

Andrew Parker

The Theorist's Mother

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Reviewed by Alison Stone , 2013

In *The Theorist's Mother*, literary theorist Andrew Parker rereads the work of Marx and Freud in terms of their "troubled relation to maternity" (1) and, informed by these rereadings, Parker puts forward some general reflections on the troubled relation to maternity of philosophy as a whole. Maternity, Parker argues, is a "special conundrum" for Marxism and psychoanalysis, which are discourses that are "distinguished by their special conditions of reproducibility" (111). Theoretical work counts as Marxist or Freudian only if it maintains the proper relationship to the work of the founding fathers Marx and Freud: Marxists must trace some of their core beliefs back to Marx, Freudians to Freud. Relationship to an intellectual father is thus a constitutive feature of these theoretical frameworks, already building into these discourses a special difficulty in acknowledging the importance of maternity. Nevertheless, Parker finds that maternity plays covert organizing roles in Marxism and psychoanalysis. To show this he offers a series of intricate, deconstructive rereadings of work in these traditions.

In chapter 1, "Mom, *Encore*," Parker discerns the hidden presence of an unusual kind of mother in Lacan's work. Parker notes that Lacan sets up a contrast between feminine *jouissance*--positively valorized and exceeding our understanding--and the mother who always desires the phallus, and whose position in psychoanalytic theory is settled. Parker also discusses the Lacanian view that psychoanalysis should focus on the psyche, not the biological body. The biological, material body is expelled outside of Lacanian psychoanalysis--abjected--a constitutive exclusion that makes this theoretical approach possible. However, Parker argues, both this expulsion of the material body and the woman/mother contrast become complicated by Lacan's concern to ensure that his thought gets passed on and reproduced.

Transmission of ideas is a particular issue for any psychoanalyst, since analysis is not simply a body of theoretical doctrine. To learn psychoanalysis one must both undergo and come to practice it. This is necessary because, according to psychoanalytic doctrine itself, there is always a gap between theoretical understanding (for example, the thesis "everyone constantly relives his or her early relationship with his or her mother") and lived experience (actually working through with an analyst or patient the way that I keep acting as if he or she were my mother). Since lived experience inescapably differs from theory, analysts cannot pass on their insight by merely instructing students in theory. Addressing this problem in *The Four Fundamental Questions of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan tells of an occasion when he engaged in "maternal divination," holding a boy who did not want him (Lacan) to leave. Parker points out that here Lacan is "rendering a scene of embodiment" (56): Lacan is staging his position as one who, as an analyst, experiences--and who engages in a lived, bodily relationship with an other--but who does not know what he is doing (hence, "divination"). In this way, Lacan indicates that there is more to analysis than mere theory, trying to convey this not directly teachable "more."

This bears on the maternal because Lacan refers to *maternal* divination. Although Parker does not make this explicit, the "divination" seems to be a matter of relating directly, body-to-

body, to the other--as Lacan does in holding this child--a body-to-body relationship that exceeds theoretical knowledge. Divination in this sense is central to psychoanalytic transmission, as the transmission of insight through lived relationships. Psychoanalysis needs this maternal dimension--a directly bodily and experiential dimension--to reproduce itself. This is a maternal dimension quite different from the phallic mother of whom Lacan claims theoretical knowledge. Parker also hints at this conclusion by entwining his reading of Lacan with a rereading of his own earlier essay, "Mom," on his mother's psychosomatic illnesses. He ends the chapter by telling us that this rereading brought on terrible psoriasis. This seems to suggest that Parker took on his mother's propensity to psychosomatic illness through an opaque, directly bodily kind of transmission.

In chapter 2 Parker provides another intricate reading, this time of the reading of Walter Scott's historical novel *Waverley* by Marxist literary critic Georg Lukács. For Lukács, Scott's works are important because they embody the rise of historical consciousness in the early nineteenth century, albeit only in fictional form; their historical consciousness would be fully developed, and stripped of this fictional admixture, by Marx. Scott even dramatizes this movement from fiction to real history by narrating how the character Waverley eventually abandons the romantic daydreams in which he was embroiled and embraces real life. Parker shows that Scott sought to defend his work against criticisms that the historical novel was a poor hybrid of fact and fiction. In self-defense, Scott claimed that his work provided pure historical remembrance of a world becoming lost, comparing his work to a historical report told by a father--whereas a history mixed with fiction would be a tale told by disloyal sons, who have embroidered their father's pure truths.

