AFTERWORD:

MUSING ON GENDER, THE MATERNAL, VIOLENCE AND THE WORLD

Juliet Mitchell

Abstract: The following short afterword is an associative musing around the question of the place of hating and violence in the gendering of the artist and analyst.

While several men in the audience commented on the erotic nature of the object and its affects, women complimented me on my dressmaking skills.

Sharon Kivland (p. 23)

I was unable to attend the conference, so this short ‘afterword’ addresses in a musing, associative style, the printed texts of the talks given there, which underpin the articles published in this special edition.

It was on reading Ken Wright’s ‘Maternal form in artistic creation’ that the gender question first raised its head on a personal level for me. In Sharon Kivland’s essay it is explicit – a major theme of her project, not of my personal, idiosyncratic musing. The gender question was put centre-table by Grayson Perry’s gender prominence and his text’s first image. In Patricia Townsend’s overall framework it was evident that the artist and/or the artwork as ‘mother’ was available to both genders. I had first read these essays in the wrong order and without appreciating that they were designed as conversations between three pairs – each pair, a psychoanalyst and a creative artist. ‘It so happens’ that each were a heterosexual pair.

The stumbling-block that made ‘gender’ a personal issue for me came with what an ‘echo’ meant for Ken as he quotes Seamus Heaney’s account of making a poem: ‘It is like an
echo coming back to you…’. I stuck on this at a first reading of Ken’s understanding of Heaney and hearing an echo, but I proceeded leaving this small obstacle aside as I went on to be most interested and appreciative of the remainder – which was almost the entire article. After re-reading two or three others, I went back to Ken’s essay and once more got stuck on ‘echoes’. Ken writes:

Imagine you are in the mountains and calling out to someone – you hear your voice, but only in a background way because the sound of your voice is overshadowed by your subjective intention; you are thinking about the message, not the shouting. If your voice then hits a reflective surface, it bounces back, and after an interval you hear it again as an echo. It is still your voice that you hear, but contact with the reflecting surface has altered the sound you receive back; it has subtly changed in timbre and pitch, and your relation to your ‘voice’ has also changed. You might say: ‘Is that really me? I didn’t know I sounded like that!’ In short, through being reflected, your voice has become an external image, and through it you experience this aspect of yourself in a more detached and objective way.

Although Ken’s account is absolutely accurate, it would never have occurred to me to think that that is what happens with an echo. To me what Ken describes suggests the always disconcerting experience of a sound recording of one’s voice. Whereas, imaginatively, even iconically, fantastically, an echo belongs to itself. My personal image is of going as a child with friends (or alone), under a railway bridge (or anywhere else suitable) where an echo yearningly and hopefully might be found (or re-found) and heard for herself. We shouted and called for it to call out from its imagined hiding place to us. The character of Echo is different from the reflection of Narcissus in the water; she is herself a character, a will-o-the-wisp, a lovelorn nymph doomed to die as the child grows older and no longer calls for her. I think Ken is an adult walking or climbing with a friend whom he needs to contact and instead gets the reverberation of his own voice. For an adult, Echo is not an imagined, unknown someone else. As I puzzled over this, I wondered if the difference in our experience of echoes was gendered.

I went back initially not to Sharon or Grayson, but to Patricia to think about the question. Later, I discovered Sharon and Ken were paired and that ‘Maternal form’ in some way therefore
addresses Sharon’s ‘Day dreaming’. Ken prefaces his text with Lucien Freud’s disappointed Pygmalion fantasy – Lucien’s painting does not actually come alive (although it is clear from their representations that his sitters most certainly/disconcertingly are). I re-read Sharon and found not only of course her project but also her audience’s sex-typed reaction to her work: ‘erotic’ versus ‘dress-making’. Sharon by presenting her own beautiful talk/article as itself the making of an art-work (initially seven days in the making), has given me permission to think of this ‘afterword’, in its brief and minor way, as a musing, rather than as an analytical process. I want to play with the ideas of gender, maternal violence and the world.

