shifting stratum of human subjectivity and meaning. This stratum is delivered to us all, irrespective of later gender alignment and sexual orientation, from the primordial severality of human becoming in the intimacy and sexual

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specificity of the feminine as a structure of unknown, co-affecting, co-emerging partial transsubjective instances encountering each other across a shared *matrixial borderspace*. Forget wombs, insides and organs. Think instead of traces, vibrations and resonances, registered sonic and tactile intimations of othernesses, sharing space but never fusing, encountering but never dissolving their boundaries, jointly eventing without ever knowing fully the other's event.

In the matrixial stratum, subjectivity is, therefore, not a matter of separation and cleavage. Subjectivity may be, also and at the same time, for different ends and effects, *encounter*. Ettinger proposes subjectivity as the effects of occurrences at shared borderspaces whose mutually unknown and unknowable partners-in-difference register a shared event, but differently for each partner. Thus we avoid the pervasive ideas of the mother's body as a primary home, a place of blissful symbiosis or a dreadful darkness of complete loss of differentiation. Womb/tomb. All the distinctively masculine fantasies void from the process of human becoming the shared but distinctive, asymmetrical response-ability of a full, fantasising and regressing, reactivating sexual human subject, and a registering, garnering, sensate, pre-subject developing in prolonged cohabitation with an other, unknown and unknowable, but none the less co-affecting and co-emerging.

Psychoanalysis may be defined as the theoretical and clinical space where we catch ourselves thinking and where we attend to what is thinking or speaking in us, where we realise thereby that we are 'determined otherwise'. Psychoanalysis is also a modern space created for what Foucault named the care of the self, for adjustments to psychic pain, for the working through of the traumas of each of our individual histories of formation as subjects. It is the modern laboratory of the mind but not as the rationalists, cognitivists or empiricists imagine the thinking organ. Rather, as Julia Kristeva argues, psychoanalysis replaces religion as the space where we encounter and ponder the sacred: that is the join of life and meaning, of corporeality and imagination, of body and language. In this space, the maternal-feminine, that is a human woman in relation to a specific dimension – her so-called sexual function at the level of her own eroticism and her position in the social script of human society and its reproduction – is both central

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and abolished, is both invoked and erased as nothing, a before, without meaning, imagination or language: just body, just life-giving, just ground for the emergence of a figure/subject cut out from her amorphous cloth. The mother is paradoxically that spectre to be invented only to be rendered so monstrous that we all need to kill her off.<sup>23</sup>

Those of us born into, and housing our subjectivities in bodies which have the potential to generate, to repeat the process of our own becoming in the matrixial severality that marks human sexual procreation, are already borderlinked to the sexual-feminine-maternal at the level of unremembered memory and imaginative projection that may be foreclosed under phallogentrism. In all those psychoanalytical legends that suggest that the erotic sexualisation of the feminine occurs to the effect that *wanting a baby* is really *wanting a penis*, and from the father, seem entirely symptomatic of the eradication of the possibility that wanting a child may be a matter of wishing for a re-encounter with the kind of otherness-in-proximity that is the gift of our mothers to us as woman-subjects, a gift to all subjects that may also be reactivated in a variety of other ways as well, notably in relations with others. Since the gift is primordial and open to every human it created, it does not need childbearing to realise its potential in human sociality or creativity. It can become the basis for an ethics and an aesthetics; or it can be re-encountered in any of the trans-subjective encounters we might create with others we do not know.

In several recent pronouncements, Julia Kristeva, with her long history of exploring pre-Oedipal moments in subjectivity, has addressed the enigma of human gestation beyond that which the life sciences, obstetrics, or religion have said about it. We are, Kristeva proposes, the first civilisation to lack a discourse on the complexity and meaning of motherhood. To remedy this, she proposes a discussion of what she names *maternal passion*. For Kristeva, such passion is pregnant with both madness and sublimity. She speaks of pregnancy as the narcissistic 'harbouring of an unknown, shapeless, pre-object' that turns the woman inward, distracting her from the world. Maternal passion is, however, also ambivalent. In addition, it is the prototype for depassioning, for the ability to let go, to let the other be, to let the other survive. It is a

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form of sublimation of aggressive, narcissistic and erotic elements into a tenderness that allows the other to separate. For Kristeva, motherhood involves acts of expulsion and detachment.<sup>24</sup>

