THEORYNOW
JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, CRITIQUE, AND THOUGHT

BETWEEN AMNIOTIC AND SEMIOTIC: THE KRISTEVAN MATERNAL BODY IN MODERNIST AND CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WOMEN'S FICTION

ENTRE LO AMNIÓTICO Y LO SEMIÓTICO: EL CUERPO MATERNO KRISTEVIANO EN LA NARRATIVA FEMENINA BRITÁNICA MODERNA Y CONTEMPORÁNEA

Iro Filippaki
American College of Greece
ifilippaki@acg.edu

Fecha de recepción: 21/07/2022
Fecha de aceptación: 17/11/2022
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30827/tn.v6i1.26185

I sought amongst so many books a way
to understand myself by analogy
Jessie Greengrass, *Sight*

Abstract: From her seminal study *Powers of Horror* (1980) to her more recent conceptualization of maternal reliance (2014), the attendant ambivalence of motherhood has been both a recurring theme in Julia Kristeva's writing as well as her dominant method to demonstrate the affinities between bodily transformation and psychic development. At the same time, the post-war literary narration of motherhood's "impossible choices", as one critic has written (Harnett 2019), has left scattered but memorable marks on the contemporary British literary canon. Experimental as well as established British women writers have attempted to document the affective ebb and flow of the maternal body as well as motherhood itself both as an individual experience and as a cultural and

socioeconomic institution (Staub 2007). This essay examines such literary works from a Kristevan perspective, attempting a literary tracing of the "herethics" of maternal love (Kristeva 2014) in selected British women authors who have heret(h)ically imagined and articulated maternal ambivalence in the interwar and contemporary era. Employing the post-realist fiction of Olive Moore (1939), Doris Lessing (1988), and Jessie Greengrass (2018) as a springboard for a Kristevan analysis of maternal bodies, it is argued that the conceptualization of a herethics of maternal love finds its literary counterpart in a continuous tradition of women's exploration of the ambivalent mother through an experimental narrative style, which in turn mirrors the construction of a new maternal body.

Keywords: Motherhood; Julia Kristeva; British women's literature; Ambivalence; Maternal body.

Resumen: Desde su influyente estudio *Poderes de la abyección* (1980) hasta su conceptualización más reciente de la dependencia materna (2014), la ambivalencia concomitante de la maternidad ha sido tanto un tema recurrente en la escritura de Julia Kristeva como su método dominante para demostrar las afinidades entre la transformación corporal y el desarrollo psíquico. Al mismo tiempo, la narración literaria de posguerra de las "elecciones imposibles" de la maternidad, en palabras de Harnett (2019), ha dejado marcas dispersas pero memorables en el canon literario británico contemporáneo. Escritoras británicas, tanto experimentales como consagradas, han intentado documentar el flujo y reflujo afectivo del cuerpo materno, así como la propia maternidad, en tanto que experiencia individual e institución cultural y socioeconómica (Staub 2007). Este ensayo examina estas obras literarias desde una perspectiva kristeviana, intentando un rastreo literario de la "herética" del amor materno (Kristeva 2014) en autoras británicas seleccionadas que han imaginado y articulado heréticamente la ambivalencia maternal en la época de entreguerras y contemporánea. Sirviéndonos de la narrativa post-realista de Olive Moore (1939), Doris Lessing (1988) y Jessie Greengrass (2018) como trampolín para un análisis kristeviano de los cuerpos maternos, argumentamos que la conceptualización de una herética del amor materno encuentra su contrapartida literaria en una tradición continua de exploración femenina de la madre ambivalente a través de un estilo narrativo experimental que a su vez refleja la construcción de un nuevo cuerpo materno.

Palabras clave: maternidad; Julia Kristeva; literatura británica de mujeres; ambivalencia; cuerpo materno.

Maman, the 1999 steel and marble sculpture of a leggy spider, was created by French-American artist Louise Bourgeois as a reflection of her relationship with her mother as well as a consideration of her own maternal role. At ten meters tall, Bourgeois' sculpture turns traditionally threatening imagery into an installation that evokes protection, safety, and shelter, even as it contradicts these notions. Bourgeois' art, often depicting controversial aspects of femininity and motherhood that work against "patriarchal abjection", as has been noted (Arya and Chare 2016), has not gone unobserved by Kristeva, who writes the following in one of her commentaries of Bourgeois' artwork titled *Topiary IV*: "Certain women artists easily attain the psychic plasticity that transforms their ageing body into a blossoming tree [...] The trunk and branches may be dry, but the thing proliferates nonetheless, ascends, ramifies, buds—not in juicy flavours, but in emerald jewels. The seduction of crystallization" (Kristeva qtd. in Miller 190).