Yet, Parker shows, Scott often embraces the writing of fiction, as in a self-referential aside comparing his narrative to a stone kicked downhill by an idle, truant boy--rolling away from the father on its own fictional momentum. So the fictional element in Scott's work remains stubbornly present. Moreover, Parker argues, Lukács remains caught up in Scott's mixed fictional-factual framework. When Lukács reads in Scott the lesson that truth supersedes fiction, Lukács is already identifying with Waverley as *he* learns to replace fiction with truth. Lukács is caught up in a fantasy identification with Waverley. In taking this lesson from Scott, too, Lukács wishes to be loyal to his own theoretical father, Marx, for whom historical fact supersedes illusion. But here too Lukács remains caught up in Scott's associative schema that links truth to the father and illusion to the disloyal son: a fictional/metaphorical scheme in which Lukács remained embroiled.

How far is the *maternal* figure involved in these father/son, truth/fiction ambiguities that Parker carefully unfolds? Parker refers to a sketch in which Lukács noted his distance from his mother and aligned himself with his father. In trying to be loyal to Marx-the-father, then, Lukács distanced himself from his mother. But when he remains caught up in Scott, fiction, and fantasy, Lukács seems to fall into the (imagined) position of the disloyal *son*, not that of the mother. Indeed Parker agrees that, in this imaginary scheme, theory becomes "an exchange between fathers and sons" (26)--but, he adds, "the mother must somehow be involved in this family affair." Nonetheless, she seems to be involved only negatively, as the figure who is excluded from the affair.

In chapter 3, Parker brings Freud and Marx together around the theme of translation. Both thinkers aim to translate symptoms (dreams, parapraxes, phobias; cultural forms, political struggles) into underlying realities (repressed forces, contradictions in society's economic base). Translation makes another important appearance in Marx's work when he claims in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* that revolutionaries must forget the old traditions that "weigh like a

nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx 1935, 15). For Marx, the revolutionary must forget tradition like someone forgetting his mother tongue (*Muttersprache*), who only truly learns a new language when he stops translating back into his native tongue. Indeed, Parker shows, Marx renounced his mother's tongue--Yiddish--in favor of his father's German.

However, Parker wants to complicate the assumption that people's mother tongue is the language they really learn, in early infancy, from their empirical mothers. Parker proposes instead (following Derrida) that the expression "mother tongue" can shed new, unfamiliar light on what *mother* means. Parker elaborates by looking at an anecdote of Freud's in which a Baroness is giving birth and progressively sheds her layers of genteel artifice as her cries become reduced to *Aa-ee, aa-ee*: bare expressions of her real, animal nature. Yet in Freud's original German, her cries are actually reduced to Yiddish: "*Ai, waih, waih*" (105). The ultimate underlying reality is not bare animal life, but language: specifically "the *Mameloshn*, the everyday language of eastern European Jewish men and women" (106), connoting the everyday maternal warmth of the Jewish family--unlike Hebrew, reserved for men. This Baroness's mother tongue--the tongue to which she reverts in giving birth--is a language already culturally imagined as maternal.

Parker's point, then, seems to be that what we imagine to be the bedrock, biological reality of the mother is always-already a matter of language; what we imagine to be bare empirical perceptions of the mother are always-already culturally mediated. Thus, when Parker concludes this chapter by hoping for a kind of revolution that does not require forgetting the *Mameloshn*, he presumably in part means a revolution that does not seek to escape from language to pure truth but that remembers the all-mediating nature of language.

In chapters 2 and 3, then, Parker recovers the presence of the maternal in Freud and Marx in the sense of language that cannot be eliminated in favor of pure truth, bare facts, or unmediated perceptions. In chapter 1, though, the sense of the maternal that Parker rediscovered in Lacan was that of direct, body-to-body relationships that exceed theoretical comprehension. These are two very different senses of the maternal. But then a central argument of Parker's introduction to this book is that the maternal has manifold meanings.

