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Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf and the Maternal

Introduction: Gender and Generation

The book title has a double focus on two themes central to feminist and identity politics. Gender we now have come to understand as involving socially constructed acts, roles and behaviours deployed through differing political, social and cultural discourses. 'Generation' is a historical and familial term that implies evolutionary and developmental processes. The conjunction of these two terms 'Gender and Generation' is of enduring value and relevance to an understanding of women's writing. This is because 'gender and generation' offers literary critics a much larger reach than tight period boundaries or genre 'isms'. The phrase suggests a complex formation of social, psychic and literary constructions crossing national and historical boundaries. Twentieth-century literary critics constructed a female literary tradition in which being a 'woman' was a key, constitutive element of literary subjectivities. ¹ Currently transgender studies encourage self-reflexive accounts of many possible genders and gender identities. ²

Although theorists of gender such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, repudiate fixed and essentialist terminologies in favour of performative differences, this does not mean that gender is itself a performance.³ Rather it is that gender is no longer a stable category. Judith Butler argues in *Undoing Gender* that gender is "a kind of doing, an incessant activity...an act of improvisation within a scene of constraint [done] with or for

¹ Showalter, 1977.

² Prosser, 1998.

³ Butler, *Bodies* 1993, Sedgwick, 1994.

another”.⁴ Feminist theorists enlarge this critique by repudiating gendered racial essences in favour of reciprocal recognitions of similar problems that women face across ethnicities and religions.⁵

Similarly ‘generation’ as a term has come to mean much more than an implied specificity of women’s diachronic locations, as in first, second wave and third wave feminisms. Griselda Pollock has argued for a gendered generational project that can cut across traditional axes of place and time.⁶ She suggests that we abolish historical or literary concentrations on individual “authors” and instead look for gendered generational “inscriptions”.⁷ Feminist historians similarly have for some time attacked the notion of discrete temporal political cultures and the idea of an inevitable historical legacy in favour of a more post-structuralist politics in which spaces of representation overlap.⁸

Nevertheless, social, psychic and relational identities depend on, and indeed draw from, notions of gendered generations. Women’s psychically lived subjectivities and our literary and aesthetic representations of these subjectivities are hugely shaped by our gender and by our generation. And there are ways of understanding gendered generations that can avoid essentialist identities. We need to undertake historically positioned analyses of writers and artists that acknowledge psychic constructions that might be trans-generational or in intergenerational dialogue. The study of specific

⁴Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2004.

⁵ Inda, 2000.

⁶ Pollock, 1996.

⁷ Ibid, p. 8

⁸ Scott, 1990, Roof, 1997.

examples of women's gendered generational relations offers a way to positively engage with these terms as a still expressive and very meaningful project.

I want to focus on the moment of the early 1970s when 'gender' began to be more widely used as a critical term in Britain, and in particular on the year 1972 the year of the first paperback publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, a time when issues of gender and generation were very important debates within British feminism occurring, somewhat un-theoretically, in a revalorisation of female identity.⁹ And subsequently I want to look at how gender and generations figure in maternal tropes in both in de Beauvoir's book and in examples of the work of Virginia Woolf. By looking backwards from de Beauvoir to Woolf I am not suggesting inheritance in a Foucauldian sense of investigating the beginnings of discursive formations, but merely sketching some intergenerational dialogues.

1972: the impact of the *Second Sex*

The 1970s is a decade in which representations of gendered generations of women, literary or political, were key themes evident in two key texts published in 1979: Julia Kristeva's 'Women's Time' and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*.¹⁰ Both critical approaches, although from very different disciplines, portray feminism and women's writing as tensely engaged with the previous 'mothering' generation in the act of creativity. Kristeva does not characterise 'generations' as phasic or in conflict, and she does identify the post 1968 generation with the specificities of reproduction

⁹ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. 1972.

¹⁰ Kristeva, 1979, Gilbert and Gubar, 1979.

and its representations, and this gels with the moment of *The Second Sex's* arrival in Britain.