Her images are powerful and astute, but wholly different from the imagining of pregnancy and motherhood offered in Ettingerian matrixial theory. Both theorisations touch on dimensions of their author's own lived experience. Both pass through the prism of their chosen psychoanalytical modelling of subjectivity. Neither can be denied. But what are the politics, ethics and aesthetics resulting from the one or the other? The one is a vision of the woman turned inward and narcissistic by a pregnancy which must end in expulsion, and which later forces a detachment to separate the child from her. The other is a notion of a primordial potentiality for imagining subjectivity as what Ettinger calls, in her revision to Laplanche, a *seduction into life*, into a human subjectivity that has as its earliest stratum, waiting to be imaginatively, ethically and aesthetically elaborated, a potentiality for transsubjective co-emerging and co-affecting com-passion, which avoids from the start notions of monadic narcissism and violent separations, symbiotic fusion versus individuation by means of abjection and castrative severance – even while allowing all these processes their place in the larger drama of subjectivity post-natally.

### **Situating Ettinger's Move in Context**

Across a flow of major papers, Ettinger has propounded an idea and elaborated a theoretical and clinical practice that contravenes the long held psychoanalytical tenet that holds that the realm of the psychic is only initiated by birth, by separation of the child from the mother's body, and that the prenatal or intrauterine is therefore, by definition the field of biology, outside and beyond psychoanalysis.

Freud was not, however, so adamant. In his essay on 'the "Uncanny"' (1919), Freud allowed for two tracks of uncanny anxiety: one arising from *castration anxiety*, the question of severance, separation and authority, and the other arising from *Muttersliebfantasien* which he allowed to be translated as *the phantasy of intra-uterine experience* (rather than fantasies of the maternal body which could mean much more of a

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relatedness and co-emergence than simply the experience of being inside the womb). *Muttersliebphantasien* involved a sense of having been here before, as well as emerging in fantasies of being buried alive.<sup>25</sup> Both rehearse the phallic vision of the womb. Ettinger senses something more in Freud's text that needs to be rendered precise:

I believe that in routing the unconscious object into the aesthetic realm of the mysterious splendour of the artwork, Freud is orienting us towards a differentiation between *the castration complex* and what we name the matrixial complex, referring to the *maternal womb/intrauterine complex*. I think we must clearly separate these two kinds of archaic phantasy complexes, both of which appear in Freud's text. Both of them, when they threaten to approach the subject in the Real, trigger a similar sentiment of awe and strangeness that lies at the source of the same class of "uncanny" or *Unheimlich* anxiety. Even if the repressed affect linked to these two kinds of experience is always anxiety, the unreduced, unerased difference between them is rooted in a different affect that was attached to them before the repression of their representations: that of pleasure or displeasure. While *castration anxiety* is *frightening at the point of the emergence of the original experience* before its repression, the *matrixial fantasy* is not frightening at the point of its original emergence, but becomes frightening when the experience is repressed.<sup>26</sup>

The difference between the two tracks lies, therefore, in the fact that while both, as returns of repressed materials occasion anxiety on such returns (uncanniness defined as the emergence of what should have remained repressed), only castration itself generated anxiety in its initiating phase. The fantasies of the mother's body did not. Such fantasies perhaps offer access to other sensations that will later line psychic processes with different affects not associated with the pairing of fusion /severance, but with the co-emergence of affects associated with partial and shifting senses of connection/connectivity for which we, later, retrospectively, *yearn*. Even if such yearnings for partial connectivity with an other cause pain, they also may solace something profound in us that undoes the absolute binary of pleasure/pain and forms the basis of our being able to share the suffering of another, or feel with another's trauma. Bracha Ettinger has built on this passing reference in Freud's text, which she shows Freud and Lacan swiftly and retrospectively incorporated into the single castration paradigm. She posits the possibility of a supplementary and different subjective track

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stemming from a different source of anxiety and repressed content, giving rise to what she calls yearning instead of desire: *nichsapha*: yearning for connection, that is neither the double fantasy of fusion nor severance, but a kind of luxuriant pleasure and sometimes anguish associated with differentiated besidedness.

This difficulty in challenging the castrative model has two foundations which rest upon each other: the scotomisation or foreclosure of the prematernal/prenatal severality as having anything to contribute to the processes of human subjectivity or meaning-creation; and the substitution of a foreclosed exploration of this matrixial transsubjective borderspacing by what she has also identified in recent papers as *the ready-made monster-mother* which is linked to psychoanalysts' refusal to acknowledge fantasies of the devouring, abandoning or the not-enough mother as *primal fantasies*.

