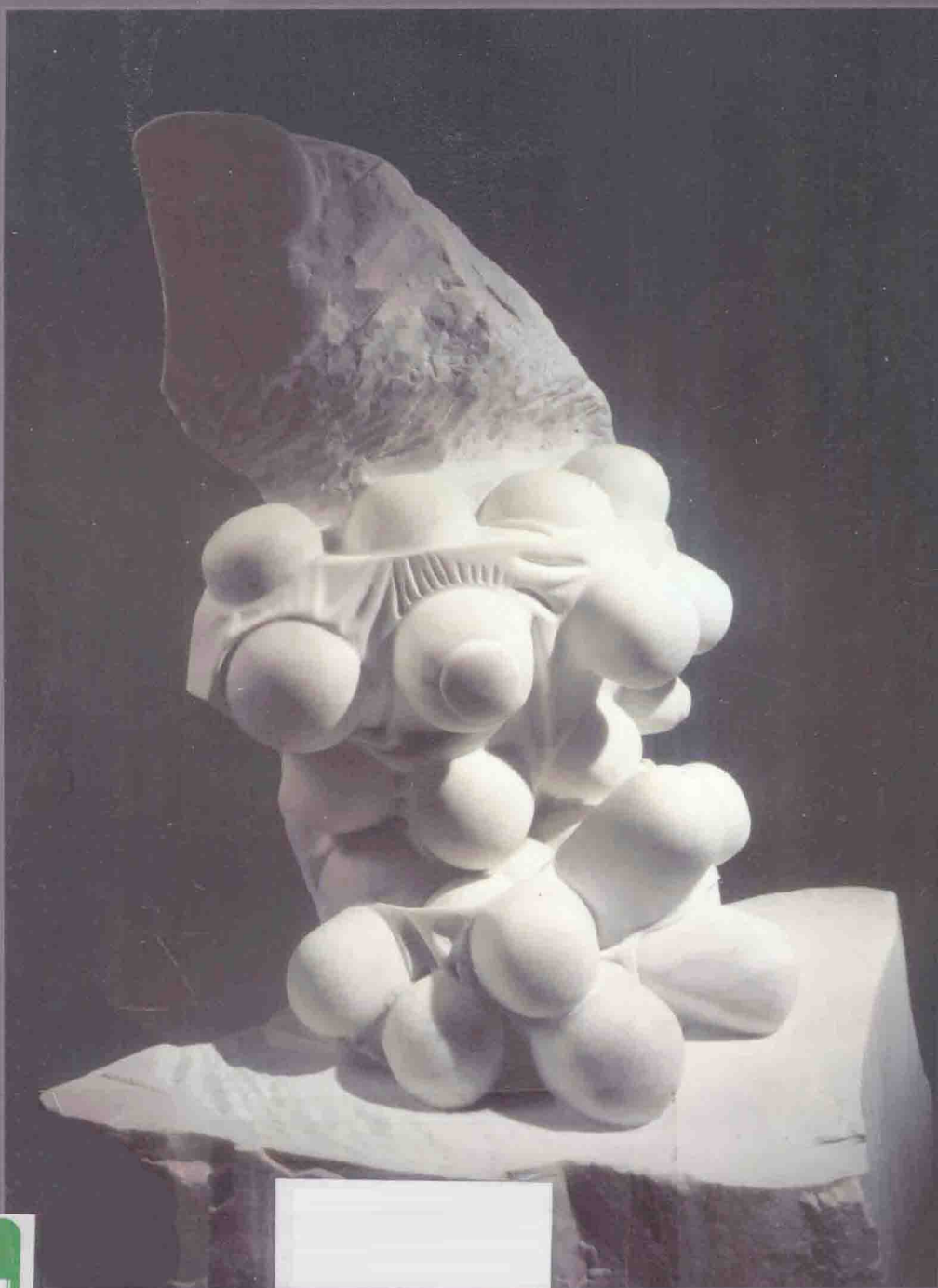


# The Theorist's Mother



Andrew Parker

ANDREW PARKER

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*Duke University Press Durham and London 2012*



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Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper ©  
Designed by C. H. Westmoreland  
Typeset in Charis by Tseng Information  
Systems, Inc.  
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-  
Publication Data appear on the last  
printed page of this book.

Duke University Press gratefully  
acknowledges the Amherst College  
Language and Literature Fund for  
assistance in the production of this book.