In the introduction, which outlines the book's overall framework, Parker reflects on the general trouble that philosophy has had with maternity: the discipline's reluctance to include mothers either as subjects or objects of philosophical inquiry. Parker also uses the introduction to put forward his positive thesis that maternity "resists univocal meaning" (11) since it covers pregnancy, childbearing, mothering, child-care, and a whole range of associated practices, identities, and contexts. New reproductive technologies and practices (such as surrogate motherhood) have exposed this multiplicity within maternity, but for Parker that multiplicity was always, inherently, there. To be a mother, Parker concludes, is "structurally--ineluctably--to be more than one" (16).

Moreover, Parker says, we can never simply perceive who is a mother: for instance, even if we see someone giving birth, that person is not necessarily the legal mother of the baby she is bearing. Parker's general point, I take it, is that childbearing and childrearing can come apart, as can other elements often lumped together under "motherhood," such as childrearing and enjoying legal status as a child's mother. Even when in fact one single woman bears a child, looks after that child, and is its legal guardian, in principle a multiplicity of elements is involved.

However, certain conclusions that Parker draws from this are for me the most debatable part

of his book. Parker disagrees with feminist philosophers or theorists who criticize the appropriation or usurpation of maternal powers by those who (they take it) are not really mothers. In particular, some feminists have criticized male philosophers--for example, Nietzsche, Plato--who have appropriated the language of birth and pregnancy to describe their own activity in producing ideas or works. Parker suggests in his short conclusion that these feminists are hostile to metaphor. Moreover, he adds, "in any case it is no longer technically true that men cannot give birth" (114): he refers to Thomas Beatie, one of a small number of FTM transsexuals who have become pregnant and had babies. Parker also endorses Sara Ruddick's suggestion that men can engage in maternal thinking and mothering if they undertake the practical work of nurturing children. He ends his introduction: "What will become of Theory when we cannot presume its mother's gender?" (27).

Parker makes these points about male motherhood quickly and playfully, but for me he loses sight of the central reason why feminists have objected to the "appropriation" of maternal powers by male philosophers--namely, because it takes place within a broader line of thought that excludes women from philosophy. On this view, women can merely give birth physically while men are able to do something superior: give birth spiritually. Now, if it were accepted that women can be philosophers and can take on male powers--can disseminate ideas to their followers, have seminal insights, and so on--that is, if the appropriation of female powers took place in a context of reciprocal interchange and borrowing--then that appropriation would not be problematic. But the problem is a tradition in which men are allowed to take on and sublimate female powers, without women being granted any reciprocal license to take on male powers.

Further, although childbearing and childrearing *can* come apart--and although it would be desirable for them to come apart more often, so that those who do not bear children can share in child-care--at present, largely, childbearing and childrearing remain compacted together. Women are generally expected to care for children, and women do the majority of child-care. In this context, claiming that men too can be mothers is problematic because it threatens to obscure the persistence of this gendered division of labor. Indeed, perhaps the claim indirectly reinforces this division, despite itself, by implying that those who do child care (whether they are male or female) must be mothers--as is not implied by the claims "men can be parents" or "fathers can do child care."