Ettinger has built a structure upon a daring and heretical hypothesis: that there is something beyond phallic logic. Contemporary work by Jean Laplanche has also defined as *phallic* a logical code that was paradoxically constructed upon perceptual anatomical difference, 'structured by the law of the excluded middle. This is the logic of presence/absence, zero and one' which makes it 'hard to keep the question of the difference of sex (the French is the same) apart from the castration complex'.<sup>27</sup> Following from such an identification that what is usually accepted in psychoanalytical circles as a universal law is merely the working through of a particular and contingent logic (however universal the logic tries to declare itself), Laplanche then asks whether this universality is inevitable, and whether there are not 'models of symbolization that are more flexible, more multiple and more ambivalent'. 'Does the inevitability of the logic of the excluded middle in the equipment of our western civilization necessarily go along with the reign of the castration complex [...] as ideology?'<sup>28</sup> Laplanche considers the castration complex itself as an agent of repression, repressing what he calls 'le Sexual', using the German term in his French text to stay close to what he suggests Freud was theorising in his famous three essays in 1905 on *SexualTheorie* – namely, the theory of the sexual which is what the idea of sex (classic sexual difference based on genital

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diversity giving rise to idea of absence and presence of the male genital) and its arm, the castration theory, want to suppress.<sup>29</sup>

There is a growing interest in the work of Laplanche in the English-speaking world and he takes his place with other psychoanalytical theorists seeking to relativise the Oedipal model. But in washing out that which constructs sex and sexual difference upon the repressed ruins of the Sexual, namely Freud's major proposals about the existence of *infantile sexuality*, we lose the power to articulate feminine sexual specificity, except through the castration paradigm of the excluded middle. Or, perhaps a different way of seeing can be presented in Laplanche's terms, through following his argument that grants priority to gender over sex and the Sexual, because of his key assertion that the primal condition always comprises adult and child and the seduction of the child by the adult.

For Laplanche the primal situation is that of adult *and* child. There is thus already and always intersubjectivity. He rejects ideas of an autistic, narcissistic monad separated out from the maternal body and driven towards its objects by internal self-preserving pulsions. The drive, triggered by implantations arising in the primal situation, according to Laplanche, has as its 'source object' the untranslatable excess of the implanted enigmatic signifiers of the messages transmitted to the psychically premature infant in the constant exchange with the adult world.<sup>30</sup> The messages projected *unconsciously* by the sexuated and sexual adults around the baby cannot be understood by the infant before the apparatus these messages will stimulate into formation is formed. The enigmatic messages arise from the already adult, sexuated, sexed adult whose own unconscious eroticism travels to seduce the infant down the very channels of loving care, the maternal aesthetic theorised by Christopher Bollas.<sup>31</sup> According to Laplanche, the breast which feeds the baby must also be understood as the erotic organ of the feeding mother, whose unconscious confusion of her pleasures may also insert themselves into the receptive infant as the enigma: 'what does this breast want from /of me?' which runs in parallel with the child's learning to want the breast. Thus, according to Laplanche, the implanted, transmitted messages form a *seduction* whose metabolisation or translation by the baby stimulates the child's drives into being. Laplanche thus radically disowns any idea of

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self-preservation/physiological need as the origin of drives onto which sexual drives are subsequently lent. The drive is sexual.

Laplanche's radical reordering of the sequencing of gender, sex and the sexual, (which engage in a polemic with feminist, notably Judith Butler's, gender theory *en passant*), arises from a theory of transmission and implantation into the neonate of the unconscious and adult sexuality in response to which the processes of metabolisation (psychic processing – both fantasy and symbolisation) are initiated.<sup>32</sup> But the problem in this fascinating work remained for me with the non-specific theory of *parental* seduction whose only real site or instrument is the highly specific breast. The breast is a gendered and gendering body-part, an organ that sprouts during female adolescence upon a newly visibly *femaled* body. The breast provides the girl-becoming-woman with a novel erogenous zone, hitherto absent (unlike the clitoris/vagina) that offers her first erotically and sometimes maternally, access to a *jouissance* – enigmatic excess of unconscious pleasure – of the feeding/sexual mother in a retroactive, fantasmatic and corporeal rediscovery of the breast at which she once nursed. Thus we can trace parallel lines of thought in Ettinger and Laplanche in their challenge to both drive theory and object relations models. But Ettinger challenges both Laplanche and behind him Freud. Laplanche argues that gender precedes the infant's fantasies about sexual difference because in this primal unit of adult and child, the gender as well as the sexuality of the adults is projected and implanted. Laplanche reminds us that Freud's comments about the first identification being the 'father of personal prehistory' are contradicted by his subsequent comment that 'the child cannot distinguish between father and mother, so that one would have to say "parents"'.<sup>33</sup>