Cover art for the paperback book  
© Louise Bourgeois Trust/Licensed by  
VAGA, New York, N.Y. Louise Bourgeois  
Blind Man's Buff, 1984; Marble 36½ ×  
35 × 25 in.; 92.7 × 88.9 × 63.5 cm  
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*In memory of*  
*Selma Blossom Cohen Parker*  
*1926–1991*  
*plus qu'une mère*

A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships.

—SIGMUND FREUD, “Femininity”

The writer is someone who plays with his mother’s body . . . in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it, to take it to the limit of what can be known about the body.

—ROLAND BARTHES, *The Pleasure of the Text*

*Algernon*: All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his.

—OSCAR WILDE, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

“Why on earth should I feel called upon to write a book?” Ulrich objected. “I was born of my mother, after all, not an inkwell.”

—ROBERT MUSIL, *The Man without Qualities*

Don’t forget that it’s almost as stupid to say of a book that “It’s very intelligent” as to say “He was very fond of his mother.” But that first proposition still needs proving.

—MARCEL PROUST, *Contre Saint-Beuve*

*Wystan*: I am *not* your father, I’m *your* mother.

*Chester*: You’re *not* my mother! I’m *your* mother!

—RICHARD DAVENPORT-HINES, *Auden*

*Salomé*: He says terrible things about my mother, does he not!

*2nd Soldier*: We never understand what he says, Princess.

—OSCAR WILDE, *Salomé*

The sense I give to the name mother must be explained, and that is what will be done hereafter.

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *Émile*

## Preface and Acknowledgments

Here there is a kind of question, let us call it historical,  
whose conception, formation, gestation and labor we are only  
catching a glimpse of today.

—JACQUES DERRIDA, *Writing and Difference*

Every theorist is the child of a mother, but few have acknowledged this fact as *theoretically* significant. And why should they? Mothers, after all, may have helped to bring the philosopher into existence but not his or her philosophy. Mothers give birth and raise children but theorists think—a division of labor as old as the division of labor. That mothers work to make it possible for their philosopher-children to think never seems to affect what philosophers think, even if the language of philosophy leans heavily on maternity's imagery. We speak regularly of the birth of tragedy, say, or of the clinic, despite knowing that tragedies and clinics are neither born nor give birth. Indeed, our conception of generation "is so instinctive to us that the etymology of 'concept' goes largely unremarked."<sup>1</sup> We tell ourselves meanwhile that mothers, like the poor, are much too busy for theory.<sup>2</sup> Though both mothers and philosophers are educators, mothers do their work at home and not in public, teach by example rather than by argument, and are never made to stand for examinations or fulfill competency requirements of the sort that, since the nineteenth century, have made philosophy an academic profession. While women may now be philosophers, mothers qua mothers may not. And yet we theorists persist in describing our books as our children, perhaps the only time we do not derogate procreation as inferior to thought: "For anyone who looked at Homer and Hesiod and all the other great poets would envy them because of the kind of offspring they left behind them," says Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. "They would rather be the parent of children like these, who have conferred on their progenitors immortal glory and fame, than of ordinary human children."<sup>3</sup>

Although in many ways Plato still defines how we think about thinking *and* mothers, the relationship between these terms has grown especially vexed during the past one hundred and fifty-odd

years. Some of this turmoil is recent, stemming from the uncertain implications for philosophy of the proliferation of “assisted reproduction” technologies and the new family forms these technologies have helped create. But mother trouble is already legible in the theoretical traditions associated with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud—Michel Foucault’s twin “founders of discursivity”—given that these traditions uniquely pose the question of their own reproduction as an element of their theorization.<sup>4</sup> When, for example, Jacques Lacan pillories the psychoanalytic establishment for the inorganic way that it trains its future practitioners, he has recourse to an idiom that implicates as well the afterlife of his own thought: “In order to be passed on—and not having at its disposal the law of blood that implies generation or the law of adoption that presupposes marriage—it has at its disposal only the pathway of imaginary reproduction which, through a form of facsimile analogous to printing, allows it to print, as it were, a certain number of copies whereby the one [*l’unique*] becomes plural.”<sup>5</sup> But can Marxism and psychoanalysis ever count on their reproduction when the one excludes mothers from its purview and the other has eyes mainly for fathers? Do we know, already with Marx and Freud as well as after them, who or what a mother may be? Where *do* theorists come from?

