

# The Paradox of the Maternal

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If the maternal is the ground of our being and, therefore, also that of which we can never speak, what does it mean to try?

I will argue where a false mastery came into psychoanalysis, but hope to show the necessity of a search to find, before facing and accepting what cannot be grasped.

After an introduction to point out what I am not attempting to discuss, this presentation is in two distinct parts, as I consider the maternal only as that which is also the ground of our being. Those setting up this series wanted to include the personal, so I have brought together two strands that were on my mind: my re-reading of John Heaton's book *The Talking Cure: Wittgenstein's Therapeutic Method for Psychotherapy* influences the first section on therapy, while a project, of sorting decades of notes to and about my long dead mother, was drawn on for the final part.

## **Introduction**

Most of us here probably have plenty to say about mothers, if we have been anywhere near psychoanalysis. The very word 'maternal' brings a shudder to many who feel grateful at having

put at arm's length the one who had total power to protect or destroy. Not only were we within her body, but were incapable of looking after ourselves for a prolonged period. We relied on being cared for and could only gradually join in the language in use – language partially shaped to suit whoever is initiating us – language being used by others to decide who we might be or what is good for us.

Other factors bring a sigh at the prospect of a talk on the maternal – those endless psychoanalytic papers on mothers and babies, on attachment and dependence, though it is grown adults who come to our consulting rooms, not just big babies reducible back to one original mould – a mould that takes no account of social context, siblings, or the subtleties of temperamental differences. In the astonishing range and complexity of what people say of their mothers, or being a mother, one overriding thing is certain – it does not all fit any one pattern.

Some people sigh since never ending tensions between the sexes easily slip into a power struggle. I liked being a girl – rather it never occurred to me to wish it otherwise – but, until 9 or 10, it hadn't dawned on me I might also be expected to follow my mother, and take up a particular place as a woman. To that I said a firm "No thank you!" asserting resolute disinclination to acquire what were considered important feminine skills. When asked, "So what will you do when you have children?" I answered grandly, I wouldn't have any, but adopt when I was 50. In a sense, I didn't quite know what I was saying, or why, yet was articulating wanting something other than what seemed to be on offer for girls.

For the maternal, like the paternal, is deeply implicated in social and economic structures, in the political, and in the way of thinking of any era. We have a continuing fight over responsibility for those in need of care – where the hard work of giving one's flesh, one's time, one's life, to caring for others is not much valued. And then there is the distribution of what are called feminine and masculine characteristics. Here, the edge was taken off battle lines for me, by having a father drawn to looking out for others and emotionally more available for intimacy, while my sparky mother was adventurous and needed a big stage to thrive.

However, this whole complex area (along with the enormity of being a mother and inevitably hurting one's children and maybe worse, damaging them) which I'm sure will be taken up elsewhere in this series, is *not* what I'm attempting to consider. I put all that aside – since what I

want to look at is our mammalian start – a beginning in water and also in inarticulacy. There is a play with sounds early once we move into air, but language is slow learning. Like our mothers' bodies, language is about us and forever remains that which is of us and also beyond our skin, and outside full mastery, in that however we come to express ourselves, we can never get behind the available language, or get back to before we could use it. It is this paradox, which is also at the heart of the maternal that I will focus on.

Becoming a mother was another re-opening to that which is beyond. And not just the passion of childbirth to which one is subject; for, despite the scientism around us and belief that soon all will be explained, mothers certainly do not know how to make their own babies. A new life takes shape within our bodies by simply absorbing what is needed, as the baby then absorbs the culture and language. Also becoming a mother, and thankfully I was not kept to my childhood intentions, made me responsible for someone – once re-plugged back into life outside myself, there was no longer the choice of ending it all in a fury of retaliation to my mother.

Our culture emphasises the separate, the individual and the rational – as if we are to make everything just our own, so we don't keep our eye on where we are rooted in the collective – for example, in the complicated game of money there is little recognition of the fact it can only be played because it *is* the shared game. Each is to grab what money they can, without responsibility, and those living with excess, displaying huge wealth, are admired – a need for luxury fuelling the economy – yet now there is a move to add something lost back on – as it becomes the fashion for the rich and for business to give something back. This distortion is everywhere in the culture, including psychoanalysis.