Although translated into English in 1953, it was The *Second Sex's* Penguin paperback publication, two decades later in 1972, that attracted a wider following of British and American feminists. De Beauvoir's idea that “the basic trait of woman: She is the Other” and her analysis of the gendering of subjectivity haunts academic disciplines including literary studies.¹¹ This is because *The Second Sex* is interdisciplinary breaking down generic boundaries between literature, sociology and other disciplines.¹² For example *The Second Sex's* literary analysis 'The Myth of Woman in Five Authors', presages many of the themes of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s, the area of British critical work in which feminists were visible in greatest numbers.¹³

1972 was a crucial year for de Beauvoir herself. As Alice Schwarzer describes in her interviews with de Beauvoir, it was in February 1972 that de Beauvoir organised the Tribunal 'Days of Denunciation of Crimes Against Women' bringing feminist issues to the fore with greater urgency.¹⁴ When French feminism re-emerged in the early 1970s, de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was one of the few available French theoretical texts and de Beauvoir's impact was heightened by her often compelling literary allusions and rhetoric. As she revealed to Alice Schwarzer “I set my store by literature” and “ordinary

¹¹ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 20.

¹² Moi, 1999.

¹³ Humm, 1986.

¹⁴ Schwarzer, p. 15.

sexism”, de Beauvoir argues, “starts at the level of grammar when the masculine always comes before the feminine”.¹⁵

1972 was also a keynote year for British feminism. The journal *Spare Rib* was founded in 1972 building on the pioneering work of the more democratically collective journal *Shrew*. *Shrew's* August 1971 issue had published a prophetic prequel of the future impact of de Beauvoir. In one of *Shrew's* customary anonymous articles, the author despairingly cries “where is the English novelist to even approach the passion, logic, intellectual curiosity and authority of, for example Simone de Beauvoir? She is in the most genuine sense, a socialist realist of the twentieth century”.¹⁶ As Ruth Evans points out in her introduction to a collection of essays about *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir chose to pose questions of experience, to juxtapose personal anecdotes with literary examples in order to re-envision 'woman'.¹⁷ In other words, rather than developing a chronological account of women's generations, de Beauvoir frequently disrupts chronological cause and effect by refusing to predict women's present and future from past events and, particularly in her literary criticism, ironizes the fallacious constructions of femininity by male writers.

In the specific British intellectual milieu of 1972 that move proved immensely attractive to British feminists. Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham both undertook critical reassessments of *The Second Sex* in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* and *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*

¹⁵ *ibid*, pp. 23 and 70; *sexisme ordinaire* was the title of de Beauvoir's column in *Le temps moderne*

¹⁶ *Shrew*. August, 1971, p. 16.

¹⁷ Evans, 1998, p11.

respectively.¹⁸ Issues of *Shrew* and *Spare Rib* in the early 1970s incorporated concerns close to *The Second Sex* albeit in a less theorized way. Both journals exhaustively investigated issues of sexuality, the family and mothering in articles about contraceptive campaigns, childminding and mea culpa confessions such as “The Reason I Gave Birth to a Son”. Looking back now at issues of *Shrew* and *Spare Rib* it is impossible not to feel nostalgic about a world in which cheap fashion tips include painting an apple on your navel and a key event was the founding of a matriarchy study group in Bromley in spring 1972. De Beauvoir is clearly a distinguishing influence. For example the Bromley group who edited *Shrew*'s December 1972 issue (each issue's editorship rotated between women's liberation workshops) stated categorically in de Beauvoir-like terminology: “the distortion and mutilation of female sexuality is achieved through defining it exclusively in terms of its complementarity to men's and never in its own right”.¹⁹

De Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf shared a totemic status as founding mothers of second wave feminism. Although *Spare Rib* added a commercial veneer to British feminism in 1972, printing the Germaine Greer column “*The Sunday Times* refused to publish” and ending collective anonymity, the journal's book reviews do acknowledge de Beauvoir and Woolf's legacy. In two inclusive surveys of contemporary feminist theory, Michelene Wandor groups *Sexual Politics* (1970), *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), *Woman's Estate*(1971) and *The Female Eunuch*(1970) as representing a contemporary generation but drawing directly on the work of two previous generations:

¹⁸ Mitchell, 1974; Rowbotham, 1973

¹⁹ *Shrew*, December, 1972, p. 1.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.²⁰ *The Second Sex*, Wandor claims is "the most exhaustive analysis of the nature of woman".²¹ By celebrating de Beauvoir in tandem with Woolf, Wandor pays tribute to the mothering legacy of both writers. And in turn Woolf and de Beauvoir are central to my paper today because their work demonstrates the tensions of maternal legacies and intergenerational writing.