This seems once again not only counter-intuitive but also matricidal, and runs in the face of much empirical research which indicates the many levels on which babies recognise and know their own mothers above all other adults. Why cannot there be a primary, post-natal identification, as a human/humanising subjectivising other, with the *maternal* and with her already multi-layered, multi-temporal emanations, not of sexual difference (phallically defined gender or sex) but of feminine sexual specificity and its

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non-gendered unconscious dimension of connectivity, co-eventing, severality and, as we shall see, hospitality?

Laplanche's idea of a primal situation of adult and child sounds promising but while it avoids some of the dangers of Momism in Kleinian and post-Kleinian reclamation of the mother, it makes no sense to think of an equality of seductions by the adult as a non-gendered adult if gender assignment is also conceived of as primary, implanting something that the child's later explorations of anatomical difference will be motivated to decipher as sex, producing primal fantasies to explain.<sup>34</sup>

Can the Laplanchean general theory of seduction be reconsidered in the light of Ettinger's daring feminist theorisation of the pre-natal/prematernal severality? Can we thus avoid the absolute sovereignty of the castrative paradigm and its version of sexual difference in which the breast as organ is displaced by another symbolically invested organ, penis/phallus? Can we displace the substitution of the maternal by the paternal while not losing the possibility of talking about sexual difference itself? Can that difference be considered sexual, in its own sexuating and specific terms: the feminine as not derived negatively or differentially from the masculine via an organ lacking or valorised by inversion? Can we grasp the feminine as an independent source of another meaning system, Ettinger's 'seduction into life' within the several strata of human subjectivity that contributes its specificity as the pre-maternal-feminine borderspace of encounter to the repertoire of humanness that may be played out in ethics (relations to others) and aesthetics? This move involves specifying distinctive operations for this matrixial dimension: *transsubjectivity* rather than what we already have explored in feminist psychoanalysis: postnatal intersubjectivity. If Jessica Benjamin rightly resists the idea that the typically phallic concept of the maternal is *asubjective* (not a subject herself and without subjectivising consequences) and demands the recognition in studies of the infant's early world of the mother's mind, Ettinger is closer to Laplanche.<sup>35</sup> She is proposing, however, a pre-natal fantasising becoming-mother with a historical/personal unconscious, altered in her own history, her memory shifted unconsciously by the presence of the other, that she already humanises, even as its own sensate capacities for

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garnering the sensations of alterity, impinging on, pulsing, resonating, moving and touching it, are constantly evolving over the six months of the last two trimesters of their shared adventure of begetting *human* life. By not using the still phallic gesture of sexual seduction and implantation of enigmatic signifiers, but rather ideas of mediation and transmission, Ettinger performs her matrixial shifting of even residually phallic constructions in Laplanchean territory.

### **Primal Maternal Fantasies: Notenoughness, Abandonment, Devouring**

In two recent papers, Ettinger has taken new steps, theorising various forms of mother-hating and mother-erasing that have real ethical, and potentially emotionally catastrophic, implications in the psychoanalytical processes of transference and cure. They are caused by the active deployment of a negative and negating fantasy by the psychoanalyst who unconsciously vies, narcissistically, to be a 'better mother'. This tendency to self-substitution leads to a failure to acknowledge the effective place of the maternal in primal fantasies, namely in fantasies that arise postnatally in the human infant to deal with the enigmas of living. These enigmas of living are not caused by adult agents or bad mothers (versus the loving good one the analyst imagines him/herself to be).

Firstly, Ettinger identifies a psychological ready-made that blames the real mother for the child's sense of what is an existential, and hence inevitable insufficiency in its world:

The prevalence of the imaginary *mother-monster readymade* figure testifies, in my view, to the major narcissistic trap in the transferential relations, due to the systematic *disrecognition* that particular kinds of recurring phantasmatic and imaginary complaints, arising in almost each and every reported case of regressive therapy, represent in fact ***primal phantasies, and have no other 'cause'***. I have suggested that we add to the classic list of primal fantasies: origin in terms of birth or primal scene, seduction, castration and Oedipus, these three recurrent phantasies (disguised as memories of the unremembered period):

- a. ***Notenoughness*** – regrouping representations of the originary disattunement with the outside into an *originary not-enough mother*;

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b. *Abandonment* – the primal fantasy of the abandoning mother and

c. *Devouring* – the primal fantasy of the devouring mother.