The word “separate” is used with such approval, being an individual is set up as a good, as if it's not a profoundly subtle matter. After all separate comes from *separate*, which in the thesaurus equates with cleave, break up, come apart, disjoin, disconnect, unattach. Most thinking about where we are in something collective, and where distinct, seems crude. And much of what we claim to be expressions of our unique individuality are likely to have been absorbed from the zeitgeist. Then there is the range of phenomena we call intuition and the uncanny, which draw attention to the fact that we cannot be half as separate as we mostly assume.

Nor are we as much creatures of reason as we hope. Anglo-Saxon culture seems particularly drawn to elevate reason, not just as a crucial language to learn, which it is for us, but as if it's the *basis* for all life. It has a long history of taking sons, who might be expected to have power and influence once day, right away from the maternal as soon as possible – to wipe it out as that in which their life is rooted.

Freud and Jung became fascinated by the area where reason did not hold sway, yet ended wanting to declare their conquest of it. Freud saw the difficulty of our not being conscious of all we are immersed in – we are embodied and subject to our bodies' extraordinarily subtle workings, we are in language, and a particular era, we are subject to desire and to a need for sleep, where we are not in our conscious mind.

Never-the-less Freud decided to put, as he said, “a bulwark against the black tide of mud”, and re-defined that which cannot be brought to consciousness as the UNCONSCIOUS. Bion argues that the theory of the conscious and unconscious is extremely useful but “becomes a bit of a pest after a time because it gets in the way of being able to see other things one doesn't know – stands in the way of one's own ignorance, so that there is very little chance of investigating this realm of ideas that have never been conscious and this state of mind that is not available when a person is talking to you with his wits about him in broad daylight, and you are listening to him with all your wits about you.”<sup>1</sup>

Certainly Freud, growing attached to his description, proceeded to use his own, rational theories as if they decoded any mystery – so that we are no longer creatures of the symbolic, but, like Oedipus faced only with a riddle. A riddle psychoanalysis itself might answer.

This confusion continues within psychoanalysis – is the analytic tradition one of getting behind dreams and the defined unconscious to give a decoding from theory? – Or is it addressing the original recognition that we are in more than we can grasp, since we can never be sufficiently outside to fully formulate? Freud acknowledged forces to which we are subject, then shifted gear and his metaphors became “facts”.

If we take a brief look at dreaming, it's obvious we do not stay awake to reason while we also dream. Even if words bubble up, briefly on automatic, as one wakes, which may be the best

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<sup>1</sup> Wilfred R. Bion, *The Tavistock Seminars*, 4 July 1977, p21.

access one gets, or even if we are left with vivid images to play with, the dream has faded. That weave of strangeness, with possibly a haunting presence, has gone – that mode of connectedness has been shed, not brought into the day, even though meditating on it may throw light on matters. To quote Bion, “I don’t think that Freud, in talking about the interpretation of dreams, really considers the fact that the patient who has a dream had an experience in what I would consider a very different state of mind from that in which he is when he is awake. Therefore the story the patient tells you, consciously, is his version of what happened last night, but he doesn’t really know.”<sup>2</sup>

What we cannot do, is gain dominion over dreaming by cracking any one particular, deciphering code. That we try to do so reveals our mania for explanation. Our relation to the maternal is much the same – we come out of dreaming as even more fundamentally we came out of our inarticulate beginnings. Driven to catch where we have been, we start retrospectively applying constructions. Some might be well imagined. We may look to descriptions of attachment, or read Winnicott and find it makes sense to us, just as any good fiction does. What has a ring of truth is, then, too readily mistaken for explanation. And the process of generating “explanations” is helped by reification. Of course, there is no such thing as “the maternal”, there is a birth mother and someone who has to care for the infant. If we just use the words “mother” and the “one who looks after” generalisations and theories are less likely to appeal.