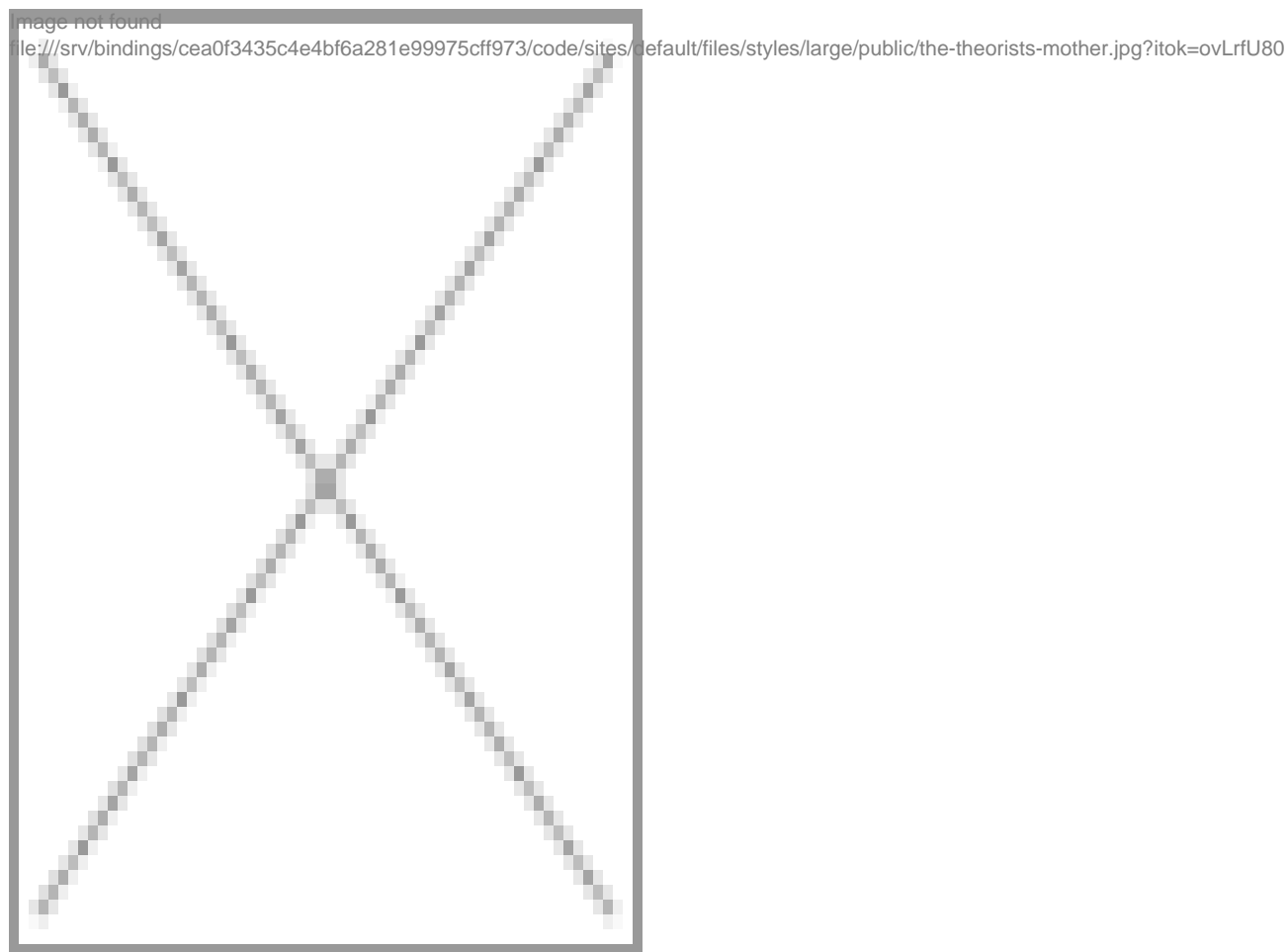
Furthermore, unless mothers are biologically female individuals (or, occasionally, formerly biological females who have changed sex but retained their wombs), Parker's careful readings of Marx and Freud are undermined. If men can be mothers, and can mother by giving birth to their theoretical offspring or heirs, then the father?son genealogies that structure Marxism and Freudianism are already maternal genealogies. This would certainly put the mother at the heart of these discourses, but in a misleading way--for as Parker says, these discourses "seem to reproduce themselves without a trace of maternal involvement" (111). If we are to first acknowledge and then complicate that apparent absence of maternal involvement, we need to admit that father?son theoretical genealogies *are* paternal, not maternal.

These criticisms notwithstanding, I found Parker's readings of Marx and Freud enjoyable and pleasingly intricate. I would have liked him to draw out the implications of these readings and pull together his conclusions in a more explicit way--but this probably reflects my own location as a philosopher rather than a literary theorist. As I've indicated, though, I do have significant doubts about the theoretical conception of the maternal with which Parker frames these readings. Even so, this book is stimulating and provocative, and is well worth reading for all those interested in the relation between philosophy and maternity.

References

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