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Julia Kristeva's Maternal Passions

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In "On Femininity," Sigmund Freud famously asked, "what does a woman want?" His answer, as we know, was a baby, and preferably a male baby. Why? Because a baby, especially one with a penis, satisfies a woman's penis envy insofar as the baby functions as a substitute for the organ she desires yet lacks. In several of the essays in her recent book *Hatred and Forgiveness*, Julia Kristeva takes up this Freudian question and appears to give the same answer: what does a woman want? She wants a baby. Yet, for Kristeva, the baby is not a substitute penis but rather an antidote to what she calls feminine fatigue, which comes from women's "extraneousness" to, and "extravagance" within, the phallic order. At the same time, however, Kristeva reverses the direction of desire from mother to baby and suggests that we all want the same thing: What do we want, whether we are women or men? We all want our mommies.

Women's *étrangeté*, foreignness, strangeness, extraneousness and extravagance come from the fact that within heteronormative phallocentric cultures, they are in the impossible positions of wanting their mommies *and* their daddies in one and the same love object.¹ Their desires are extravagant because they want it all; they want both sides of the dual universal that is humanity. At the same time, their desires are perversely extraneous to the reproduction of the species, which traditionally has been their place in the sun. Kristeva suggests, if does not say, that the cause of both women's extravagance and their extraneousness is their fundamental bisexuality.

Following Freud, Kristeva identifies two phases of the female Oedipal development. What she calls "Oedipal prime" is an attachment to the mother that leads to both an identification with the mother and a desire for her. What she calls "Oedipal two" [*bis*] changes the girl's love object to the father and to the law. Now, she wants to be the best at following his rules. By so doing, she protects her mother/self insofar as the fantasy of the child being beaten is not she but rather some bad boy.

In *This Incredible Need to Believe, Hatred and Forgiveness*, and a recent lecture, Kristeva rereads Freud's "A child is being beaten" as not only an account of individuation and sexual differentiation, but also of the inauguration of human civilization *ala* Freud's band of murderous brothers in *Totem and Taboo*.² She argues that from the perspective of the little girl, moving from Oedipal prime to Oedipal two, the girl protects herself from incestuous arousal by masochism and then by concentrating on others (which, I would say, may amount to the same thing). For the girl, the prototype of the beaten other is the victimized castrated mother (with whom she both identifies and refuses identification). She tries to protect this ambivalent object of her affection by looking for others to take her place in the beating fantasy, especially boys or men.³

As Kristeva describes it, in Oedipal two, the little girl displaces her incestuous desires for her father (which only barely covers over her desires for her mother) onto language and thought. Kristeva calls this "the extravagant capacity of sublimation that all humans possess but which, I, little girl, work hard to excel in better than anyone else."⁴ We could read this as a diagnosis of certain feminist philosophers who set out to prove themselves in the world of the father by vigorously protecting the mother from victimization by patriarchy.

I am thinking of my own work, and that of others who revalorize the maternal in order to protect it from debasement within phallic culture by beating up on their philosophical fathers both to prove that they themselves are worthy of the band of brothers and to protect their mothers/themselves from victimization by those very brothers, whom they love and yet resent because they will someday become the beating, and therefore deserving to be beaten, father. This is not necessarily the agenda of feminists who revalue motherhood as a vocation for themselves, so that they can become mothers worthy of recognition by mankind. Rather, these are feminist avengers who take on the father/brothers to save the mother whom they love, as ambivalent as that love may be due to the abjection of maternity within the family of man. Holding onto their bisexual allegiances, they are forced to give up having it all, if that means actually having children. Perhaps, they are too tired to have children!