The characteristics of all these fantasies correspond to all the basic requirements of primality.<sup>36</sup>

Paralleling Laplanche here in this understanding of primal fantasies as fantasmatic translations/infant theorisations of what cannot, in fact, be made sense of, Ettinger defines this new series of primal fantasies as corresponding to ‘the basic human enigmas of existence regarding the source of anxiety and the source of psychic pain’.<sup>37</sup>

If, however, as often occurs, instead of treating such fantasies of insufficiency and abandonment as both primordial and fantasmatic, the analyst lends reality to the analysand’s expressed feelings of anger, rage, distress about his/her actual mother’s failure or menace, ‘maternity, feminine sexuality and most of all mother/daughter relations’ suffer catastrophic damage.

The lack of recognition of the three phantasies of Not-enoughness, Abandonment and Devouring *as primal* destroys mainly the mother-daughter relationship since it systematically rechannels hate toward the mother and destroys the daughter’s desire for identification with the parent of her own sex, with catastrophic results for females, whereas the paternal figure of originary repression constituted as a figure of identificatory love, regulates, together with the establishment of Seduction, Castration and Oedipus as phantasmatic primal complexes, the parallel same-sex father/son identification problem, for the actual son/father relationship. This disrecognition stands in huge contradiction to the Freudian early, major discovery that *paternal seduction* ‘remembered’ by patients represents in most cases a primal phantasy and the real father is not to be automatically blamed when this phantasy, disguised as memory, arises in periods of acute regression during analysis. Indeed primal phantasies that organize male sexuality and paternal authority were more easily recognized, causing benefit to the symbolic organization of the subject according to parameters of maleness and masculinity.<sup>38</sup>

Ettinger is arguing that the generally acknowledged primal fantasies of Seduction, Castration and the Oedipus smoothly ‘regulate the male subjectivizing process vis-à-vis a paternal loving figure with regard to *source-less primal enigmas*’.<sup>39</sup> I fear he wants to kill me. No, says the analyst, your father does not want to kill you: that is a phantasy

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corresponding to the anxiety of the child struggling in his infant state to make sense of sex, desire, origin and rivalry. If with regard to the mother, the analyst, says, as Ettinger reminds us that Winnicott once said to one patient, 'I too hate your mother', the real mother is not relieved of the anxiety generated by what is, in effect, a primal anxiety that she has not caused through personal failure as a carer. Any infant confronting the world will inevitably ask: why do I feel threatened, abandoned, insufficiently fed or held? Why - not because it was non-subjectively sustained in perfect fusion and symbiosis during its prenatal sojourn, but precisely because there has been, through birth, a change of state in subjective-to-subjective correlations that in the real absence of the shared matrixial web, produce now a yearning for this web of connectivity, and anxiety associated with its apparent fading.

By the psychological release, furthermore, created by the analytical acknowledgement that such feelings are in effect, primal fantasies arising to 'explain' the inevitable insufficiency of the world for the becoming subject rather than the bad or not-ever-quite-good-enough mother, it becomes possible to recognise that such feelings of abandonment, insufficiency, or devouring arise themselves precisely in the conditions of our post-natal shifting from the primordial matrixial severality. For classical psychoanalysis, such a legacy is illegible except as the real failure of the so-called good enough mother - another treacherous ideal which makes us all fail as mothers. Good-enough sounds initially less than ideal while actually installing an impossible ideal in place of recognition that being born initiates us into a psychic loss. The trace of matrixial potentiality must hover between not-enoughness, abandonment and devouring at the point at which anxiety is generated by *disattunement or non-adjustment to the novel post-natal conditions*. Without the alignment of such anxieties to phantasy, fantasies that deal with matrixial traces as well new sources of anxiety in the post-natal individuating situation will be projected retrospectively onto what Ettinger has identified in psychoanalytical literature and practice as 'the ready-made mother-monster'. Ettinger writes:

The Not-enough Mother fantasy arises as a reply to the enigma of the loss of perfect attunement between presubject and environment – the disturbances in

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what Freud named the ‘Oceanic feeling’. Apart from occurrences of traumatic and very dramatic disturbances, real traumatic abandonment... real traumatic maternal over-domineering... (that must be recognised as sources of suffering when they occur in reality) *the failure to recognise* these three unconscious threads **as *primal*** Mother-phantasies is, in my view, the reason for a flagrant damage to the feminine-maternal caused during the process of psychoanalysis itself encouraged by their defaulting counter-transferential misrecognition of them.<sup>40</sup>