Patricia’s text is extremely thought-provoking. As she acknowledges, her framework of ‘genesis, development and separation’ sounds almost too obvious, but it is in fact highly innovative and has creatively moved forward my own thinking in a very different field. However, I want to start with a musing that runs counter to the tenor of her proposal although one that I think could be incorporated within it. Against (or in addition to) her nuanced comparison of an art work to the baby in Winnicott’s statement that ‘There is no such thing as a baby…’, we might also recall that Winnicott notoriously claimed (against Kleinian thinking) that ‘one thing I know is that the mother hates the baby before the baby hates the mother…’. If this is right, then the baby will receive not only caring, containing spaces and J-B Laplanche’s concept of enigmatic sexual messages from its carers. The mother must be not only a protection but a dangerous object, an integral part of the dangerous environment. Abusive, murderous mothers are on a continuum with that ideal fiction of ‘good enough’ mothers.

Ken postulates that artists may have in common not-good-enough parenting. Grayson is explicit about dealing with that in image and text: ‘I knew I wasn’t like one of these middle class people whose parents were covertly horrible to them. I was from a working class background, and I knew full well that my parents were horrible’. This surely makes it clear that the specific is just an instance of the general as Valerie Sinason’s text so powerfully suggests? Mothers, all mothers, can be dreadful, dangerous.

Valerie’s theme is the possible transformation of horror in its many manifestations as the shared terrain of art and therapy. She opens by suggesting that the audience’s laughter indicated that Grayson’s humour transformed the anger and pain of his words and work. Violence creeps loudly into other texts: Sharon’s favourite ‘Allure’ scent bottles make silk encrusted Molotov cocktails, Grayson’s ashtray maybe indicates that he wishes to kill his smoker mother, and the
audience laughs at what is perhaps Martin Creed’s playful aggression towards his current
talkative analyst, while memorializing her more silent dead predecessor who had given him the
transformative thought that, as for an analyst, so for anyone: to stay silent is not to lie. Martin
will hand on to someone else what is bad in his situation or in himself. Drawing on Joyce
McDougall’s use of Klein, Lesley Caldwell develops the role of the baby’s violence inherent in
the art process. But the centre-point of the violence in these papers, for me, is Valerie’s startling
introduction of a patient:

So just to give you a moment of a profoundly multiply disabled woman abandoned at
birth, blind in one eye from eye poking, collapsed bowel from anal poking following God
knows how many years of abuse, dumped on a doorstep at one year old and paralysed
from the waist down, coming for a therapy assessment because her staff can’t bear the
fact that although she can’t speak she screams and screams, and every night they put her
to bed in clean sheets that are covered with shit and blood in the morning. I am
deliberately bringing this image because in a way all art is a transformation of earliest
effluents, orifices, we go back to the beginning of everything. And the lift doors opened
and out came what felt like a monster, in that she was wanting to reflect the monstrous
image of herself that she’d imbibed from all her care homes and abusers and everything.
In that whilst her fingers covered her face so I could only see one good eye, her breasts
were exposed, she had a little tunic on that only half covered her vagina, smell of urine
and faeces, thin legs because she wouldn’t do her physiotherapy, and behind her a care
assistant holding her tights in a non-verbal example to say ‘I did bring her out dressed,
she’s chosen to do this.’

Valerie’s shocked reaction and her brilliant interpretation of herself and her patient was
obviously transformative in the therapy. But what of this raw violence that while transformed in
therapy maybe cannot be transformed in the same way in art but instead returns, as though
unprocessed, in another place? Is it always latent behind the transformation in art? If so, where
does it go in therapy? Is there a connection with gender?

All three psychotherapists and Sharon refer to, or centrally deploy, the work of Winnicott
– but not the Winnicottian mother who hates, the mother of violence. The female mother has
usually given birth - the clean sheets covered in shit and blood. We have all been born usually accompanied by urine and faeces. Karl Abraham argued the mother had a pre-ambivalent phase in her feelings for her baby; for Freud this was ‘maybe’ the case but if so, only for boys. For Freud/Lacan, the mother wants the phallus and so too for the world in general. Do Amartya Sen’s hundred million missing women of India play out into the historical and contemporary prevalence of infanticide – so vastly greater for girl neonates? Does the baby receive this violence as a central part of the enigmatic message from the mother? As a more at-risk sex, are psychically bisexual baby girls more frightened of the hating mother than bisexual baby boys? Does the artist have to find in ‘himself’ the fear inherent in the girl’s heritage? And in ‘himself’ too, must he discover the murderousness of the mother?

