

Exploring the Unexplored and the Unexplorable in Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 2009)

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In this book I seek to articulate the potential within maternity for new experiences, sensations, moods, sensibilities, intensities, kinetics, tinglings, janglings, emotions, thoughts, perceptions; new coagulations of embodied and relational modes. I try to pay attention to the ways that motherhood may allow the generation of new 'raw materials' for experiencing ourselves, others and our worlds. [...]. I take as my starting point some rather mundane and usually overlooked moments of maternal experience that appear to trip us up, or throw us 'off the subject'. It is to moments of undoing, I argue, that we need to apply ourselves theoretically, if we are to try to glimpse something we may term maternal subjectivity (p. 3).

1 There are currently two main trends in circulation in the field of motherhood studies. Badinter (*La femme, le conflit et la mère*, 2010) and Douglas and Michaels (*The Mommy Myth*, 2004) characterise the first approach which considers the idealisation of mothering and its impossible standards of perfection, as, perhaps more than ever before, deeply injurious to the subjectivity of the mother. Both speak of a reversal or an involution in contemporary culture with regard to mothering, that is, a return to the traditional stereotype of the all-sacrificing mater dolorosa who lives through the child and for the child but never for herself. In contrast to this rather bleak picture of what mothering today entails stands Baraitser's account of mothering published in 2009 under the title *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*. Baraitser's text, while it no way overlooks the difficulties and frustrations suffered by mothers, offers a more positive examination of mothering and endeavours to articulate the potential within maternity for new and generative experiences as opposed to positing the experience of becoming a mother as the inevitable annihilation of the self. Of her own motivation for writing the book, Baraitser explains that she wished to create a space where maternal subjectivity could emerge in its own right through the exploration of a range of mothering experiences

[...] characterised by [...] physical viscosity, heightened sentience, a renewed awareness of objects, of one's own emotional range and emotional points of weakness, an engagement with the built environment and street furniture, a renewed temporal awareness where the present is elongated and the past and the future no longer felt to be so tangible, and a renewed sense of oneself as a speaking subject (p. 4).

2 Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Baraitser's text is its distinct structure, an unusual intertwining of personal anecdote and theoretical analyses that present the reader with a very real account of mothering but one which is still framed by an identifiable structure. Baraitser states

Anecdotal theory seemed like the right kind of vehicle with which to elevate the mundane details of a mother's daily life to the status of 'material' that could then be available for reflection, analysis, even 'research'. [...]. My hope was that an anecdotal approach to maternity would make visible a range of sensations, intensities, experiences, sensibilities, thoughts, emotions, moods, encounters, culminating in a new collection of 'raw materials' with which to think about maternal subjectivity [...]. (p. 152).

In adopting such an approach, Baraitser thus valorises the everyday experiences of mothers by inscribing them within academic discourse but allowing neither to enjoy privilege over the other. Although Baraitser may feel that this, at times, creates a sense of tension in her writing, in that she seems to be moving in two opposite directions (Ibid), such a contradictory pull is, in itself, characteristic of the experience of mothering. Indeed, the mother figure at the heart of *Maternal Encounters* is at once she who interrupts and she who is interrupted, she who is divided between being for oneself and being for another. To "create a semblance of coherence out of the self that is fragmented [...] due to the inherent ambivalence of the maternal" (p. 15) is not the goal of Baraitser's text.

3 The seeming disjointedness of the text's two-fold narrative, however, should not distract the reader from the fact that Baraitser has a series of clear aims that she establishes from the outset. First and foremost, Baraitser is keen to debunk the various myths associated with the mother: for example, the mother as abject; the mother and narcissism; the conflation of the maternal and the feminine; and, the unity/fluidity dialectic relating respectively to the self before motherhood and the self as mother. Nor does she shy away from questioning the work of established feminist theorists such as Irigaray and Kristeva. Baraitser declares that the tendency for abjection to cling to the maternal subsequently leads to the characterisation of the mother as dangerously "unthematizable, unrepresentable and unrecoverable" (pp. 6-7). In order to counteract a discourse so mired in "loss, murder and melancholia", Baraitser writes, we must approach maternal subjectivity from a position that engages with the unexpected and the excessive and acknowledges their generative rather than their destructive power (Ibid). With regard to the myth of motherhood and narcissism, Baraitser is quick to draw a distinction between maternal desire (as something that relates to a third term, such as desire for the phallus

or for one's own mother) and maternal love (in terms of emotions that emerge in direct response to the child). Configuring the mother as solely desirous hinders our ability to articulate maternal love as something stemming from the encounter between the mother and the child (p. 96). Similarly, conflating the maternal with the feminine (as is the stance of differentialist feminism) prevents the formulation of a specifically maternal subjectivity and leaves the mother's particular concerns and paradoxes hopelessly unarticulated. Maternity and femininity must be uncoupled to allow us to move

[...] beyond a conception of maternity as the embodied potentiality to become two, towards an account that can include the staggering complexity of what happens for a mother after 'birth': what arises for mothers during the day-to-day, ongoing and relentless experience of mothering, whether that is with their birth, adopted, fostered, community, surrogate or 'other' children (p. 10).

Finally, Baraitser takes on the myth of the unity/fluidity dialectic which, in the same way that phallogocentric binarism elevates the masculine as the unified subject and relegates the feminine to the inferior position of 'other', sets up the self before motherhood as a fictional unitary and coherent self whose loss is to be mourned while the maternal becomes the messy excess (p. 50). For Baraitser, it is important to free the maternal from its entrenchment in the unity/fluidity dialectic that serves only to devalue it, and consider it otherwise, from the point of view of the materiality of motherhood (p. 65).

4 In her bid to examine what it is like to "stay alongside a child" (p. 11), "to live in proximity with this irregular and mysterious other" (Ibid), to exist in the world with 'this extra, unpredictable limb' (p. 153), Baraitser inevitably moves into an exploration of the realms of maternal space and time. Building on Kristeva's (1981) concept of women's time as cyclical in opposition to the teleological structure of male time, maternal time, according to Baraitser is embedded in the present and predominantly characterised by recurring interruptions and moments of undoing (p. 75). These constant disturbances, however, while they may indeed be "depleting, exhausting, disabling" (Ibid), also have the "potential to be an enlivening and productive encounter, one that forces a mother to access a kind of thinking and feeling outside of her usual repertoire" (Ibid). With regard to space, becoming a mother entails a whole new relationship with one's environment, "a new set of actions, movements and manipulations" (p. 127) on the part of the mother as she tries to navigate the landscape afresh, accompanied by the

child and burdened with the various accoutrements of mothering, ‘maternal stuff’. Women find themselves mothering across “a vast array of different physical and geographical locations” and the challenges that this brings, or, more specifically, “the ergonomics of motherhood”, have not as yet, according to Baraitser, been given sufficient attention (Ibid).

5 To conclude, *Maternal Encounters* delivers what the title promises, in that it brings us into contact not only with the world of mothering theory but, also, the everyday lived experience of being with a child. Certainly, the text does not answer all our questions, for example, it steers away from darker forms of mothering such as depression, violence and infanticide, and does not differentiate between the experience of being a mother to a son and a mother to a daughter, but Baraitser is aware of this herself, hence the title of her own conclusion, ‘Intentions, Inconsistencies and Inconclusions’. What she does manage to convey however, is something of the specificity of the maternal position from a new and refreshing perspective.

Works Cited

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