## Beauty

I want to conclude with some thoughts from another paper that comes ever closer to our thematic: ‘Diotima and the Matrixial Transference: Psychoanalytical Encounter-Event as Pregnancy in Beauty’ (2007). Clearly the transferential situation that is fundamental to the work of psychoanalysis is one of the two privileged moments in which we can glimpse matrixiality in our post-natal subjectivities - the other being the aesthetic encounter. ‘In psychoanalysis, within the matrixial borderspace transference, the analysand’s subjectivity engenders new boundaries while being engendered in a transgression of boundaries, and it processes its becoming within subjectivity-as-encounter between I and non-I.’<sup>41</sup> The matrixial encounter-event occurs primordially in the real of prematernity/prenatality but this moment is, of course, as the Laplanchean model also argues, asymmetrical since the I and non-I partners, adult and child (Laplanche) or, prematernal and prenatal subject (Ettinger), are in different moments of becoming, remembering, registering. This gives rise to some ethical implications. Notably it should be said that the exploration of the prenatal does not in any way prejudice the woman’s right to choose. In fact, the ethics of this asymmetry enhance the adult subject’s rights over her shared body and support the choice positions of the maternal partner who is the only adult who can choose for this profound partnership in difference. The ethical conditions replay in the analytical situation in which the relations between analyst and regressing analysand may also produce an asymmetry with its particular responsibilities on the part of the analyst. It produces both an ethics

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(responsibility) and an aesthetics (concerning the nature of the transformations effected in the analysand's inner worlds). To plot this final point out I shall remind my readers firstly:

The matrixial transsubjective dimension, and the desire that arises within it, applies to both women and men even though they are based upon the archaic bonding and linking of each human pre-subject with his/her female m/Other and in the sense that they are feminine and (pre)maternal. Matrixial transsubjectivity does not postulate subjects in interrelationships or intersubjectivity.<sup>42</sup>

This takes Ettinger back to Plato, and to the contributions of the woman Diotima to Socrates' discussion about Eros. Why Socrates needed to speak this through a woman is a fascinating question. Ettinger finds intimations of matrixiality in Diotima's understanding of Eros as intermediary, mediator, interpreter and means of communication. During the discussion of Eros, Diotima uses pregnancy and birth as her predominant metaphors to elaborate this transformative Eros. Ettinger quotes: "Eros is birth in something beautiful whether of body or of soul."<sup>43</sup> Ettinger then argues for what she has importantly identified and named: a non-prohibited pre-birth incest that is to be understood as non-sexual, yet sexually differentiated. This gives rise to other ways than phallic/erotic mastering, incorporating, rejecting, or debasing through which we might aspire to connection or to be open to shared transformations at the borderspaces between generations, or between any I and non-I such as the artwork itself proposes when we meet the event of the other it encodes. Ettinger explains:

Eros that I have called matrixial: a feminine-prematernal Eros with its particular ethics and aesthetics, is entwined in the process of co-dawning in the course of differentiation and differentiation in jointness, of which the psychic and corporeal encounter in pregnancy is, in my view, the basic pattern. This Eros, such as this union, eludes the incest prohibition (since foetal-pre-son and pre-daughter-and maternal bodily union is of necessity 'incest' and of necessity unavoidable) and it, therefore, necessarily forever bears, in the human, the imprint of incestuous yet not sexual closeness, and it is that particular kind of incest which is implied, in my view, in Diotima's secret inasmuch as it is a feminine secret. Likewise, what Jacques Lacan termed, in modern psychoanalysis, the additional, other, impossible feminine sexuality also leads, in my view, to the subject of non-prohibited pre-Oedipal pre-natal 'incestuous' relations in and by pregnancy.<sup>44</sup>

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What is the significance of being able thus to articulate Lacan's late proposals of another, feminine *jouissance*?

The incestuous (yet non-sexual and non-genital) wish to unite across the gap between generations, though not fulfilled in the body outside of pregnancy, and precisely because it cannot be fulfilled in the body in other manners than prenatality and prematernity, institutes a sublimated feminine ethics of compassion and a sublimated feminine aesthetics of Beauty [...] [,] a transsubjective affective, mental and erotic sphere.<sup>45</sup>

Ettinger's recent work addresses, therefore, the issues of com-compassion and hospitality arising from the acknowledgement of the potential enlivening and solace, and the potential trauma occasioned by the existence of the matrixial web and borderspace engrained in all humans as a result of our shared 'incestuous', i.e. transgenerational, human becoming in the sexually specific feminine body-psyche. While Ettinger is, in my view, offering a profound and profoundly feminist theoretical intervention in the field of psychoanalytical theory and practice, she is also an artist. It was from her art practice that the grains of these ideas were first gleaned. Thus she makes an equal contribution to practical and theoretical aesthetics reformulating in matrixial terms the transformation event-encounter created by artwork for both artist and viewer.