I have written this as a loosely floating stream of consciousness … how did I get from wondering if the Echo of my childhood (and of Ken’s different adulthood) was a gendered reaction to arrive at this point of worrying about infantile fear and maternal hate? For me, Echo is a girl in love with Narcissus – a hopeless situation. Was I re-finding my lovelorn self completely as another girl in the crevasses of the railway bridge? Echo dies because the child loses interest. Is there death, romanticized as melancholia, here? The Leaden Echo and The Golden Echo. For Ken there will always be an echo – it is his own voice given back to him from elsewhere, replenishing, as he says, his core self. There could almost be a pun on the feminine mythological and the masculine scientific readings. The artist can, and the analyst must, inhabit both places.

Echo links loosely and associatively to my earlier question to Patricia – what of the mother as part of the frightening environment? But also, what of the mother who, in most of the world and most of history, is/was realistically frightened of dying-in-giving-birth; in being prepared to offer new lamps for old? Are all women, whatever their particular destiny, somewhere also birth-producing mothers? Freud’s essay on ‘The Three Caskets’ makes women the threefold bearers of death. Do men, differently, as artists/analysts need to be giving birth to the baby all small children imagine they can produce? Is the art-work more the created ‘other’, formed within and pushed out from themselves? For this birthing and procreativity, they would want the echo to enhance them, yet it is a strenuous undertaking. These seem uneasily familiar, conservative gender ponderings but nevertheless to be a thin thread through these papers.
I want to use Lesley and Martin to yank myself back from melancholic echoes. Lesley makes an important *sortie* into the role of the Institution and to thinking of artists as themselves forming a family. Although here, I would want to balance or probably replace this family with the artists’ embedment, however solitary they may be, within the social group. In turn, this roots down (or its roots force themselves up into shoots) into my own obsession with the lateral as different from the lineal; the group from family relations, and the baby seeing the world as well as those close-up parents. Although they intermingle inside us all the time, the social and psychic structures of the group are very different from those of the family. Often deeply gendered, this gendering nevertheless may not be structurally intrinsic to the group as it is with the family.

The perceptive attention of the baby will develop forward into the perceptive attention of the artist, analyst or ordinary human being – but to create there must be a hard-won backward move as well. This is not the flowery-path ‘reminiscence’ of the hysteric, but the labour of the artist/analysand/analyst. Regression, which is too often forgotten in the rush for the ‘hear and now’, must be put at the service of the work of art. This means going back into those first few months of neonatic ‘madness’, the beginnings of the agony and the ecstasy.

The baby will receive and identify with the world (a theme that Patricia develops, using Christopher Bollas). The small child will start to represent it in language, drawings, play…but however wonderful and enjoyable for an audience, these children are not creating works of art. Why not? Wilfred Bion in *Second Thoughts*, battling with the absence of a model for a psychoanalysis of psychosis, claimed that there was available the ‘intuition’ of the psychotic patient. ‘Intuition’, unsurprisingly, comes up in these essays. If we take it as signifying what Nina Coltart used to describe as ‘accumulated experience which you didn’t know you had’, then the child quite simply has not accumulated enough. The adult artist consciously uses her own unconscious regression and in going to time-past takes with her not only time-present but all the moss that has been gathered in the backwards and forwards transit. She takes Sharon’s very gender-distinct audience of dress-making or eroticism or her transsexualism with her to the bisexual infant inside her who is receiving the message from the primary classification of human beings: ‘It’s a girl; it’s a boy’. The message is enigmatic because it is filtered through the world’s desires – loving and hating. But it is also not all that enigmatic.

Lesley notes the family in which the artist is embedded. Certainly the mother, father, sister and brother will have their desires for the baby. Until around age five, a sibling will want
the new baby to be of the same sex, and after that, of the other sex. In the social group there can be a freedom to play underneath or outside the gender net. Such a play of positions will not, with impunity, take place in the family but rather with peers, friends and foe, those fellow trainee artists or analytic candidates at the Slade or Institutes of Psychoanalysis. When these relationships are established, the family, as well as staying all-important, also becomes only a part of the more general supportive and dangerous environment from which it emerged in the first place. This is the world. All the artists take me there. Martin Creed in particular, seems to deliberate in this extra-family, world-space. Human organization to be human establishes the gender categories, but the world does not.

This is a wonderful collection of conversations and reflections.