Two words stand out in Kristeva's commentary of Bourgeois' sculpted female form, also standing seemingly in opposition, namely "plasticity" and "crystallization". Kristeva seems to suggest that womanhood exists in the tension between these two concepts: on the one hand, the plastic movement and re-arrangement of the physical form that is apparent not only in ageing, as Bourgeois examined in *Topiary IV*, but predominantly in procreating ("proliferating" as Kristeva writes); on the other hand, the solidity represented in the crystallization of the jewels seems akin to preservation and maternal resilience, thus bringing to mind Kristeva's own recontextualization of Freud's Eros as maternal eroticism: "by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed", eros "aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, at preserving it" (Freud qtd. in Kristeva, "Reliance, or Maternal Eroticism" 70). Kristevan herethics explore the ambivalent space between complication and preservation, plasticity and solidity. Through her theory of herethics, Kristeva argues that the female body is complicated and networked at "the crossroads of biology and meaning as early on as the pregnancy" ("Motherhood Today") and the preservation (or crystallization) of new life, where the mother is, in her own turn, preserved in the new child's thought and creation of discourse. Having worked through her maternal passion for her child, her "maternal thought" is now appropriated by the child's "recreating it in his own way of thinking-representing" ("Motherhood Today"). As I will argue here, on the one hand, maternal ambivalence, as part of maternal herethics, subtly underlines the creation of modern and contemporary British women's literature. In this context, Kristevan herethics operate as maternal sublimation, as the maternal body's ambivalent passions are transcribed into writing. At the same time, Kristeva's critique on the mapping of the maternal body on religious patterns is illuminated in the novels at hand through the emerging religion of the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries, namely science. Reading for herethical clues in the novels, I argue that such literature can be read as contributing to Kristeva's own "dream", as she writes, for "*a discourse on the complexity of motherhood*" (Kristeva, "Motherhood Today", emphasis in the original). In this essay I aim to show that by working against dominant medical and social discourses, literary writing can indeed show the complexity and split nature of the maternal body, as per Kristeva's realization[1]. Ultimately, plasticity and solidity/crystallization are the two poles in-between which the maternal role takes shape. Plasticity and rigidity are forces that, as I will show, are constitutive of the narrated maternal experience, without necessarily bearing negative or positive connotations.

Maternal ambivalence in literary writing has made a spotty appearance throughout the twenty-first century in literature, despite its solid presence in theoretical discourse. Adrienne Rich's profound articulations on female ambivalence towards the ability to become pregnant and the fear of entering the institution of motherhood in her 1976 work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* have found ample ground in contemporary storytelling on the maternal. Books such as Lionel Shriver's *We need to talk about Kevin* (2003), Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter* (2008), *Motherhood* by Sheila Heti (2019), and *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder (2021) point to the emergence of maternal ambivalence as a revealing literary trope, apart from a newly household term. This is a crucial turn if the maternal is finally going to be disentangled from sacred *"religious feeling*" as Kristeva notes ("Motherhood Today", emphasis in original). While the politics of motherhood and the maternal body have been examined at length in Shakespearean and Victorian Britain (Adelman 2012; Marland 2004 respectively), analyses of motherhood in modernist and contemporary literature are scarce. This is surprising if one considers that medical accounts of early modern and Victorian era pregnancy and motherhood explicitly link the maternal with individual citizenship: the emotional response triggered by pregnancy branded women as unfit citizens who had to suppress all emotional excesses in order to "become rational mothers who would, in turn, transmit principles of self-governance to their offspring" (Hanson 88). In her review of pregnancy's and motherhood's social and political significance since the mid-eighteenth century (a period that Greengrass herself explores in her novel), Clare Hanson has concluded that, since then, the maternal body has been positioned diametrically opposite rationality. This is a position that the selected authors in the present essay

1 The complexity of motherhood that Kristeva mentions and that the novels I discuss here unpack is contingent upon the characters' whiteness. That is to say, the female protagonists describe themselves as maternal others, but not as others in racial terms. This is a limitation of the present essay, as it only addresses a particular female experience, even in the case of Moore's protagonist Ruth, who decides to live in exile as self-punishment for giving birth to a disabled child that she is unable to love.

counter. The medicalization of pregnancy and its placement somewhere between sanity and insanity, and health and disease have been consolidated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and as a response, all of the maternal characters of the novels under consideration here face crises of subjectivity caused by that medicalization.

Spleen, a 1939 novel by the prolific yet uncanonical author Olive Moore, deals singularly with the ambivalence of the maternal body. Ruth, the English protagonist, finds herself in a common predicament: she becomes pregnant with an unwanted child and her son Richard is born disabled, with deformed feet and unable to communicate with Ruth[2]. Ruth decides to punish herself by taking him and going into a twenty-year-long exile on a remote Italian island, as she believes that it is her lack of maternal instinct that caused his disability. Lessing's *The Fifth Child* and Greengrass' *Sight* tell the stories of currently pregnant women who are already mothers, and detail their ambivalence towards making an ethical choice regarding parenthood. Harriet, the proudly maternal protagonist of *The Fifth Child* births child after child within the same, precise ritual of happiness. This happiness is interrupted when Ben, the fifth child, is born. As Ben exhibits violent personality traits, Harriet is forced to come to terms with her own body as a bearer of violence, becoming, much like Moore's Ruth, what Kristeva has called a "courageous mother" ("Motherhood Today"). After Harriet and her husband, David, decide to take Ben to an institution, Harriet is tormented and slowly makes another impossible, (herethical) decision: to bring Ben back home, with devastating consequences for the rest of the family. In a similar fashion but forty years later, Greengrass presents a tale of contemporary hesitation to become a parent. Apart from the protagonist's partner, Johannes, no other name is presented in the novel, not even the protagonist's, whose namelessness constitutes her an everywoman. When she loses her mother to cancer she meets her future partner and together they start negotiating procreation. At the same time, the protagonist narrates her story of conducting research into intricate visions of bodies, from Wilhelm Roentgen's accidental discovery of X-rays to Sigmund Freud's analytical vision of psychopathologies and anatomical descriptions of pregnant bodies. In-between historical details, her own story of connection with her mother and her maternal grandmother, her partner, and her two daughters, as well as visualizations into her own pregnant body, provide the methodology according to which she attempts to understand the impossible choices surrounding maternity. In the end, all three mothers take an ethical *stand* towards the "prodigious structure of maternality that the West has erected", as Kristeva puts forth in "Stabat Mater" (147).