From Diotima Ettinger gleans an understanding of Eros as a figure of transformation and a forming of an intermediate state: becoming or birthing which is, if we keep to our matrixial understanding, of necessity, a co-becoming, a co-birthing. The passage unexpectedly evokes, in its poetics, Plath's phrasing of her being shifted from stone to cloud.

And wit(h)nessing in art? The desire of the artist seals imprints of Eros in the artwork as a new impregnated cluster created like a cloud from sparkles of traces of internal [*GP: personal history*] and external [*GP: world history*] encounter-events, a cluster that produces transformations in earlier observations and opens the potential for new insight, for the artist and for the viewer. The gesture of the artist creates in the painting from Eros and inscribes the secret of the encounter between proto-Ethical compassion and aesthetical com-passion [*GP feeling/suffering with*] of each specific out-in-sight that gives birth to the outside inside and to the inside in the visible. The insight born as co-dawning with the artwork is a borderlinking insight. Likewise, the desire as the imprint of Eros in the work of art is in fact a

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question about the irruptions of ethics in aesthetics through the gesture of the artist.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

This is a working paper, perhaps rendered strange through the necessity of working with many specific theoretical vocabularies and the generating of not only new ones but almost another language, in order to accommodate the possibilities of thinking about the foreclosed matrixial maternal-feminine. I cannot stress enough that my engagement with this field is not to limit women to this dimension. Following Freud, there are many aspects of any human subject. But in so far as we are born to it, born in it, could live beside and think with it, we should pay attention to the maternal-feminine. In so far as Kristeva has warned us that we may be living in an age without a discourse on the mother, losing religion's historic appropriation and ritual's ancient dramatisations, allowing a phallic science and technology alone to reduce this immense rich field of human meaning and affectivity to a series of replicable procedures without a sense of their subjective implications, we need to prevent feminist-daughter anxieties and professional entrenchments in existing psychoanalytical traditions prohibiting us from imaginatively and theoretically daring to think the unthinkable. Matrixial theory has been elaborated for over twenty years now. Ettinger's works constitute an extending corpus of writings that I have just barely introduced here. My aim has been to assist them to take their place in *Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics*.

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University of Leeds June 2008

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity' (1933), *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), XXII (1964), 112-35 (p. 135).

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Plath, 'Love Letter', in *The Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 147.

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<sup>3</sup> Cathérine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred* (1998), trans. by Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). See also *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference*, ed. by Griselda Pollock and Victoria Turvey Sauron (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), especially Griselda Pollock, 'Sacred Cows: Wandering in Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Anthropology', pp. 9-48.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking here of the opening passages of Julia Kristeva's 'Motherhood according to Bellini' (1975), trans. by Leon Roudiez, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' ([1975] 1976), trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 245-64.

<sup>6</sup> This is a key phrase of Bracha Ettinger, whose work will be discussed extensively in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'The "Mechanics" of Fluids' (1977), trans. by Catherine Porter, in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 106-118. For a discussion of Irigaray's theory and feminist aesthetics, see Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: the Politics of Art by Women* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006). Elizabeth Watkins has also worked on Irigarayan theory and the cinematic, as has Caroline Bainbridge, 'On Feminine Enunciation in the Cinema', *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* (Special Issue: Dialogues with Luce Irigaray), 25 (2003), 129-141.

<sup>8</sup> Bracha L. Ettinger, 'Matrix and Metramorphosis', *Differences* (Special Issue: Trouble in the Archives, ed. by Griselda Pollock), 4 (1992), 176-208.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>10</sup> Plath, p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissent' (1977), trans. by S. Hand, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 292-300 (p. 297).

<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' (1981), trans. by David Macey, in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 34- 46 (p. 41).

<sup>13</sup> 'Matrix and Metramorphosis', pp. 176-77.

<sup>14</sup> Bracha L. Ettinger, *Matrix-Borderlines* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Laplanche, 'Gender, Sex and the Sexual', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 8 (2007), 201-219 (p. 217).