Slippage into explanation and other category confusion is not trivial, nor a cold matter of “just grammar and logic”: once descriptions slip into accounting for our history, we lay claim to conceptualising more than is justified and turn ourselves, our patients, and the maternal into objects of knowledge. Also we generate the unfounded illusion of being able to get hold of ourselves through rational theory, even though we were fully present, alert and responsive to the world around us, our senses in good order, long before reasoning, which is necessarily a late development in language. How far we sniff one another out, tuning in in a myriad of ways, sensing where we are with one another and getting our bearings, long before we can use reasoning – and, thankfully, these ways continue along with speech and increasing rationality.

Language introduces something profoundly different as it unglues presence by bringing in a future and a past tense – a past tense that goes to our head as we superimpose some theoretical picture. This is obvious in Klein’s misuse of language to decree what is going on

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

conceptually in the minds of pre-linguistic infants, who can have no concepts. She encloses the baby within particular structures, as if no other life force is of any relevance. It is as if the child forms within a seashell, with Klein knowing exactly the shape of those firm sides shutting in the developing life. In her picture there is no ocean; yet if sea shells do not open to the flow of water, any life within shrivels and dies. Winnicott, in his struggle with Klein, to be allowed to express what he understood in language other than Kleinian theory, wrote that she sounded as if she knew how to make daffodils flower and that was not what psychoanalysis could know. All we can see is how we might better nurture the bulb, in the hope that it may flourish.

Since therapy is an attempt at more honest speech, the therapists' correct relation to the words they use is fundamental. Slippage into pseudo explanation and confusion of categories, which imply, or establish, spurious knowingness, is either unthinking or unscrupulous. It generates power and fake authority for our practice. This is not to suggest a collapse into "we can't say anything", nor is it to endorse that "it's all about feelings and words don't matter" – the struggle to move into a more correct relation with what we can and cannot say of ourselves requires rigorous attention. Most of us come to therapy with, at least, some of our "language-on-holiday" – i.e. we speak with a degree of disconnection from what we have already lived, or perhaps only half understanding what it is we are saying, or claiming to know too much only because we have been unable to further question. Our task of finding a way to more honest speech is, crucially, a move to seeing slightly better what cannot be caught.

Perhaps we begin therapy as a search, hopeful of *an* answer, *the* meaning or of understanding ourselves and others, and pursue this quest, till we are forced to recognise the limits of our language. Many of us begin, expecting to extricate ourselves from strong mothers, and take a long time to surrender to the fact that the maternal is also the ground of our being – and we cannot reason our way out of being subject to it.

Which brings me to Part II – and of my own notes as I tried to get hold of my mother. I have taken a tiny selection, from masses of scraps of paper, bits of diary, which I eventually gathered together to put in two big folders. Perhaps I began writing notes to her, when surprised by the intensity of longing to show her my newborn son, though she had been dead ten years.

I can't really say what I was hoping to clarify – and it changed – but I sought to understand the woman who left life dramatically just as I assumed myself to be leaving her. Who was she?

What did I think of her? And why did I seem unable to re-find ease of connection, except in extremis, out at sea, after I had gone to look for something of her, nine grim months after her death, in the city she came from and where she'd returned on holiday and been killed in a car crash. There was no doubt I found her in the deep. She was all around me as I grew into life and I, like many, felt her profoundly about me as I was nearly dying. In between coming into life and leaving it, what had she been?

These fragments are not in the order in which they were written, over four decades. I have chosen those that seem to connect with the first part of this paper and restricted myself to an alphabet – A to Z. (My mother is the “you” in these notes, my father the “he”.)