Simone de Beauvoir: issues of gender and mothering

De Beauvoir's attention to cultural relations, including literary representations, and interweaving of the maternal with literature and culture, gelled with this cultural 'turn' of second wave feminism. *The Second Sex* was initially attacked, by feminist critics, for its negative characterisation of the maternal, evident in de Beauvoir's anxiety that pregnancy incurs a loss of individual agency. Indeed her chapter 'the Mother' begins by positioning the maternal within a nexus of "the voluntary control of human beings" and the horrors of French illegal abortion and contraception.²² The horrors and necessity of abortions here are matched in many of de Beauvoir's works by a hatred of 'the mother' embodied in destructive mother images. But it is important to remember that the last woman to be guillotined in France, in 1947, while de Beauvoir was completing *The Second Sex*, was an abortionist.

I would argue that de Beauvoir, like Adrienne Rich later in the 1970s, is attacking the myth of motherhood not necessarily an experience of mothering if undertaken in revised social conditions. In addition, as Margaret Simons's

²⁰ Wandor, 1972, p. 5.

²¹ *ibid*, p. 5.

²² De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 501.

pioneering essay and subsequent criticism have explicated, the Parshlay translation of *The Second Sex*, the 1972 paperback, is full of deletions, mistranslations and sexism.²³ Post-modern readings of de Beauvoir now suggest that de Beauvoir's dramatization of the maternal body is an 'under-appreciated feminist discursive strategy of defamiliarization'.²⁴

Certainly de Beauvoir's use of the trope of mothering in the literary critical section of *The Second Sex* 'The Myth of Woman in Five Authors' is a perfect example of defamiliarization in which male fears of mothering and excessive misrepresentations of women's fecundity are turned against them by de Beauvoir. 'The Myth of Woman in Five Authors' details the extent of woman's representative Otherness in the work of Montherlant, D.H. Lawrence, Claudel, Breton and Stendhal. What gives the chapter such force is de Beauvoir's accurate unmasking of patriarchal literary assumptions in terms of the maternal. De Beauvoir is not concerned so much with literary texts as discursive objects, but with the kinds of gender significations that constitute literary praxis. For this reason perhaps, de Beauvoir prefers the vivid paraphrase rather than detailed technical analysis. But, as Fullbrook and Fullbrook point out, de Beauvoir always utilises literary genres as testing sites for her philosophical designs.²⁵ De Beauvoir explicitly states in her opening line that she turned to literature "to confirm this analysis of the feminine myth as it appears in a general view".²⁶

²³ Simons, 1986.

²⁴ Zerilli, 1992.

²⁵ Fullbrook, and Fullbrook, 1998.

²⁶ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 229.

De Beauvoir brings the French writer Montherlant's literary misogynies sharply into focus. Montherlant becomes a dramatic persona, "a specialist in heroism", whose work reveals, de Beauvoir argues, a deep masculine fear of the maternal body. A significant *leitmotif* in Montherlant's writings, de Beauvoir suggests, is a maternal figure who exists only "to keep her son for ever enclosed within the darkness of her body".²⁷ Arguing that literary misogynies directly draw on a masculine fear of the female body, de Beauvoir goes on to suggest that the frequent representation of "woman" as excess in texts by men allows male authors to abolish their "own bodily secretions", in an assumed disgust "with a sweaty and odorous woman".²⁸ De Beauvoir depicts Montherlant aptronymically as himself a character ruled by a particular passion or trait, projecting his masculine fear of the maternal into abjection. "It is not because they are contemptible that he disdains women, it is because he would disdain them that they seem so abject".²⁹

Similarly D.H. Lawrence, de Beauvoir argues, is terrified by women who stray outside the boundaries of prescribed femininity. Lawrence's subordination of women's sexuality in *Lady Chatterley* when Mellors "deliberately denies" Lady Chatterley "the orgasm", shocks de Beauvoir as much as Lawrence's denial of Lady Chatterley's "hard and brilliant feminine power".³⁰ Claudel goes further, de Beauvoir argues, because in Claudel's religious schema, women, particularly mothers, are absolute Others.

²⁷ Ibid, p.230.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 27.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 238.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 252.