<sup>16</sup> I cannot go in detail here into the complex Lacan propositions about Woman as Other and Thing, and *objet a*. This is explored in Ettinger, *Matrix-Borderlines*, pp. 14-18. Here she discusses Lacan's seminar *Encore* of 1972-3 to be found in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton & Co., 1998).

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<sup>17</sup> Bracha L. Ettinger, 'From Proto-Ethical Compassion to Responsibility: Besidedness and the Three Primal Mother-Fantasies of Not-enoughness, Devouring and Abandonment', *Athena: Filosofios Studijos* (Special Issue: International Commemoration of Emmanuel Levinas), 2 (2006), 100-136.

<sup>18</sup> Ettinger, 'From Proto-Ethical Compassion to Responsibility', p. 103.

<sup>19</sup> See Ronald D. Laing, *The Facts of Life* (London: Penguin, 1976); Donald Meltzer and Meg Harris Williams, *The Apprehension of Beauty: The Role of Aesthetic Conflict in Development, Art and Violence* (Perthshire: Clunie Press, 1988); and Luce Irigaray, 'The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty', *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm", in *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Athlone Press, 1993), pp. 151-184.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, *The(e)ories: Advanced Seminars for Queer Research 2009 in the MA in Gender Writing/Graduate Education and Research Programme in Gender, Culture and History, School of English, Drama and Film, University College Dublin* will host a two-day seminar on 'Reading Bracha L. Ettinger's *The Matrixial Borderspace*' on 18 and 19 April 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953).

<sup>22</sup> See Laplanche, 'Gender, Sex and the Sexual', p. 217; and Françoise Dolto, *l'Image inconsciente du corps* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984). On Guattari, see Bracha L. Ettinger, 'From Transference to the Aesthetic Paradigm: A Conversation with Felix Guattari', in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. by Brian Massumi (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 240-245. For a major and systematic analysis of Ettinger's work in relation to and difference from the above, see Anna Louise Johnson, 'Bracha Ettinger's Theory of the Matrix: Contexts and Commentary' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Madelon Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990). On the necessity of matricide and the melancholic effects of failure, see Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987), trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Motherhood Today', <<http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html>> [accessed 14 November 2008]. See also 'La passion maternelle' on the same website.

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), trans. by James Strachey, in *Art and Literature*, ed. by Albert Dickson, Penguin Freud Library (London: Penguin Books, 1985), XIV, 335-376 (p. 367).

<sup>26</sup> Bracha L. Ettinger, 'The Matrixial Gaze', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 41-92 (p. 46).

<sup>27</sup> Laplanche, 'Gender, Sex and the Sexual', p. 217.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

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<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905), trans. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

<sup>30</sup> Jean Laplanche, 'The Drive and its Source Objects: Its Fate in the Transference', trans. by Leslie Hill, in *Essays on Otherness*, ed. by John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 117-132.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 13-15.

<sup>32</sup> Laplanche writes: 'The sexual is the unconscious residue of the repression/symbolization of gender by sex' ('Gender, Sex and the Sexual', p. 204).

<sup>33</sup> Laplanche, 'Gender, Sex and the Sexual', p. 214.

<sup>34</sup> Just to remind readers new to Laplanche, Laplanche argues that primal fantasies – castration, the primal scene, and so forth – are not fantasies of origins, but the origins of fantasies themselves lie in the child's attempts to make sense of the enigmas of sexual difference, the origin of him/herself, and the origin of sexuality. Thus the fantasies, shaped by cultural logics and determined by pre-given codes are explanations for fundamentally enigmatic questions of human existence as the child encounters them in already coded adults. See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bernard Pontalis, 'The Origin of Fantasy' ([1964] 1968), in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. by Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Caplan (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 5-27.

<sup>35</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> 'From Proto-Ethical Compassion to Responsibility', p. 106.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> 'From Proto-Ethical Compassion to Responsibility', p. 107.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> 'From Proto-Ethical Compassion to Responsibility', p. 107.

<sup>41</sup> Bracha L. Ettinger, 'Diotima and the Matrixial Transference: Psychoanalytical Encounter-Event as Pregnancy in Beauty', in *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*, ed. by Hein Viljoen and Chris N. Van der Merwe (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 105-32 (p. 105).

<sup>42</sup> Ettinger, 'Diotima and the Matrixial Transference', p. 109.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 113

<sup>45</sup> Ettinger, 'From Proto-Ethical Compassion to Responsibility', p. 113.

<sup>46</sup> Ettinger, 'From Proto-Ethical Compassion to Responsibility', p. 130.

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