2 It should be mentioned here that Moore's experimental modernist narrative style expresses maternal ambivalence through the appropriation of disability (Franks, "Mental Inversion"); similarly, Lessing employs the monstrous and disabled body of her son to speak of her own monstrosity and radical otherness as a mother (Clark, "Re-Reading Horror Stories").

Pregnancy/understanding

Moore, Lessing, and Greengrass present the ambivalent maternal body at the intersection of nature and culture, living organism and scientific language. All three novels feature mothers whose ambivalence moves in separate directions: for Greengrass's protagonist, ambivalence towards procreating is to a great extent what sets the novel off; in Lessing's Harriet's case, ambivalence comes post-partum, after Harriet has her fifth child and starts questioning her role as a mother; and Moore's Ruth, bearing a predicament similar to Harriet's, gives birth to an unwanted child only to realize that her ambivalence might have been justified but also the cause of her son's severe disability. In all three novels, and despite their chronological distance, maternal ambivalence during pregnancy is employed as an analytical and self-critical tool to make sense of the maternal body and to question established norms.

For the protagonists of the novels, the very notion of the maternal is inhabited by ambivalence. The same is true for Kristeva, who defines maternality as a tug of war between biological and cultural processes: "By 'maternal' I mean the ambivalent principle that derives on the one hand from the species and on the other hand from a catastrophe of identity which plunges the proper Name into that 'unnameable' that somehow involves our imaginary representations of femininity, non-language, or the body" ("Stabat Mater" 134). For Kristeva, perhaps the only real proof of the maternal is its ambivalence, particularly as, "though subject to biology", it derives from "a socialized body" (Margaroni 95). Indeed, pregnancy for Kristeva is a paradoxical situation:

> Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present […] to signify what is going on. 'It happens, but I'm not there.' 'I cannot realise it, but it goes on.' Motherhood's impossible syllogism (Giovanni Bellini 237).

Even though the protagonists of the novels under consideration here all seem to be aware of the danger of this unnameable amalgamation that motherhood is, their maternal experience (either through their first-person narration, or through the omniscient narrator) never strays from explorations and descriptions of the physical body in a desperate attempt to put the maternal into words. As the unnamed protagonist of *Sight* describes her days of researching in a medical archive, where she identifies with all researchers who believed that "knowing the constitution of their bodies they might be granted understanding of their minds" (Greengrass 51), she presents her quest for bodies as a quest for her own physical identity, punctuated by the tension between her body's fluidity and the archive's crystallization of bodily information: "The act of

reading was […] a half-held belief that somewhere in those hectares upon hectares of printed pages I might find that fact which would make sense of my growing unhappiness, allowing me to peel back the obscurant layers of myself and lay bare at last the solid structure underneath" (Greengrass 36). This is no simple act of reading, but rather a metaphysical experience, where many physical and imagined topoi converge: the different geographies that the narrator is exploring, from Freud's Vienna, to Roentgen's Zurich; the different timelines of the scientific and personal discoveries described in the novel, from the first motion picture to the invention of the unconscious; and the different stages of the narrator's own body (the growing unhappiness at her mother's death mirroring the growing fetus inside her body as she remembers the past). All are sought to be understood through a process of literary excavation, echoing Kristeva's incantation in "Stabat Mater": "Let a body finally venture out of its shelter, expose itself in meaning beneath a veil of words" (134). In this way, the narrator presents her body as a hybrid inevitability between text and biology ("word flesh," per Kristeva "Stabat Mater" 134), where the physical structure finds its correlative on the printed page.

Through her research at the Wellcome library in London, the protagonist of *Sight* narrates a physical journey that stands in opposition to that of motherhood, as, instead of building a new life through her expanding body, she allows her own body to become overwhelmed by historical and scientific knowledge on motherhood: "Although at the time the sound of pages turning seemed to grind against me until I worried that I might be worn away by it to nothing, now I recall that long summer as though it had been spent within the papery confines of a cocoon" (Greengrass 37). The woman seems to regress to a different embryonic stage, one where instead of being carried by a maternal body, she is borne in a papery uterus. Having lost her own mother to cancer, and being ambivalent about bringing a child into the world, this character seems ready to be simultaneously born and shrouded in death. Paper in this instance becomes a metaphor of the Kristevan "'semiotic' that does not coincide with linguistic communication" ("Stabat Mater" 143) and is akin to mother's milk, or tears, an extension or product of the maternal ambivalent body. As the woman is trying to decide whether to become a mother or not, she starts suffering from migraines, described as "abscess" "swelling inside my skull" (Greengrass 41), and falls deeper into maternal/ambivalent abjection: "I would dream that my mouth was filled with something like wet sand, a claggy, white substance which regenerated as fast as I could spit it out or excavate it with my fingers from the space between my gum and cheek; and waking I would have the taste of it still, the lingering memory of something like rotten milk catching in my throat" (Greengrass 41). It is difficult not to read Greengrass' metaphors of the "papery cocoon" and the "rotten milk"-like

substance through Kristevan abjection, which echoes Kristeva's thin "surface of milk, harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring" (*Powers of Horror* 2). Standing in for her own abject maternal skin, the sheet of paper that mirrors her own knowledge within the Wellcome archive is what protects Greengrass' protagonist from her mother's death and her child's birth. Through researching about ways to look at the body, and the maternal body in particular, the "papery confines of a cocoon" provide her with a sense of empowerment and even comfort in this institutionally sanctioned (re)-enactment of abjection, once again reminding us of Kristeva's understanding of the abject: "abject and abjection are my safeguards" (*Powers of Horror* 2).