Tired from fighting not only their own extraneousness to the phallic order but also the victimization of their beloved mothers, it would make sense that they suffer from "feminine fatigue." Kristeva describes this feminine fatigue as the result of a bisexuality that hasn't been worked through. Unable to choose between mother and father, to take sides once and for all, this woman is exhausted from walking the fence. She wants to please her father and that is why she excels at his game, although she uses it against him to defend her mother, even if she is what Kristeva calls a "crazy mother." "We are not all psychotic," says Kristeva, "but we can all be crazy. Crazy for one another (men and women, women and women, men and men)

because we are crazy for our crazy mothers.”⁵ It turns out, however, that some of us are crazier than others for those crazy mothers! Too invested in pleasing the father with our intellectual pursuits to *be* her, yet too loyal to her craziness, to her depression, to *be* him. Confused about who to be and therefore about who to love. Wanting to be everything and to love and be loved by everybody, an extravagant and ultimately exhausting desire.

Kristeva imagines a “cure” for feminine fatigue in motherhood. She maintains that woman’s extraneousness or strangeness to the symbolic order is manifested in a specific way during pregnancy and motherhood, particularly in the mother’s relation to the infant.⁶ And pregnancy and motherhood are ways of working through the passion that makes us speaking beings, the passion that makes us human rather than animals. Maternal passion, she argues, is a prototype of all human passion.

Following Jean-Didier Vincent, she defines passion as specific to man in that it requires reflexive consciousness and the capacity for encountering the other. Passion is the crossroads or interface between emotions, which are bodily or somatic and shared by all vertebrates, and reflexive consciousness, which is the result of both the symbolic pact that founds human civilization (that is to say the murder of the father and substitution of the totemic animal) and the formation of the unconscious as a result of the repression of this criminal act upon which the pact originates.

Of course, Kristeva’s rereading of *Totem and Taboo* complicates Freud’s story. In *Powers of Horror*, she emphasizes the brothers’ incestuous desires for the mother; in *Sense and Nonsense of the Revolt*, she emphasizes the pleasure in the totemic feast that operates as counterbalance to the horror and guilt; in her recent work, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, she emphasizes the incestuous desire for, and identification with, the suffering father, the father is being beaten to death). For Kristeva, even when it is about the father, it is also and always about the mother and the pleasures and horrors of her body. This is why maternal passion is a prototype of passion from the side of the child, the father, and the other more generally. But, it is from the side of the mother herself that Kristeva locates the essence of human passion.

In a chapter of *Hatred and Forgiveness* entitled “The Passion According to Motherhood,” she says, “allow me to take the mother’s side” and proceeds to describe “the extraneousness of the pregnant woman” as the narcissistic withdrawal wherein “the future mother becomes an object of desire, pleasure and aversion for herself.” In this state, which Kristeva claims is not unlike “possession,” the pregnant woman is “incapable of taking into account an existence separate from her own.”⁷ She is completely absorbed by emotions invested in her own body as the “hollow” habitation of a future love-object that she will have to allow to become a subject. Here is how

Kristeva describes this maternal progression toward what she calls the "miracle" of love:

[It] begins by the passion of the pregnant woman for herself: her destabilized "self," a loss of identity, because divided by the intervention of the lover-father, and, through this intervention of the other, inhabited by an unknown third party—an embryo, a fetus, then a baby, a child, though for the moment an indiscernible double...This first stage of the passion turned within is followed by the mother's passion for the new subject that will be her child, provided he/she ceases to be her double, but from whom the mother detaches herself to allow the child to become an autonomous being. This motion of expulsion, of detachment, is essential. Thus, the negative immediately inhabits maternal passion.⁸

This move from self-absorption to love of the child and then eventually release or weaning of the child is the "miracle" of maternal passion because the mother embodies both passion and dispassion, or passion and working-through passion. On Kristeva's account, then, it is not primarily passion that is uniquely human but rather dispassion or the sublimation of passion, which is essential to maternal passion as successful mothering. She describes the "miracle":

Miraculously ("miraculously," because even though it seems impossible, this alchemy manages to take place, and consequently, humanity exists, thinks, speaks, lives), motherhood is a passion in the sense that the emotions of narcissistic attachment and aggressiveness, filtered through reflexive consciousness and through the unconscious that speaks of Eros and Thanatos, are transformed into love (with its more or less attenuated correlate of hate). I would even say that in this experience of motherhood, passion takes on its most human aspect, which is to say, the furthest from its biological foundation, which nevertheless accompanies it (the famous drives of attachment and aggressiveness), and that it takes the path of sublimation without ceasing to be a passion. ...