In pointing to Montherlant and other writers' disavowal, and fear, of maternal origins, de Beauvoir's argument comes close to the psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein. Throughout her career, Klein persuasively theorized the anxieties and conflicts that the maternal body arouses in males. In her analysis of very young children, Klein noted how fantasies of projection and interjection, played out by the child, represent the mother's body as both a threatening and desirable object.³¹ Woolf's narrative project has also been examined in terms of Klein. Elizabeth Abel argues that Lily's painting in *To the Lighthouse* is a reparation for the lost mother.³² Klein's 1925 lectures to the British Psychological Society were delivered at 50 Gordon Square, the home of Adrian Stephen, Virginia Woolf's brother and at the heart of Bloomsbury. And on the 8th March 1939 Woolf attended the Society's twenty-fifth anniversary dinner where she met Klein and invited Klein to dinner. In her autobiography *The Prime of Life* de Beauvoir greatly admired Virginia Woolf's experimental epistemological representations of gendered realities.

I reflected that words have to murder reality before they can hold it capture, and that the most important aspect of reality its here-and-now presence - always eludes them ...this was why I felt so personally affected by Virginia Woolf's reflections on language in general and the novel in particular. Though she emphasized the gulf that yawned between literature and life, she appeared to expect that the discovery of new techniques would allow a narrowing of the gap, and I hoped she might be right.³³

³¹ Klein, 1991.

³² Abel, 1989.

³³ de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*. 1962, p. 40.

Virginia Woolf: issues of gender and mothering

Woolf's work was translated into French more eagerly than in other European countries. From the first translation by Charles Mauron of 'Time Passes' in 1926, to de Beauvoir's discussion of Woolf, a translation of Woolf or commentary about Woolf's work appeared almost every year. Woolf was awarded the Prix Femina-Vie-Heuruse-Anglais for *To the Lighthouse* in 1928. A review of *Orlando* by Louis Gillet was published in 1929 and by 1949 *Flush*, *The Waves*, *The Years*, *Jacob's Room*, *Between the Acts* (in two different translations) and *The Voyage Out* had all appeared in France.³⁴ Although Woolf wrote in her diary in 1932 "two books on Virginia Woolf have just appeared - in France & Germany. This is a danger signal. I must not settle into a figure", Woolf made many trips to France, studied French and the Woolfs were tempted to buy a house La Boudarde near her sister Vanessa Bell in Cassis.³⁵ As in England, it was in the 1970s that French feminists turned to Woolf when the translation of *A Room of One's Own* became a best seller. Pierre-Eric Villeneuve even argues that Woolf's work made a direct contribution to the new epistemologies of post second world war intellectuals³⁶

When Woolf died in 1941 de Beauvoir was thirty-three. What is interesting to me in terms of understanding de Beauvoir's uses of Woolf for example, the intertextual impact of Woolf's *Orlando* on de Beauvoir's *All Men are Mortal*, is that de Beauvoir first came to Woolf through photography. On a

³⁴ Barnaby, 2002.

³⁵ Woolf, 1983, p.85.

³⁶ Villeneuve, 2002.

Sunday afternoon in March 1939 at la Maison des Livres Adrienne Monnier's bookshop in Paris, de Beauvoir saw a collection of photographs of writers taken by Monnier's friend Gisele Freund. Freund, la femme aux images as she was called following her dissertation on photography at the Sorbonne inspired by Norbert Elias, photographed Walter Benjamin, James Joyce as well as Woolf, and undertook a socially committed reportage of economic depression in northern England for *Life* magazine.³⁷ The encounter between Freund and Woolf when Woolf felt that Freund had "filched and pilfered and gate-crashed – the treacherous vermin" was remembered much more positively by Freund.³⁸ In her preface to Freund's *James Joyce in Paris* Simone de Beauvoir vividly describes that Sunday afternoon

The place was crowded with famous writers. I don't remember who was there; but what stayed eternally in my mind, however is...the screen glowing in the darkness [due to wartime exigencies Freund showed slides rather than prints] and the faces bathed in beautiful color.³⁹

A feminist genealogy suggested by de Beauvoir's debt to Woolf's invention of 'new techniques' converges on the difficulty of figuring the mother. Since 1972 the imaginary and symbolic representations of the maternal have been a focus of feminist criticism concerned with rethinking cultural locations for the maternal body for example, the summative collection of essays edited by Adalgisa Giorgio.⁴⁰ Although both de Beauvoir and Woolf

³⁷ See Humm 2002 for a longer account of Freund and Woolf.

³⁸ Woolf, 1980, p.351.

³⁹ Monnier, 1976, p. 491.