The narrator's ambivalence towards the physical properties of motherhood is carved on her body, especially as she seems to be often balking with terror at birthing a child:

> […] I am terrified, as at a world remade, and I am unprepared. It seems like such an unforgivable breach of promise to be reduced to flesh which I cannot, by thought, transcend, but blood and muscle go about their business just the same and in my side something puckers, the sharp retraction of a rock pool creature that has been disturbed (131-132).

On the one hand, this feeling of being "reduced to flesh" echoes Kristeva's theory of the maternal "chora", which is created as "discrete qualities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body—always already involved in a semiotic process—by family and social structures" (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* 25). The affective flow between mother and child, and the physical conditions of the maternal body order the space of the chora, and it is this space that is contested by the narrator of *Sight.* Resisting, to an extent, her own body as the chora, and unable to experience joy in this space where "the alterity of the entities engaged in [a] process of mediation" is preserved "though not at the expense of their connectedness'' (Margaroni 82), Greengrass' protagonist feels that with motherhood she herself will cease to be a speaking and thinking subject, and will be reduced to the physical properties of her body. Upon thinking about her first daughter and their relationship, she decides to spend some time apart from her, thinking that "without her I would be myself again, whole and undivided; but instead I am half-made, a house with one wall open to the wind" (133). There is no cultural definition of the mother in Greengrass' novel, only flesh and blood; instead of a cultural and linguistic transcendence, there is the singular presence of the maternal body; instead of expansion, there is a "sharp retraction" (132).

Similar to Greengrass, but almost a hundred years before her, Moore constructs a female character whose unconventional doubt towards the maternal estranges her from

her husband, home country, and her own body[3]. Ruth also employs knowledge to calm her ambivalence at the birth of her child and her anger at Nurse Gunn, her designated carer, who does not let her go out of the house on her own. Like Greengrass' protagonist, Ruth likes to ponder on man-made inventions, history, and science; after a long internal monologue on man's obsession with flying, from Leonardo da Vinci to the Wright Brothers, she concludes that "without this knowledge of something new and rare to sustain her she would still have been as unreconciled and appalled as in the first bitter weeks of her pregnancy" (47). Both protagonists seem to echo contemporary theoretical concerns regarding motherhood in culture: as Miglena Nikolchina asks, "what makes female fertility so central in the face of conflicting scientific and technological facts?" (67). The mothers of both novels attempt to answer this question by conducting their own research. Once again, similarly to *Sight* and the future mother's empowerment experienced through envelopment in the papery cocoon of researching about bodies, Ruth recalls feelings of loss during her pregnancy, being "enclosed within her as she had been since her father's death" (48). Ruth justifies her ambivalence as a matter of genealogy: "no child conceived and sired as she had been could give birth to a thing commonplace or usual" (48). Yet, one can trace in it the underlying tension sustaining the Kristevan development of maternality, namely, that between plasticity and crystallization: "Ruth was aware of the world as the victim of woman's ineradicable possessiveness; that emotional maternal substance which women ooze as a form of adhesive plaster by which mankind is held together, and is decaying" (42). The maternal body, for Ruth, is evidence of maternal passion, which she rejects, and, much like in *Sight*, maternality is grounded through physical words such as "ooze" and "plaster," denoting the mother both as abject flesh and blood but also as the inescapable material of social crystallization. *Spleen* is built on this tension between plastic and rigid. Both its diction and imagery hark back to Ruth's ambivalent maternal body, whose social and physical purpose she feels unprepared and unwilling to serve:

> She knew that there is but one purpose in life. Man and woman and child and child and child. Woman and child. Wash child, wash corpse. That was all there was to it. That was all there should be to it. Could be to it. Woman from the neck downward. Man from the neck upward as he chose. But for woman no choice […] I think I carry my womb in my forehead (57).

3 It might come as a surprise that the characters of all three fathers in the novels are marginal at best. Kristeva acknowledges the role of the father as one of the three major factors that may lead to the "depassioning", as she calls it, of the maternal experience, with the other two factors being time and language ("Motherhood Today"). The difficulty with which the mothers of the novels at hand experience their own maternal sublimation might relate to the fact that the fathers of their children are not strong father figures. The descriptions of the fictional mothers under consideration here do not focus on their children acquisition of language and thought, which, per Kristeva "depends as much on maternal support as it does on the paternal function" ("Motherhood Today"), but rather explore the maternal perspective without detailing facts of their children's development, or even their relationship with their fathers.

On the one hand, the rigid, staccato, verbless sentences highlight the lack of options for women as future mothers, while fluid and unexpected imagery such as the carrying of the womb in her forehead more like a shameful scar and less like a crown signal her ambivalence towards her maternal role. At the same time, the experience of motherhood becomes an exemplary abject experience: the washing of the child that is paralleled with the washing of a corpse is a direct allusion to a mother's religiously ritualistic representation, which "fails to take account of what a woman might say or want of the Maternal" as foregrounded by Kristeva ("Stabat Mater" 135). Ultimately, Ruth's every conclusion is that the female body is foreign to every woman: "She was like a woman possessed. She was a woman possessed; and she was horrified at the possession of herself by this thing she neither understood nor desired" (Moore 19).

