

Thoughts on French Feminism: The Maternal against Disciplinary Power

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I want to indicate some philosophical questions about the maternal which might form part of 'maternal studies'. These questions arise from post-Lacanian, post-structuralist – 'French' – feminism.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the pre-Oedipal mother and the bond with her is necessarily unrepresentable, because to become a speaking, individuated subject each of us must break this bond, entering the order of linguistic substitutions premised on a basic substitution of language for the mother's lost body. The Lacanian/post-Lacanian phrase 'the maternal' indicates that what is in question is the pre-Oedipal mother of fantasy and the qualities associated with her (i.e., the corporeal and passionate): empirical mothering behaviour has only an oblique relation to our (supposed) universal necessity of separating from this fantasised mother. The insistence that the maternal must be repudiated may be discouraging, but at least the Lacanian tradition departs from the normalising notions of the good-enough mother which have prevailed in some object-relations psychoanalysis.

Post-structuralist French feminists have challenged Lacan's insistence on the paternal function of language, more or less radically. For the early Kristeva (1974), the pre-Oedipal maternal finds a mode of representation in the semiotic – rhythmic, sonorous, sensuous – dimension of speech and writing, and through devices such as synaesthetic metaphors which evoke the multi-sensory world of infancy. Despite problems with Kristeva's position, such as her view that male modernists have most successfully written the 'feminine' in this semiotic sense, she importantly shows that writing/art can represent the maternal by its material form as much as its content. Kristeva (1987) also describes – as Irigaray does – the burdens women face under the paternal symbolic: since their bond with their mothers constitutes them as female-sexed, they have to exclude/repress themselves as females to enter the linguistic-social order; radically split from themselves, women are the melancholic sex.

Criticising Lacan more radically than Kristeva does, Irigaray advocates transforming our symbolic order so that it makes available not one, supposedly sex-neutral but in fact structurally male, subject position but instead two sexually different subject

positions, male and female. Under this transformed symbolic women could become subjects but retain their bonds with their mothers, by identifying themselves as female subjects, subjects who can potentially give birth and become mothers themselves. Thus women would remain linked with their mothers both in sex and in having the possibility of returning to the pre-Oedipal closeness they shared with their mothers from the parental side. Irigaray envisages writing and art that would enact, in style and content, this new female subject-position and would position mothers and daughters as couples.

In different ways, then, French feminists deny that the maternal must be outside representation. Yet the maternal maintains a complex relation to representation. Even in the transformed symbolic that Irigaray envisages, becoming an individual subject requires losing one's pre-Oedipal closeness to the mother – painfully leaving one's first home. Even if as a female subject one acknowledged one's dependency on one's mother, one would still be acknowledging a level of intimacy that one has, as a conscious subject, lost: a bond that has constituted one's self, but that lies outside the orbit of that self now it is constituted. For a woman to regain this early bond by becoming a mother herself is not for her to consciously remember her own infancy in narrative form, but rather for her to re-experience, to undergo again, the emotions and fantasies of that time, to relive them in her body and bodily relation to her child – to corporeally 'remember' those images and feelings, to use Toni Morrison's word from *Beloved* (1987, p.215).

By seeing the maternal as necessarily excessive with respect to (if not necessarily wholly outside of) consciousness, French feminism stands back from efforts to normalise particular forms of empirical mothering behaviour, efforts enshrined in endless books, pamphlets, etc. offering guidance on how to parent. In French feminism, the maternal is disruptive, excessive in relation to any specific social norms. Here, philosophical/literary projects of representing the maternal-feminine might converge with political projects of supporting diversity in empirical family practices and of resisting the extension to mothering/parenting of disciplinary power – of standardising judgement, expert power-knowledge, and anxious parental self-regulation.¹ Grounds for resisting these disciplinary regimes are sometimes located in parents' common-sense knowledge about what they are doing. In contrast, my point is that the force of the maternal in us means that we as parents necessarily do not and cannot know or control all that we are doing, and that efforts to exercise or encourage such control are futile and oppressive.

French feminism also positions the maternal as a force contrary to heteronormativity: for if in mothering women recover their original bonds to their

mothers, then they are recovering their ‘ancient and primary relationship to [...] homosexuality’, perhaps especially if they mother daughters (Irigaray 1987, p.20). Yet how can Irigaray’s idea of a female subject position as that of a subject who can potentially give birth avoid making it normative for women to give birth? And how can the post-Lacanian stress on the mother’s centrality to everyone’s psyche avoid reinforcing the equation parent-mother? These issues need attention. How can French feminism complement rather than undercut feminist efforts to dismantle the gendered division of childcaring labour?

Further questions are how these abstract philosophical reflections on the maternal relate to women’s lived experiences of becoming mothers and of relating to their mothers. How do Kristeva’s and Irigaray’s accounts of female melancholy relate to experiences of depression, including post-natal depression, amongst women in the contemporary West? How does the exteriority of the maternal to the existing symbolic order relate to the lived disequilibrium, the craziness, the extremity of becoming a mother? And how does writing the maternal-feminine intersect with women’s writing about their experiences of becoming mothers and being daughters?

References

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¹ Contrary to what these normalising regimes suggest, a very wide variety of parenting practices are compatible with what Sara Ruddick (1989) defines as the general aims of ‘mothering’ (parenting, as I prefer): to preserve children, nurture their growth and socialise them.