⁴⁰ Giorgio, 2002.

were dependent on male intellectual confirmation and neither were mothers, both searched for ways to represent women's experiences and these articulations struggled with formations of the maternal. From Jane Marcus's pioneering 'Thinking Back Through Our Mothers' onwards there is now a huge body of criticism on Woolf's relation to the maternal.⁴¹ Although in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf famously claims "we think back though our mothers if we are women", Woolf, like de Beauvoir, felt ambivalent about her literary foremothers. As Molly Hite suggests, "the figure of the mother was a site more of conflict than of reconciliation".⁴²

'Professions for Women' contains Woolf's famous attack on the maternal "Angel in the House" in Woolf's hypotypostic visual scene of the Angel's "shadow of her wings" falling on the writer's page and forcing the writer to grab "her by the throat...killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of the woman writer".⁴³ This scene is often misread as a literary matricide needed to prevent a woman writer's muteness. But Woolf's attack is on Victorian maternalism promoting the "arts and wiles" of sexual subservience, and Woolf herself craved, and realised in the figure of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, what Teresa Brennan has described as the "living logic of the mother's flesh" as a "shield against the negative affects".⁴⁴ After the death of her mother, Woolf re-enacted the wings of the Angel with the maternal arms of her sisters and friends. Calling Violet Dickinson a mother

⁴¹ Marcus, 1981; Minow-Pinkney, 1987.

⁴² Hite, 2000. www.Genders.org/g31/g31_hite.txt.

⁴³ Woolf, 1961, p. 205.

⁴⁴ Brennan, 2004, p. 135.

wallaby with Woolf as the baby or Sparrow (sparrow) Woolf pleaded with Dickinson “have you a real affection of the sparrow. She folds you in her feathery arms, so you may feel the Heart in her ribs”.⁴⁵

In Woolf’s first novel *The Voyage Out* the absence of Rachel Vinrace’s mother and Rachel’s need to see her older friend Helen as a maternal figure is very marked. Helen’s “soft body” embodies Rachel’s living attention. It is Helen who cares for Rachel in Rachel’s severe illness and subsequent death. “Helen was here and Helen was there all day long”.⁴⁶ Clive Bell, Woolf’s brother-in-law, suggested that Woolf in *The Voyage Out* had invented some new kind of form what we might term, in contemporary critical vocabulary, an experience of maternal jouissance. “Helen’s form stooping to raise her in bed appears of gigantic size...her body became a drift of melting snow, above which her knees rose in huge peaked mountains of bare bone”.⁴⁷ In this so-called ‘psychotic’ speech, full of metaphor and metonymy, Rachel’s affective body is un-assimilable to standard medical treatment. “Every object in the room and the bed itself and her own body with its various limbs and their different sensations were more and more important each day”.⁴⁸ Lytton Strachey, Woolf’s friend and a long-term invalid, particularly appreciated this section of *The Voyage Out* “something Tolstoyan, I thought – especially that last account of the illness” and Woolf’s descriptions are self-consciously made from the interior perspective of the affective ill body.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Woolf, 1975, p. 262.

⁴⁶ Woolf, 1970, p. 334.

⁴⁷ Ibid p. 334.

⁴⁸ Ibid p. 335.

⁴⁹ Briggs, 2005, p. 24.

It is of crucial significance for understanding Woolf's writing here that attending to and learning to work within the perspective of the sensate ill body was the speciality of Woolf's mother Julia Stephen. Critics have explored the possible impact of Woolf's mother's *lack* of physical contact with her daughter having to care, as Julia did, for eight children, her own mother and husband and other relatives, as well as being responsible for the well being of large numbers of local people in St. Ives the holiday home and in London. This much commented on representation of Julia as the *absent* mother explains Woolf's turn to hypotyposis and other metaphorical devices in her fiction. What has been occluded is an examination of Julia's own writing about the ill body, writing which Woolf knew well. Julia Stephen's *Notes from Sick Rooms*, privately printed in 1883 the year after Woolf's birth, presages not only the physical descriptions in *The Voyage Out* but also Woolf's techniques of empathetic narrators and sometimes exaggerated sensibilities.⁵⁰