Similar scenes of maternal ambivalence are present in the narration of Lessing's *The Fifth Child.* Coming from the late eighties, but narrativizing maternal ambivalence in the 1960s, Lessing presents us with a female character, Harriet, who is seemingly determined to have as many children as possible with her husband, David. With every pregnancy, Harriet grows more and more tired and feels more and more ambivalent. When she finds out she is pregnant with her fifth child in 1973, it is "to her utter dismay, and David's" (40). This pregnancy is making Harriet more fretful than usual, leading David to conclude that she is not "anywhere near herself" (43). Harriet herself realizes that with this fifth pregnancy she has entered a foreign territory the first time that she feels the baby kick:

> This morning, lying in the dark before the children woke, she had felt a tapping in her belly, demanding attention. Disbelieving, she had half sat up, looking down at her still flat, if soft, stomach, and felt the imperative beat, like a small drum. She had been keeping herself on the move all day, so as not to feel these demands from the new being, unlike anything she had known before (45).

The otherness of the baby is felt as an intruder by Harriet, in direct juxtaposition to her other experiences of pregnancy, where instead of sharp movements inside her, "it seemed that doors in [her] breasts flew open, and what poured out was an intensity of relief, of thankfulness, that still astonished them both" (28). Once again, for Harriet, the fluidity of her previous experiences of pregnancy co-exists with the rigid "imperative beat" (45) of her pregnancy with Ben. With her fifth pregnancy Harriet exhibits "a fatalism that seemed so at odds with the rest of her" (29), according to the narrator. Kristeva has described what Lessing calls "fatalism" as "a *reinforced and destabilized* narcissism: the pregnant woman is losing her identity, for, in the wake of the lover-father's intervention, she splits in two, harboring an unknown third person, a shapeless

pre-object" ("Motherhood Today"). Indeed, Harriet describes her baby as a "thing" and an enemy:

> If a dose of some sedative kept the enemy—so she now thought of this savage thing inside her—quiet for an hour, then she made the most of the time, and slept, grabbing sleep to her, holding it, drinking it, before she leaped out of bed as it woke with a heave and a stretch that made her feel sick. She would clean the kitchen, the living-room, the stairs, wash windows, scrub cupboards, her whole body energetically denying the pain (Lessing 51).

Having resorted to asking her doctor for sedatives, Harriet essentially drugs the fetus in order to carry on with her life, thus entering an antagonistic relationship with the child. In an effort to reclaim her body, she resorts to the activities allocated to her gender that seemingly define who she is. The denial she is in stems directly from the clash between cultural expectations and physical experience: mostly everyone, including her husband David, expect her to feel thrilled about this pregnancy, and when she does not, they stop recognizing her. Even her doctor dismisses her concerns: "'Have you ever had a case like this before?' Harriet sounded sharp, peremptory, and the doctor gave her an annoyed look" (49). Lessing here echoes contemporaneous concerns around motherhood. Ann Oakley argues that such "romantic expectations about childbirth" promoted by the cultural "idealization of motherhood" constitute an insufficient narrative that becomes contradicted as soon as the mother-to-be experiences physical and emotional pain, while being constantly under technological and scientific scrutiny (281-84). For Harriet, it is not only her family that critiques her attitude, but the medical representative as well, as she feels constantly "disapproved of—by him" (24). The idealization of motherhood focuses on the outside of a woman's body and its technoscientific outlook, ignoring the internal feelings that a pregnant woman experiences. An inwardness that is untold and unimaginable is described by Harriet, as she goes to the hospital to deliver Ben: "By the time she was there, there were strong wrenching pains, worse, she knew, than ever in the past. The baby seemed to be fighting its way out. She was bruised—she knew it; inside she must be one enormous black bruise […] and no one would ever know" (59). As Susan Maushart observes, women may often feel a split at the realization that what they thought to be a transcendent experience is in fact viscerally painful (73).

Delivery/puerperium

Even in the best-case scenarios, the fears of *Sight's* protagonist are largely substantiated after she gives birth—as are Ruth's and Harriet's. The desire to understand their own body prevails, and so does the decision to not assume what Maushart terms the

socio-cultural "mask of motherhood", that not only prevents women from expressing their true feelings, but is "downright disabling" (xiii). No matter their circumstances, all three mothers of the novels under consideration are ambivalent about their role, with childbirth failing to bring about the expected degree of certainty. No matter their time-frame, the three novels narrativize a new liminal space that motherhood occupies, one that is neither internal nor external to their bodies, especially as they try to navigate their maternal passion which, according to Kristeva, is located in a "cleft between the mother's hold over her child and sublimation" ("Motherhood Today"). What is also crucial in all three authors' descriptions of maternality is the importance of seeing and observing, which complicates Kristeva's dictum that "the pregnant woman 'looks' without 'seeing' the father and the world; she is elsewhere" ("Motherhood Today"). Greengrass' protagonist wonders after giving birth and while her daughter is on vacation with her father, "if this is how it will always be, now, this longing to be elsewhere—the wish when I am with my daughter that I might step apart from her, and when I am apart this anxious echoing, the worry that the world might prove unsound" (133).

Greengrass has her protagonist understand and declare that she can feel love only "in absence" (134), while her own body feels incomplete in relation to classical representations of motherhood, such as Clemente Susini's *Anatomical Venus*: "Beside her it is hard not to feel that it is I who am the imitation, mere flesh in the face of an object made, not just to educate or to instruct, but because science was once a form of worship […] a way to wonder at the fierce complexity of God's work" (Greengrass 135). Imbued with a sense of immaculacy, the wholeness of the constructed maternal body is juxtaposed with the incompleteness of the experienced maternal body, which, following Kristeva, cannot possibly measure against the Virgin Mary as "the mooring point for the humanization […] of love" ("Stabat Mater" 141). Explicitly referencing the religious representations of the maternal body, and introducing science as the new religion, Greengrass here adds to the Kristevan proposition that "Christianity is no doubt the most sophisticated symbolic construct in which femininity […] is confined within the limits of the *Maternal*" ("Stabat Mater" 133-4, emphasis in original). Greengrass develops a parallel narrative according to which the techno-scientific world has similarly provided an inescapable lattice of bodies and body parts with which her protagonist's "own body, with its creaking joints and stretched skin" cannot possibly compete (135). Feeling unrepresentable in her maternal experience, the protagonist in *Sight* is placed outside the scientific and religious discourses, and thus looks to art to make sense of her own identity as a mother. Reading about the Lumière brothers and their first motion picture, where one of the brothers holds his infant daughter over a fishbowl and in front