- A. Had you lived there would have been ways to meet, with every day frustrations. In the resounding absence, I foraged, perhaps finding only dried bones, but also made my way into much you left unspoken.
- B. Decades on it is still possible to gag on the fact that you are never coming back – and that you, who were all too present to existence, could just leave with no goodbye.
- C. There was nothing to be done to keep you. It was all over and not a single thing could make it different. That was the crushing defeat and how I struggled to forgive it.
- D. When death came for you, I had no importance – and it remained an outrage you didn't send a message.
- E. For you were at the mercy of forces I no longer believed in – the power of life and death, like fairies, were outgrown. Till you showed me – dying to do it!
- F. The air thickened with misery and confusion. Weighing heavy, it pushed us down through surface crust, over which we'd previously skated.
- G. You whisked away the ground we stood on, proving every lullaby a lie – *you* couldn't keep us safe – you could not save yourself!

- H. Having assumed any difficulty ahead would be standing up to your strength – asserting my own way – I never doubted you'd be there to fall back on. If I was about to move out, on a long rope, of course, you'd stay firm behind me.
- I. We lived side by side, no longer close. I'd probably have replied, if asked – you cooked, I ate good food, and failed to notice I might be rooted in you still – not so autonomous after all.
- J. You died and that was fact, if also indigestible. Your mothering proved to be no object to catch – whatever still lived was not for extermination – and continued beyond that abrupt cremation.
- K. With him it was easier – never having been within his flesh, he couldn't swallow me. And it never occurred to try and seek all strands of fathering – he was there in person – not a skeleton, to be pinned with words.
- L. Death was dressed in euphemisms and you draped in hyperboles. The "you" I recognised was gone and, after bewilderment, I began to hunt you – to catch those primrose sandals at the beach – the way you flung yourself backwards into water – my pride in your sparkling ball gowns – your relish of oysters and foreign foods. I sought your character, asking embarrassed friends and your reluctant sisters. I got given clichés.
- M. I missed knowing you as adult – so much I want to ask – and all I'd like to tell.  
But would you have ever listened?
- N. Like most, I hatched to cocoon life, within a family – added in and sharing residence, fears, a bedroom, meal routines and ways of speaking, ways of doing to grow in us as forming bones.
- O. Your structuring days were through my way of being, not detachable as I'd supposed.
- P. My flesh began as part of you, though I considered myself distinct, but your crashing out proved more than could be taken in, through confusions of what must be you and what was me, until I found I could not go where you had gone, not without wilful destruction. And, yet, how soon I went abroad, shoulders pushed up in declaration of managing

without you, and went exploring, just as you made plans to do the night before you borrowed a car, not knowing it was faulty.

- Q. Though I thought it was you reduced to pieces in a smash, it was our expectations lying in bits. But, cruelly, our bodies looked whole, in an illusion of completeness, while having to bear comprehension of your death only in small fragments.
- R. You were the earth for the seed of me, even if that idea displeased. I grew despite you is the claim, although cells developed through no will of mine. Note that you spoke to me of our beginnings, though the complications lingered.
- S. Shared existence shattered, like some shell, leaving me apparently freed, if with a running yolk. You as the container were fragile too, though I'd certainly failed to notice. Astonishingly his comfort outlives his ordinary death – while your end was too disruptive of who I took my teenage self to be.
- T. Alongside our colonial, daily life was always that wide ocean. Even land locked days kept a watery edge – liquid, from which we emerged, there in perpetual motion – a power beyond the confines of town. Our several rivers led the way in merging again, into vast and salted sea.
- U. And when its pulse fades into tales of its existence – having no force except in the pitfalls of memory – we are stranded high and dry in constructions of the mind.
- V. Sedate like you I've never been, and move still in tides and with the moon. The flow of water might be hard to collect and yet I have felt gathered, in etching words to you, across what stays filmy between us.
- W. Phrases come alive in the writing – that quick move to show the unseen – but what do they net when put on repeat?
- X. Who can speak that move out of water into air, before there is any talking? You told me only what you wished, of thunder at my birth. Then left before I could question your version.

- Y. While you lived, some of our history never got a word in – which put much else on semi-disconnect between us. Finding you at sea, it seemed an absolute that language must begin again, from scratch!
- Z. Eventually, therapy gave a gradual re-association with some of what we'd lived. I didn't get hold of you, as probably I'd hoped, but learned to talk with someone else – making space for a way of speaking, inconceivable while beside you.



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