Julia Stephen was not a public writer publishing only *Notes from Sick Rooms*, an essay for her husband's *Dictionary of National Biography* about her aunt the famous Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, a few other essays, and signing Mrs. Humphrey Ward's notorious 'Appeal Against Female Suffrage' published in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1889. Ward's lengthy attack on feminism, and Julia's support of Ward, is usually cited as an example of Julia's Victorian ideology with which Woolf had to battle. But in *Notes from Sick Rooms* Stephen validates women's special knowledge of the female body. The sick room is a room of women's own. Both patient and nurse are female and the good nurse will, Stephen suggests, have an almost

⁵⁰ Stephen, 1980.

empathetic, affective relation with the sick body as if being able to feel and visualize from her perspective, exactly like the descriptions of illness in *The Voyage Out*. “In doing the invalid’s hair, the nurse...shall hold the hair near the roots with one hand...lightly touch” and be aware that “few things are more aggravating” for the patient than to “have a long hair brought slowly over the face each time the brush comes around”.⁵¹ This dyadic union of patient and maternal nurse is marked by the way in which the nurse carries the other’s negative affects allowing affects, as Teresa Brennan suggests, “to pass from the state of sensory registration to a state of cognitive or intelligent reflection”.⁵² A nurse’s hand must always have “the palm hollowed inwards a little” to curve to the patient’s “hand and cheek”.⁵³

In *The Voyage Out*, Helen’s similar introjected identification enables Helen to instantly understand Rachel’s distress. “When Helen came in an hour or two later, suddenly stopped her cheerful words, looked startled for a second and then unnaturally calm, the fact that she [Rachel] was ill was put beyond a doubt”.⁵⁴ There are great similarities between Julia’s descriptions of the nurse and her female patient and Woolf’s continual turn to maternal presences in Woolf’s use of metaleptic bodily metaphors. The knowledge of health and maternal physiology was also a maternal inheritance. Julia’s own mother Maria Jackson, Woolf’s grandmother, was the wife of a physician and in their letters Maria and Julia deploy very accurate medical terminology. In

⁵¹ Ibid p. 7.

⁵² Brennan, p.120.

⁵³ Stephen, p.10.

⁵⁴ Woolf, 1970, p. 333.

1883 Maria wrote to Julia about a servant “going into Hosp[ital] to undergo an operation, that the tumour is in the womb so that I suppose it is ovarian”.⁵⁵

The maternal is explicitly fore-grounded in Woolf’s autobiographical writing ‘A Sketch of the Past’ where the mother as semiotic origin, to use Kristeva’s terminology, in a matrix of sounds, smells and colours of pure jouissance is evident in the often quoted opening passage.

Red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother’s dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close...at St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking...it is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling...the purest ecstasy I can conceive.⁵⁶

The major metaleptic figure in *To the Lighthouse* is the figuration of Woolf’s memories of her mother Julia Stephen as Mrs. Ramsay where Woolf adopts an intense mode of sensual symbolization to capture the maternal presence and absence. In this novel the maternal body shapes Woolf’s choice of scenes, particularly the famous dinner of *Boeuf en Daube*, as well as the texture and end of the novel. The *Boeuf en Daube* scene, where Mrs. Ramsay harmoniously brings together all the characters around a dinner of what was Woolf’s friend Roger Fry’s favourite dish, Woolf represents as a maternal archetype. “The whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating relied on her [against] the sterility of men”.⁵⁷ The body of the stew is a referent for Mrs. Ramsay’s maternal body. “A soft mass...with its shiny walls...a French

⁵⁵ Adolph, 2004, p. 12.

⁵⁶ Woolf, 1985, pp. 64-5.

⁵⁷ Woolf, 1984, p. 96.

recipe of my grandmother's said Mrs. Ramsay".⁵⁸ The sensuality of the moment is in 'female time', as the womb like quality of the stew pot is matched in maternal quality by Mrs. Ramsay's intuitive ability to decode the emotional affects in each character's body language.

Mrs. Ramsay's own powerful affects touch every character in the novel and are to do with the formation of the female body as the mother. In addition the whole tonal quality of *To the Lighthouse*, Hermione Lee claims, is inflected by Woolf's memory of another maternal heritage that of her great aunt Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs, and I would add, by Woolf's own photography.⁵⁹ It could be argued that Woolf 'refuses' her mother's death by constantly revivifying the maternal in art. The contemporary post-Lacanian psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger similarly focuses on aesthetic reconstructions of maternal memories in what she terms the "matrixial gaze".