of the camera as the other brother films, the narrator/protagonist attempts to decode and take part in the maternal: "If I looked hard enough, absorbing into my own body each detail of the way Auguste's hands held his daughter, of her responding smile as she reached down to pat the surface of the water, then I might understand what it would be like to be either of them" (4). As Greengrass' protagonist attempts to read motherhood, she simultaneously strives to understand what being a parent or a daughter feels like, especially since she is grieving for her recently passed mother. The surface of the water and the screen through which the parental can be seen represent the divide between real experience and represented motherhood, while harking back to the amniotic fluid of the womb, situated both within the protagonist as she carries her daughter, as well as defining her on the outside as she struggles to accept the ultimate separation from her mother.

The fragmented maternal body and the fragmented narrative standing in opposition to the supposed wholeness of motherhood showcase the tension between biology and culture (including technology), which for Greengrass is of pivotal importance for her protagonist's maternal experience. The unnamed narrator tries to name everything, lest she is plunged into the Kristevan unnameable, while confessing that no amount of researching and writing can provide a language for the maternal. As she remembers one of the winter breaks at her grandmother's house, she questions the human desire to understand one's body through language:

> How it is to feel that one must note each detail of one's thoughts in case that thing should pass unseen which might otherwise provide the key, laying out the shadows of the bones which rib and arch and hold the whole together. It strikes me as extraordinary, now, that we should be so hidden from ourselves, our bodies and our minds so inaccessible, in such large part so uncharted; but there is a thrill to it, too (Greengrass 107).

One can see Kristeva's conceptualization of motherhood as the impasse between the bodily experience of the maternal and its cultural representations, which almost stand a priori to the physical experience. For Kristeva, the maternal body is an interface, "a thoroughfare, a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture'" ("Giovanni Bellini" 159), particularly at the moment of giving birth. Similarly, psychotherapist Maura Sheehy sees pregnancy and new motherhood as tantamount to the experience of being colonized, both in the sense of having been physically invaded and in the sense of having absorbed the culture's discourse about motherhood and what that is supposed to mean: "Becoming a mother happens simultaneously from without and within, like a hallucination" (100-102). As *Sight's* narrator confesses after giving birth, "through days and weeks to months […] still that joy I had been promised didn't come. I waited, patiently […] for the instant

of my own remaking when at last I would feel the things I ought" (154). Greengrass' protagonist experiences only something complicated and nameless (154), realizing the clash between her experience and cultural representations of maternality, to such an extent that she worries that she might "fail to be an adequate mother; that I will neither recognize nor love my child. […] I am afraid of all that which, unseen, remains unknown: my own insides, the thoughts of others, the future" (Greengrass 190).

A similar structure of maternal ambivalence that directly mirrors the impasse between nature and culture is thrown into relief in *Spleen,* with special emphasis also being placed on what can and cannot be seen. Rationally realizing that she does not belong to what she terms "all women", Ruth declares that the socio-cultural expectation to love a child she had not seen is simply not logical:

> She knew it was not possible to her to love a thing she did not know or had not seen. How can one? Yet I am expected to. All women do. I am a woman. Therefore I do. And if I do not? (And at a movement real or imaginary within her.) When I breathe, it breathes. When I feed, it feeds also. Against my will. Yet when it had finished using her for its own purpose, she must welcome it and say that it was hers and that therefore she loved it (all women do) at once and without question. When it had nothing to do with her from start to finish (21).

Questioning the validity of the biological link between mother and child through scientific observation, Ruth addresses the gap between the "movement real or imaginary within her" and her reality, which is unable to match the maternal experience—what Kristeva calls a FLASH: "atoms swollen beyond measure, atoms of a bond, a vision, a shiver, a still shapeless embryo […] what is not yet visible and which language necessarily surveys from a very high altitude, allusively" ("Stabat Mater" 133-34). Moore anticipates Kristeva, juxtaposing the rigidity of the maternal reality with the plasticity of the growing embryo[4].

The same tension between the plasticity of the new life and the harshness of maternality can be seen in the narrative style of *Spleen*. For example, all through the description of Ruth's labor and the days that followed, the narrative flows, mirroring Ruth's "delight […] at [the baby's] winsome and minute perfection" (48). This section ends abruptly though when Ruth overhears the nurses talking about her baby's disability, and she takes a look at him, properly understanding "the vacant fixity of his infant stare and his utter soundlessness and immobility" (49). Ruth sees her son being caught in amber,

4 It has been argued by Erin Kingsley that in *Spleen* Moore also anticipates argumentation on motherhood made by Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich that mothering is a "fundamental organizational feature of the sex-gender system" that "demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (145).

witnessing, at the same time, the crystallization of her life into something that she has not in reality chosen. After that, in-between two large breaks on the page, we read the more staccato "She was sobered and appalled. It was terrible to her" (49). With the sobering reality of Ruth's son's disability comes sobering diction. Later, upon seeing her baby, the binary between perfection and imperfection, fluidity and crystallization is further deepened as the narrator describes the baby as "beautifully whole and finished; except for his feet. They hung loose and shapeless from the ankle, soft loose pads of waxen flesh" (49). The baby himself is described both as a complete [crystallized] being, and as a being in the making, doomed to be forever unfinished, his body mirroring Ruth's incomplete and ambivalent maternal desire: "She showed little affection for the child, though attentive to it in that she would sit beside it for hours" (65).