All subsequent theory—including feminist and queer varieties indebted (or not) to Marx and Freud—has had to grapple with these questions, and this book explores some of their disconcerting consequences. Maternal predicaments occupy center stage in three different ways in the book’s central chapters, where the mother (dis-)appears in turn as an inassimilable body, a constitutive absence, and a foreign native tongue. Since I call philosophers to task for failing to consider their own mothers’ pertinence for thinking, chapter 1—a rereading of “the body” in Lacanian teaching—includes reflection on my mother’s form of psychosomatic pedagogy. In pondering the mother’s near-total elision from Marxist thought, chapter 2 discerns in György Lukács’s reading of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* a characteristic injunction to read fiction as history’s parthenogenic child. Where the first two chapters treat Marxism and psychoanalysis separately, chapter 3 brings them together to consider what specifically in these traditions the mother can and cannot translate. At their con-

clusions all three chapters pass through the membrane that traditionally divides Writing from Life, as relations between particular mothers and sons (my own, Lukács's, and Vladimir Medem's) enact in a different register the argument that precedes them. The book's introduction and coda explore more general questions concerning the mother's troubling identity—more troubling now than ever, perhaps, when even “her” gender may defy prediction.

Truth be told, *The Theorist's Mother* is an accidental book, but no less beloved by me for that. Other books may begin at the beginning, but this one came together belatedly with the surprising discovery that I had already been writing about mothers—for years and years, in fact. Have I ever written about anything else? Why, indeed, was I the last to know? Perhaps, in structural terms, I am hardly the one to answer these questions. In any case, Julia Kristeva's description of maternity seems an apt characterization of this book's peculiar gestation—as well as of the nature of writing more generally: “‘It happens, but I'm not there.’ ‘I cannot realize it, but it goes on.’ Motherhood's impossible syllogism.”<sup>6</sup> Maternity and writing will share many such traits in the chapters that follow.

A second surprise is that these pages turned out in some sense to be “about” Jacques Derrida even though his work never occupies center stage for very long. Though I anticipated devoting a concluding chapter to Derrida's abiding interest in maternity as an unmasterable question for philosophy, it soon seemed clear to me that to do full justice to this material—from *Of Grammatology* and “Khora” to *Glas* and “Circumfession”—would require a book of its own. Given that the impact of Derrida's thinking is nonetheless apparent throughout this project, I sensed that a culminating chapter on his work could also leave the impression that, here at last, is the maternal truth that eluded all of his theorist predecessors. Nothing could be further from the deconstructive point this book wants to make about maternity and teleology, or, indeed, about maternity as teleology: that the mother's identity has never been undivided, that our inability to recognize a mother when we think we see one began well before the modern advent of technologically assisted conception. We will discover in what follows that this point, moreover, is not simply Derrida's. The revital-



ized field of kinship studies, in grappling not only with the global impact of new reproductive technologies but also with sociosexual challenges to the definition of the family, will similarly conclude that there is always more than one mother. If Derrida retains some privilege here, it is in the hope that the terms he provides may help renew discussion within and between the fields of philosophy, ethnography, literary and media studies, linguistics, and feminist and queer studies—in short, in whatever remains today of Theory.

This book was inspired in a different way by the world-renowned artist Louise Bourgeois, whose *Blind Man's Buff* (1984) appears on the cover of the paperback. I read this highly tactile marble sculpture with its impossibly numerous breastlike protuberances mounted on a headless, phallic torso as a wry if unsettling take on what theorists want from their mothers. Bourgeois died in 2010 at the age of ninety-nine. Much of this book was written in the Manhattan neighborhood I “shared” with her (along with several hundred thousand others), and I am sorry not to have been able to make her a gift of it. Less tintured by the Lacanian imaginary were the recent deaths of a number of other muses—friends and interlocutors I knew in different circumstances and at different moments of our sundry lives. I can recognize some of the places where Sean Holland, Barbara Johnson, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Greta Slobin, and David Foster Wallace each left traces in the writing; perhaps others will emerge with the passage of time.

I have many happy debts to acknowledge as well. Françoise Meltzer and Stephen Melville may be reminded of conversations we had together in Chicago in the early 1980s. Colleagues and friends at Amherst College and in the Pioneer Valley—Michèle Barale, Anston Bosman, Greg Call, Jack Cameron, Jay Caplan, Jennifer Cayer, Cathy Ciepiela, Rhonda Cobham-Sander, John Drabinski, Tom Dumm, Judy Frank, Liz Garland, Deborah Gewertz, Heidi Gilpin, Margaret Groesbeck, Daniel Hall, Amelie Hastie, Nat Herold, Leah Hewitt, Marie-Hélène Huet, Nasser Hussain, Kannan Jagannathan, Michael Kasper, Sura Levine, Marisa Parham, Dale Peterson, Dennis Porter, Catherine Portugese, Ronald Rosbottom, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Austin Sarat, Robert Schwarzwald, Adam Sitze, Kim Townsend, and Martha Merrill Umphrey—have fed my mind and stomach since 1982. My col-