"It is in motherhood that the link to the other can become love..."⁹

Several features of Kristeva's account are particularly noteworthy. First, she describes pregnancy and motherhood as the most human activity insofar as it is the furthest from mere biological functioning. Clearly, this claim is antithetical to traditional views of women's role in reproduction, which, as we know, has been and continues to be seen as a matter of biology, even

animality. And while it is akin to de Beauvoir's suggestion in *The Second Sex* that human females are more oppressed by their relation to reproduction than female animals because they can reflect on the experience, Kristeva, unlike Beauvoir, valorizes maternity.

Second, maternal passion is quintessential to human passion because it can be a form of working through conflicting emotions of attraction and aversion, which are the result of animal drives, by turning them into the human passions of love and hate. On this account, animals are incapable of love and hate because these so-called feelings require reflexive consciousness and expression in language and therefore go beyond mere feelings in the technical sense in which emotions are opposed to passions.

Third, the transformation of emotion or bodily drive into passion or sublimated drive is only the beginning of maternal passion. Its *telos* is the detachment or dispassion required for weaning the child and helping it become autonomous. And this simultaneous holding onto and pushing away is what is truly distinctive about human passion, embodied most dramatically and dynamically in maternal passion. This is why, here, Kristeva says that there is no good mother except the one who lends herself to matricide, echoing her earlier provocation from *Black Sun*, "matricide is our vital necessity."¹⁰ She also claims that the good enough mother loves no one because her passion is eclipsed by her detachment, which leads to her "serenity."

Fourth, this so-called serenity, like the good enough mother, also may be an impossibility, which is why we end up with crazy mothers. Indeed, how can loving passionately, and then sacrificing that love for the sake of a society that demands your own symbolic death, not make you mad, if not a little crazy?

Fifth, Kristeva argues that without motherhood, women remain extraneous and therefore most likely paranoid or hysterical or both. She maintains: "Human history since the last glacial period has found two 'natural' solutions to allow this grueling path (Oedipal prime + Oedipal two)—which society requires the female subject to realize somehow—to end in plasticity rather than collapse: there are motherhood and hysteria."¹¹

In addition, Kristeva argues that without working through both Oedipal phases, women cannot have fulfilling relations with others: "Taking into account the feminine extraneousness to the symbolic order, I think that without *an optimal experience of motherhood*, the female subject has difficulty attaining—and perhaps never attains—a relationship to the other sex, or a relationship to the other, whatever it is, that is not pure emotion (attachment/adversity) or pure indifference." Yet, Kristeva claims that analysis can perform the same structural modifications of optimal motherhood: "I said: *without a relationship to maternal passion*, it being understood that motherhood is a biological and symbolic process and that

analytical, self-analytical, or sublimatory work can arrive at the same structural modifications. I am emphasizing the structural experience of motherhood: I am not fundamentally 'pro-birth'.¹²

There is something about the structure of motherhood, then, that can be emulated in analysis, something that can move the woman through the borderline state that is her inherent bisexuality and becomes explicit in pregnancy, toward "serenity." This serenity, which may seem to echo Freud's oceanic feeling, from the side of the pregnant woman, actually explodes the illusion of oneness and wholeness in order to love passionately and yet let go of that love to embrace life. Like childbirth, analysis (and writing, art and mysticism) can bring "a time of new beginnings and rebirths and a certain serenity."