An important symbol of maternal ambivalence for Moore is milk. Moore does not describe breastfeeding Richard, but there is a passage in the novel that discusses the social role of maternity, as she notices the tenderness with which Italian mothers treat their children, and the cruelty with which they treat young animals. At the sight and sound of a young goat bleating through the night asking for its mother, who is being kept away so that "an extra cup of milk" would be produced (51), Ruth wonders:

> Why should the cry of the little goat tied with the ridiculously thick rope to the wall of the house in the hollow which she overlooked, weigh on her heart with a sense of injustice and cruelty? […] She could no more explain her attitude than understand theirs [the Italian mothers']. Why they picked up and swung kittens by their hind legs. Or put large birds in small cages (51).

Centering on the false necessity of the cup of milk, which according to the narrator could be procured "with the fraction of a penny" (51), Moore here exposes the falsehood of a universal maternal instinct that would supposedly mean women are caring towards all kinds of offspring. Milk, then, represents the ultimate connection between human mother and child, while becoming the symbol exposing the hypocrisy of the Western world, and the fact that motherhood is nothing but a virtuous construct. Moore seems to understand that the imagery of the "milk and tears [that] are the signs *par excellence* of the *Mater dolorosa*" (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 143), signifying the suffering mother, through whom humanity's suffering is encoded, is an arbitrary image that has very little to do with biology and everything to do with cultural and religious standards. Almost in protest of this doubleness of maternal experience, Ruth avoids forming a pre-verbal connection with her son by feeding him and always gives "it to others to wash and feed" (14). Ruth becomes the exemplary Kristevan *Mater Dolorosa*, especially as she views her own sleeping child as a corpse, regretting that she had no one to "relieve her" of her

life and "of her corpse and its responsibility" (56). Instead of having given life, Ruth feels that she has wasted life, becoming the keeper of her disabled son, and after years of "crying silently", "the tears pouring down her cheeks" (18). Much like the *Mater Dolorosa*, Ruth "knows no male body except that of her dead son, and her only pathos (which is sharply distinguished from the sweet and somewhat absent serenity of the lactating Madonnas) comes from the tears she sheds over a corpse" (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 144). Moore's sharp critique of centuries of uncritical birthing desacralizes the maternal body and leaves Ruth wanting "*something else, something different, something new, something more worth having*" than a child (18, emphasis in original).

This tension between the pre-verbal connection between mother and child through maternal fluids and the harshness of the experience of maternity is also described by Lessing through a shocking scene of Harriet breastfeeding Ben:

> Ben sucked so strongly that he emptied the first breast in less than a minute. Always, when a breast was nearly empty, he ground his gums together, and so she had to snatch him away before he could begin. It looked as if she were unkindly depriving him of the breast, and she heard David's breathing change. Ben roared with rage, fastened like a leech to the other nipple, and sucked so hard she felt that her whole breast was disappearing down his throat. This time, she left him on the nipple until he ground his gums hard together and she cried out, pulling him away (63).

Harriet may feel that she is being devoured by her new-born son, but her family and the medical institution are not particularly sympathetic to her experience: "'Come, Harriet', said Dr Brett, annoyed at her", for having trouble breastfeeding Ben (61). Even Harriet's mother, Dorothy, who has been helping out throughout Harriet and David's multiple births, and implores Harriet to wean Ben off, is unsympathetic to Harriet's difficult maternal experience. "They'll all be coming soon for the summer" (65), she sternly tells Harriet, "all" being David's and Harriet's extended family, whom they host three times a year and which are present even as Harriet is trying to breastfeed, thus making breastfeeding crucial not only for mother and child, but for the family and social circle as well.

The tension between birthing and seeing, or knowing, is also of essence in *The Fifth Child*. Years later, as Ben has descended into aberrant and violent behavior, Harriet still feels that she has not really seen or known him. As a teenage Ben sits with his gang of friends, plotting their next offense, Harriet looks at him, and their eyes meet:

> Did he feel her eyes on him, as a human would? He sometimes looked at her while she looked at him—not often, but it did happen that his eyes meet hers. She would put into her gaze these speculations, these queries, her need, her passion to know more about him—whom, after all, she had given birth to, had carried for eight months, though it had nearly killed her (156).

Acknowledging the complexities of her maternal passion, Harriet *s*peaks of a Kristevan de-biologization of maternality, "*without becoming completely detached from* the biological, yet already the emotions of attachment and aggression are on the way towards sublimation" ("Motherhood Today"). Harriet's desire to know her son is also her desire to possess him, and her ultimate realization that she can do neither leads her towards sublimation.

This maternal passion for knowing her son parallels *Sight's* protagonist's desire for knowledge of her daughters' bodies, and in both cases is displaced onto science:

> But suppose one day someone who was an amateur of the human condition, perhaps an anthropologist of an unusual kind, actually saw Ben, let's say standing on a street with his mates, or in a police court, and admitted the truth. Admitted curiosity … what then? Could Ben, even now, end up sacrificed to science? What would they do with him? Carve him up? Examine those cudgel-like bones of his, those eyes, and find out why his speech was so thick and awkward? (Lessing 158)

It is this partly scientific, partly maternal curiosity that has led Harriet to bring Ben home, after she finds him in an institution, "half dead in a strait-jacket" (157). Interestingly, Harriet fully lets her son be who he is in the very last pages of the novel, when she sees him, or someone like him, on the news during a riot: "When she saw him on television in that crowd, he had worn a jacket with its collar up, and a scarf, and was like a younger brother, perhaps of Derek. He seemed a stout schoolboy. Had he put on those clothes to disguise himself? Did that mean that he knew how he looked? How did he see himself?" (157). Harriet's *dépassionement* takes place through the screen, which works here as reverse amniotic fluid: instead of the protective environment that envelops the embryo and links mother and child, it works as a lens that amplifies the child's fundamental otherness; in its transparency, the screen becomes a divider between mother and child, as opposed to the amniotic fluid that was the shared space between them. Through the screen, Harriet finally sees Ben as an independent, if deeply flawed, individual.