leagues at Rutgers the past two years made me feel instantly at home; my thanks to Myriam Alami, Carole Allamand, César Braga-Pinto, Mathilde Bombart, François Cornilliat, Elin Diamond, Josephine Diamond, Uri Eisenzweig, Ann Fabian, Lynn Festa, Jerry Flieger, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Billy Galperin, Doug Greenberg, Myra Jehlen, John Kucich, Renée Larrier, Jorge Marcone, Susan Martin-Márquez, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Michael McKeon, Richard Miller, Anna Pairet, Lorraine Piroux, Barry Qualls, Stéphane Robolin, Diane Sadoff, Evie Shockley, Derek Schilling, Richard Serrano, Mary Shaw, Jonah Siegel, Ben Sifuentes, Mary Speer, Jimmy Swenson, Henry Turner, Janet Walker, Steve Walker, Rebecca Walkowitz, Cheryl Wall, Alan Williams, and Carolyn Williams.

Jane Gallop, Marge Garber, and Bill Germano have kept me returning annually to the English Institute even when I no longer needed to. I am long beholden to Jonathan Arac, Ian Balfour, Geoff Bennington, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Eduardo Cadava, Cathy Caruth, Cynthia Chase, Jonathan Culler, Penelope Deutscher, Shoshana Felman, Diana Fuss, Barbara Guetti, Michael Lucey, John Mowitt, Tim Murray, Yopie Prins, Bruce Robbins, Avital Ronell, and Gayatri Spivak for allowing me to feel like a fellow traveler. The cast and crew of the Leverett-Montague Players—among them Emily Apter, Lee Edelman, Jonathan Goldberg, Jay Grossman, Janet Halley, Lisa Henderson, Ann R. Jones, Joseph Litvak, Jeffrey Masten, Michael Moon, Hal Sedgwick, Peter Stallybrass, Tony Vidler, Daniel Warner, and Elizabeth Wingrove—have sworn that what happens onstage stays onstage, for which I am hugely grateful. Sean Belman, Brent Edwards, Yvette Christiansë, Mikhal Dekel, Stephen Engelmann, Lisa Gitelman, Stathis Gourgouris, Martin Harries, Virginia Jackson, Suvir Kaul, Ania Loomba, Tina Lupton, Daphne and Robert McGill, Sophia Mihic, Rosalind Morris, Neni Panourgia, Leslie Parker, Sarah Schulman, Michael Warner, and Nancy Yousef never once told me that they had heard enough already about mothers. Mary Russo argued with me every step of the way. I read the manuscript of Elissa Marder's *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* too late to profit from its stunning insights; I look forward to years of sharing the microphone with Marder on conference panels and daytime talk shows. I am delighted to have worked once again with the editors and staff of

xvi Preface and Acknowledgments

Duke University Press—my special thanks to Ken Wissoker, Courtney Berger, and Leigh Barnwell, and to an anonymous reviewer of the manuscript. The index was prepared with the assistance of J. Naomi Linzer Indexing Services. A portion of chapter 1 appeared in *The Oxford Literary Review* 8, nos. 1–2 (1985), 96–104. Meredith McGill made this book necessary, as Yogi Berra would have said, and she is even happier than I am to see it in print. The book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, who taught me first about the limits of the possessive.

Jersey City, May 2011

# Contents

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS XI

INTRODUCTION: Philosophy's Mother Trouble 1

1. Mom, *Encore*: Rereading, Teaching, and  
"Maternal Divination" 29

Beware the Crocodile! 29

"Mom" 34

Lacan's Two Bodies 40

Do Not Read 45

"Maternal Divination" 54

2. History, Fiction, and "The Author of *Waverley*";  
or, Fathers and Sons in Marxist Criticism 57

Family Romances 57

The Prehistory of the Present 59

The History of the Father 68

Fictions: Of Paternity 74

"The Author of *Waverley*" 80

3. Translating Revolution: Freud, Marx, and  
the *Mameloshn* 88

The Mother of Language 88

The Translator's Hand(s) 91

Philosophies of Translation 95

Forgetting the Mother Tongue 99

The *Mameloshn* 103

CODA: Other Maternities 111

NOTES 117

BIBLIOGRAPHY 149

INDEX 173

## Introduction

### Philosophy's Mother Trouble

. . . what is neither subject, nor object, nor figure, and which one can, provisionally and simplistically, call "the mother."