The with-in-visible matrixial screen is a web into which subjectivity is woven in different ways in art – by trauma, by phantasy, by desire. It is in between us, it is a veil spread between joint traumas, fractions of phantasy from out into the inside and aspects of painting in-to the outside. On the screen's interlaced threshold, a feminine gaze diffracts.⁶⁰

Bracha Ettinger lays bare the psychic mediations which lie between the maternal Imaginary and external objects, and which are visible in artistic representations. Photographs, which Ettinger uses as a primary artistic medium, she suggests reveal a special relationship between the I and the Not

⁵⁸ Ibid p. 116.

⁵⁹ Lee, 1996

⁶⁰ Lichtenberg Ettinger, "The With-in-Visible Screen", 1994, p. 109.

I, between invisible matrixial intrauterine memories and the external world.

“The emotional and mental conductivity of an artwork may reflect on far away matrixial unconscious events”.⁶¹

Post-Lacanian feminism is an umbrella term applied to the work of a number of contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers including the French feminist Luce Irigaray as well as Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. Its premise is that Lacan creates in his writing an impossible binary between phallic language and maternal bodies and feminism needs to go beyond (post) Lacan. What post-Lacanian feminism offers is a more positive way of understanding the maternal for example, in the notion of an experiential figural unconscious. Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger’s theorisation of the Imaginary recreates a lost maternal object and lost matrixial relationship in painterly, poetic and photographic images. This does seem to offer a way of conceptualising imagery and narrative which can make available a female Imaginary in the symbolic. The characteristics of such a method resemble Woolf’s modernist experiments: a use of fragmentary images, a refusal sometimes of nominative sentences for example, a fluidity of narrator, character and object, interruptions of linearity, traces of the Imaginary and intricately worked surfaces.

Jane Marcus argues that Woolf uses birth images for example, that Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* is a vaginal space. Certainly Woolf delighted in frequently describing the textual birth of her novels and non-fiction in terms of matrixial creativity. Writing *Three Guineas* in March 1937 was, for Woolf, a hypotyposis of childbirth, “the mildest childbirth I ever had...no book ever slid

⁶¹ Lichtenberg Ettinger, “The Almost-Missed Encounters as Eroticised Areas of the Psyche”, 1994, p. 59.

from me so secretly & smoothly” and Woolf makes the maternal present as an experienced ‘affect’ also in her photography.⁶² Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger makes domestic photography into a palimpsestic source of the maternal. By incorporating a visual prehistory of matrilineal references into her photography, Woolf creates trans-generational memories and her photography frequently focuses on the bodies of her sitters in a physiognomic intimacy.⁶³

But even some professional photographs of Woolf, bear the affective imprint of Woolf’s mother. The two *Vogue* photographs of Woolf encapsulate this theme. In the first in May 1924, taken by Maurice Beck and Helen Macgregor, Woolf introspectively wears her mother’s dress. Although in the second photograph, taken in May 1925, Woolf appears in contemporary dress, the photograph was shot in the former studio of Thomas Woolner a sculptor who had proposed marriage and a sitting to Woolf’s mother. Woolf’s averted female gaze and prominent display of gloves an anachronism in fashionable photographs of the Twenties, carry the emotional burden of the matrilineal in Ettinger’s terminology. *Vogue* went on to publish a Julia Margaret Cameron photograph of Julia Stephen in the December 1926 issue.

Conclusion

In undertaking a comparison between Woolf and de Beauvoir’s struggles with maternal imagery I am aware that a number of critics regard de Beauvoir’s project to be an advocacy of childlessness.⁶⁴ I am not suggesting any inheritance or teleology. Simply that both Woolf and de Beauvoir refuse to

⁶² Woolf, 1984, pp. 148-9

⁶³ See Humm 2006, for a longer account of Woolf and her photography, and examples of the photographs discussed.

⁶⁴ Grosholz, 2004.

essentialise motherhood in their focus on maternal affects. Critics talk of how difficult it is to find a vocabulary specific to affect but most ground the potential of affect in the body. And, as Brennan and Ettinger suggest, maternal affects and sensations can be elevated into significations of great theoretical significance. Woolf's frequent focus on domestic, maternal spaces, on her maternal heritage from Julia Margaret Cameron and Julia Stephen registered in novels, and in domestic and professional photographs attests to the possibility of a matrixial modernism. Similarly de Beauvoir's turn to the specificities of male misconceptions of the maternal and her debt to Woolf suggest a successive generational matrixial practice, if one that is less conscious.

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