Coda: Other mothers, monstrous children, new textualities

The constant awareness of the maternal body exemplifying the interface between biology and culture that all three mothers under discussion experience changes them, turning them into different bodies that no longer fit under the category of motherhood. After having raised Ben, "the alien, the destroyer" (156), and the rest of her children, and having seen Ben's violent acts unleashed into the world, Lessing's Harriet describes her body as something other than that of a mother, a new physicality that embodies both presence and absence: an "invisible substance had been leached from her; she had

been drained of some ingredient that everyone took for granted, which was like a layer of fat but was not material" (155). For one last time, we see the inescapable Kristevan combination of plasticity and crystallization that is embedded in the maternal body, whose flesh is highly symbolic and whose plasticity works to solidify social connections. In the same vein, *Sight*'s protagonist realizes that being "pulled in two directions" really adds up to maternal love (155), while Moore's Ruth is able to stop reproaching herself and to accept her son's difference within the concrete greyness of her return to London. In any case, the maternal bodies envisioned in each novel embrace their almost monstrous difference, and are narrativized through experimental texts that demonstrate their maternal characters' oscillation between emotion and rationalization, fluidity and rigidity.

Works Cited

Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*. New York, Routledge, 2012.

Arya, Rina, and Nicholas Chare. *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016.

Bourgeois, Louise. *Maman.* 1999, London, Tate Modern.

____. *Topiary IV.* 1999, private collection.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978.

Clark, Emily. "Re-Reading Horror Stories: Maternity, Disability and Narrative in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*." *Feminist Review*, no. 98, 2011, pp. 173–89.

Ferrante, Elena. *The Lost Daughter.* New York, Penguin, 2008.

Franks, Matt. "Mental Inversion, Modernist Aesthetics, and Disability Exceptionalism in Olive Moore's *Spleen*." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2014, pp. 107–27.

Greengrass, Jessie. *Sight*. London, John Murray, 2018.

Hanson, Clare. "The Maternal Body". *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, edited by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 87–100.

Harnett, Emily. "Doris Lessing's 'The Fifth Child' and the Spectre of the Ambivalent Mother". *The New Yorker*, 11 May 2019. *www.newyorker.com*, https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/doris-lessings-the-fifth-child-and-the-spectre-of-the-ambivalent-mother. Accessed August 12, 2022.

Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood.* London, Vintage, 2018.

Kingsley Erin M. '"In the centre of a circle': Olive Moore's *Spleen* and Gestational Immigration". *Feminist Modernist Studies,* vol. 1, no.1-2, 2018, pp. 138-156.

Kristeva, Julia, "Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini," *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, edited by Leon S. Roudiez, translated by Thomas Gora et al. New York, Columbia University Press, 1980, pp. 237-270.

____. *Revolution in Poetic Language,* translated by Margaret Walker. New York, Columbia University Press, 1984.

____. "Stabat Mater", translated by Arthur Goldhammer. *Poetics Today*, vol. 6, no. 1/2, 1985, pp. 133-152.

____. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 1982. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York, Columbia University Press, 2002.

____. "Motherhood Today". October 28, 2005. http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html. Accessed 2 April 2022. Talk.

____. Kristeva, Julia. "Reliance, or Maternal Eroticism." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2014, pp. 69–85,

Lessing, Doris. *The Fifth Child*. Broadway, NY, Harper Perennial, 2007.

Margaroni, Maria. "'The Lost Foundation': Kristeva's Semiotic Chora and Its Ambiguous Legacy." *Hypatia*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2005, pp. 78–98. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810844. Accessed 23 Aug. 2022.

Marland, Hilary. *Dangerous Motherhood: Insanity and Childbirth in Victorian Britain*. New York, Springer, 2004.

Maushart, Susan. *The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Our Lives and Why We Never Talk About It*. London, Penguin, 2000.

Miller, Elaine. *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.

Moore, Olive. *Spleen*. 1939. Dallas, TX., Dalkey Archive Press, 1996.

Nikolchina, Miglena. "Motherhood and the Machine." *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française*, vol. XXI, no 2, 2014, pp 62-69.

Oakley, Ann. *Women Confined: Towards a Sociology of Childbirth*. New York, Schocken Books, 1980.

Rich, Adrienne. O*f Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York, Norton, 1976.

Sheehy, Maura. "Anonymous: Floaters." *With Culture in Mind*, Muriel Dimen edited by Muriel Dimen, New York, Routledge, 2011, 99-106.

Shriver, Lionel. *We Need to Talk about Kevin.* 2003. London, Serpent's Tail, 2010.

Staub, Susan C. *The Literary Mother: Essays on Representations of Maternity and Child Care*. Jefferson, NC, McFarland Publishers, 2007.

Susini, Clemente. *Anatomical Venus.* C. 1770-1790, Florence, La Specola.

Yoder, Rachel. *Nightbitch.* London, Random House, 2021.