But, it is not just the mother's relationship with the child that makes motherhood transformative. In addition, it is the woman's relationship with her own mother through her experience of childbirth and motherhood that makes motherhood one way of dealing with the fundamental bisexuality of the bivalent female Oedipal complex. Through motherhood, a woman identifies with her mother and re-fuses that incestuous bond in a socially acceptable way. In addition, she returns to her own childhood and "unconsciously relearns her mother tongue" by teaching her child to speak. She thereby revises not only her relation to her mother, but also her relation to language. Rather than find her self extraneous to the phallic order, as a mother teaching her child to speak, she is essential to it. Through the baby talk she shares with her infant, she reconnects words, affects, and bodily sensations, which also reconnect her with a "lost time," the time of infancy, the time of Oedipus prime.¹³ Baby talk is a "sensorial language" that allows the mother to find "the conjunction of her symbolic and carnal essences."¹⁴ Baby talk remains symbolic even while foregrounding the semiotic element of language, particularly as it relates to the relationship between the maternal body and the infant, and maternal body and the lost time of her loving bond with another woman's body.

Thus, Kristeva concludes: "the very structure of maternal experience favors this metabolism of passion into dispassion" through the place of the father, time, and the acquisition of language, all three of which provide the distance necessary for detachment required for turning passion into dispassion.¹⁵ In a sense, then, motherhood and analysis share the same goal, namely, to turn passion into dispassion through sublimation. We need to give up love, or at least distance ourselves from it, in order to find it beyond craziness and in serenity. Alluding to Colette, Kristeva reassures us that "The dispassionate humanity reborn from this experience would not necessarily be boring or robotic. Perhaps it would simply have a gay, varied, and plentiful lucidity. And it would preserve the laughter of love: to the point of making light of love itself..."¹⁶ In her earlier work on female genius, Kristeva suggests that perhaps motherhood is the antidote to the

increasing atomization of human experience insofar as maternal creativity engenders human individuals through both nature and nurture.

In "Fatigue in the Feminine," she compares this creative mother to a "good fairy": "Nothing is impossible for a mother who succeeds at her psychical bisexuality: a tireless 'good fairy', she does not notice that she is depleted in the small cares lavished on her loved ones." It seems, then, that motherhood is a strange antidote to both feminine fatigue and hysteria, insofar as the woman is exhausted and perhaps even sick, but doesn't notice. Kristeva gives the example of a woman who was taking care of her mother who had Alzheimer's and her son who was operated on for a brain tumor, who was so busy taking care of others that when she fell and broke her ankle she felt no pain or fatigue.¹⁷

At this point, we may wonder whether this tireless good fairy is just another form of maternal sacrifice and why Kristeva embraces this model so familiar to us from cultural stereotypes of the good mother, who sacrifices herself for her children. Perhaps, this good fairy mother is the one who needs to be weaned, not only for the sake of her children's autonomy, but also for the sake of her own. After all, Kristeva does insist that it is through not only her passion but also her dispassion that the mother can be a model for human passion at its best.

Kristeva suggests that like Colette's mother Sido, the ideal mother has to turn away from her children to tend her own flowers, so that she too can bloom.¹⁸ Describing writing as another antidote to feminine fatigue, and Colette's writing in particular, Kristeva says "No fatigue in this writing, through which a gigantic feminine Self loves itself in the French language (for the first and last time?), Sido's maternal language, consuming flora and fauna, cacti and cats, the dimensions of the universe. Flowering, continual rebirth."¹⁹ Leaving aside her troubling reliance on the actuality of pregnancy and the activity of mothering, Kristeva suggests that the structure of motherhood, like the structure of writing, art and analysis, is not primarily about giving birth but about rebirth, and the cyclical time of flowering and dying off necessary for life.

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness: Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis III*, trans. Janine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 115, 161-162.

² Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 61.

³ See "A Father is Being Beaten to Death," presented by Kristeva at Columbia University on April 29-30, 2006 at a symposium on the Dead Father.

⁴ Kristeva, "A Father is Being Beaten to Death."

⁵ See Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 247.

⁶ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 84.

⁷ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 85.

⁸ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 86.

⁹ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 86.

¹⁰ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 91.

¹¹ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 120.

¹² Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 87.

¹³ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 90.

¹⁴ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 121.

¹⁵ See Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 89.

¹⁶ See Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 227.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 121.

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 91.

¹⁹ Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 124.