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the theorist's mother

Andrew Parker, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2012, 200pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-5232-7, \$22.95 (Pbk).

In a brilliantly revealing response to the question 'What philosopher would you have liked to be your mother', Derrida answered, 'it is *impossible* for me to have any philosopher as a mother ... My mother, my mother *couldn't* be a philosopher [switches to French] A philosopher *couldn't* be my mother' (Dick and Kofman, 2003, quoted by Parker on p.5). Andrew Parker opens his dense, subtle though rather disjointed book *The Theorist's Mother* with a musing on this passage in which Derrida claims that it is only after the deconstruction of phallogocentric philosophy that he himself has performed that philosophy may gain a mother. Even then, he figures this mother as himself or his son, before allowing himself to say 'granddaughter', an inheritor who would reaffirm his own practice of deconstruction, a woman, he concedes, 'who thinks. Not a philosopher. [...] A thinking mother—that's what I both love and try to give birth to'. Here Derrida completely co-opts the generative capacities of such a mother of philosophy (he births his own mother), and of course repeats the familiar gesture in which philosophy, figured in the masculine, uses maternal tropes to figure its own beginnings, generativity, transmissibility and renewal but without returning anything to women, whom philosophy continues to exclude. Feminist scholarship, on the other hand, and in particular that branch of feminist theory that takes the maternal as its subject,¹ has been less stumped than Derrida when asked this question, and has shown a particular interest in the relation between motherhood and thinking, working the groove of that intractable problem of how maternity can register philosophically without recourse to a universality that it would wish to contest, and the problem of how intellectual and maternal labour appear to cancel one another out.² That mothers think is not in dispute, but rather that there are recursive effects for the feminine when philosophy uses maternal tropes to think itself, while simultaneously consigning the maternal to the very limit of thought and knowledge. In psychoanalytic theory, in particular, the limit of knowledge (i.e., the unconscious) is precisely where we find and fail to find 'the mother'. To think about mothers is to do violence to what remains resistant to knowledge, as Jacqueline Rose has argued, pushing the mother further into the shadows (see Rose, 1996). Whenever the maternal and thinking are brought into conjunction we are therefore forced to re-think both thinking and philosophy proper. For Derrida, as Parker shows, there is a radical disjunct between intellectual and maternal labour—himself, his son, his granddaughter

1 See MaMSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics, at www.mamsie.org) and the online journal *Studies in the Maternal* <http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/> for numerous examples of such maternal scholarship.

2 See Sandford (2011) for an important account of the strained but productive tensions between the terms 'maternal' and 'labour'.

can philosophise, but not mothers. In a sense, Derrida's very distinction between thinking and philosophy is premised on the exclusion of the mother.

Where, then, do theorists come from?, asks Andrew Parker, blurring the distinction between biography and the fantasy of theory as auto-generative. Parker prefers the term 'theory' rather than philosophy to signal the work of Freud and Marx, for whom the issue of transmissibility and generation (of psychoanalysis and Marxism) is central. Their work produces theories that are premised on a return to the founding texts that originate from fathers, not mothers, and yet they generate practices (psychoanalysis, revolution) that cannot be understood or transmitted through texts. This 'other scene', distinct from the paternal line that Freud and Marx give rise to, Parker tries to trace as a hidden mother of theory. What is interesting about Parker's question is that it works in two temporal directions—returning us to the erasure of the maternal in a strand of critical thought that is preoccupied with its own renewal, and pointing us towards a particularly contemporary uncertainty about the gender of that 'she' on whom we are reliant for reproduction. Today's technologically assisted reproduction thoroughly fragments and multiplies 'the mother' where formerly her identity was guaranteed by sense perception. Parker argues that this must shift our understanding of theory, if we accept that theory has a mother. However, Parker doesn't explicitly return to the question of this contemporary fragmentation of identity, which is somewhat left hanging, and might be for others to pick up. As a literary critic he instead pursues what feels like safer territory, identifying three ways that the maternal traditionally makes trouble for theory: the mother as inassimilable body, as constitutive absence and as native tongue. These aspects of mother-trouble correspond to what Parker identifies as three main uses of the maternal in theory: the ways she is evoked to regulate the distinction between the literal and the figural; her role in establishing the relation between singularity and generality; and the trouble she makes at the border between a theorist's life and writing where the eruption of biography into philosophy threatens to undo the very project of philosophy whereby the necessary and the accidental threaten to dissolve into one another.

What Parker offers us is three short chapters that reveal an elusive yet discernable maternal presence just where we expect to find her in her more classical figuration as *das Ding* (the Thing), as a missing history, or written over by a paternal language. The first locates Lacan's double movement of abjecting the maternal body but letting a body-to-body encounter in through the back door when Lacan speaks of 'maternal divination', a figure for the passing on of psychoanalytic knowledge that bypasses language. The second involves a reading of the Marxist critic Georg Lukács' reading of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, in which fiction emerges as history's parthenogenic child, giving rise to historical consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century. The third chapter involves a discussion of Marx's Yiddish-speaking mother. Here Parker argues that Marx's mother tongue 'speaks'

through Marx and later through Freud, leading to the revolutionary potential of Yiddish as the language of Marxism.

Tracing lost maternal figurations that underpin the masculine symbolic places *The Theorist's Mother* within a tradition of feminist scholarship that has sought to overturn the erasure of the maternal in psychic and social life. However, the most interesting aspect of the work remains the most undeveloped. If, as Parker claims, we are entering a particularly challenging period for philosophy and theory in which we encounter—'a strangely queered, (im)possible maternity that—till now, at least—is not what we think' (p. 2), a mother whose gender we cannot presuppose that gives the lie to whether we ever could, then it is just this multiple queer mother that we might want to trace more closely. Instead what emerges from Parker's analysis is one of the most traditional tropes for the maternal: 'she' who guarantees transmission through a shadowy presence, hovering between biology and the social field, unable to take shape in either. In remaining firmly within a critical literary tradition of textual analysis, the multiple queer fragmented mother seems to disappear. Perhaps *The Theorist's Mother* will become a starting point for an exploration of that more impossible maternity that Parker points us towards.

references

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