—PHILIPPE LACOE-LABARTHE AND JEAN-LUC NANCY,  
*Retreating the Political*

#### 1.

*The Theorist's Mother* proposes that what unifies the otherwise disparate traditions of critical theory and philosophy from Karl Marx to Jacques Derrida is their troubled relation to maternity. This is a very large claim, to be sure, and perhaps also an obvious one: has anyone ever been spared a troubled relation to maternity? Even so, "mother trouble" has not typically been recognized as a defining feature of Theory (in its familiarly capacious sense) beyond the forms of its inherence in the work of particular theorists. The mother is seldom included among the customary topoi of philosophy, even as philosophers rely heavily in their discourse on the tropes of maternity. As a synonym for "beginning," the word *birth* appears in every conceivable context in the official histories of Western thought—except for parturition. Marx is in one respect an arbitrary origin for this project, given that he was hardly the first (nor will he be the last) to wish to do entirely without the mother. However much Sigmund Freud would have liked simply to follow suit, he invented his own procedures for making her disappear. Where Martin Heidegger assumed that *Dasein* has no gender, we may infer further that it had, for him, no mother either. Friedrich Nietzsche, Emmanuel Levinas, and Derrida were all unusual as philosophers in the explicit interest they took in maternity, though the various forms of their attention have irritated many of their feminist readers. And yet feminist philosophers and theorists have been no more immune to mother trouble than their canonical counterparts. Indeed, more than a generation after the first births by

in vitro fertilization, we have been obliged by new developments in medical technology and by changing conceptions of kinship to think differently not only about the present and future of motherhood but also about its past. Clearly, as Jacqueline Rose has put it, thinking about mothers produces singular effects on the nature of thinking itself.<sup>1</sup> This book traces a number of such effects, primarily in the writings of Marx and Freud and their heirs, at a moment when philosophy and theory are confronting what may be their most perplexing challenge: a strangely queered, (im)possible maternity that—till now, at least—is not what we think. What is a mother when we cannot presuppose “her” gender? Were we ever able to?

I imagine the theorist of my title as a scholar working within and across the loose confederation of disciplines—primarily Continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, political theory, anthropology, and linguistics—that transformed literary and cultural analysis in the 1970s just as the “new reproductive technologies” began to change our understandings of conception, pregnancy, and birth. At the center of the book are the figures of Marx, Freud, György Lukács, and Jacques Lacan, with Derrida playing a significant though less direct role throughout. Heidegger, Roland Barthes, Levinas, J.-B. Pontalis, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Alain Badiou all make appearances of varying length from supporting actor to cameo, and Nietzsche plays a prominent role in the coda. This book takes up, in other words, one plausible version of “the male theory canon,” which, with few exceptions, earns its canonical status in part by not acknowledging itself as male.

Not to mention as maternal. One example will have to stand in here for others, many more of which will be discussed in detail in the chapters that follow. When Simon Critchley identifies as one of Continental philosophy’s defining features an emphasis on the “thoroughly *contingent* or *created* character of human experience,” we might have expected maternity—which, presumably, has something to say about the nature of contingency and creation—to count as part of that experience.<sup>2</sup> It does not. If Critchley had wanted philosophical precedent for *not* associating maternity with creativity, he could easily have turned to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, which argued that pregnancy is merely a bodily function and, as such, inherently uncreative.<sup>3</sup> But Critchley does not refer to that argument, or make

any other, to justify maternity's omission, which thereby goes unremarked. The absence of reflection on maternity from his discussion of the "*created* character of human experience" thus has the effect of suggesting that motherhood is a kind of *inhuman* experience, alien to the forms of conceptual generality to which philosophy properly aspires.<sup>4</sup>

Yet philosophers seem to have no doubt as to where philosophers come from. The following is the first of the nine "stories" presented recently by Badiou as his "philosophical biography":

My father was an alumnus of the *École Normale Supérieure* and *agrégé* of mathematics: my mother an alumna of the *École Normale Supérieure* and *agrégée* of French literature. I am an alumnus of the *École Normale Supérieure* and *agrégé*, but *agrégé* of what, of philosophy, that is to say, probably, the only possible way to assume the double filiation and circulate freely between the literary maternity and the mathematical paternity. This is a lesson for philosophy itself: the language of philosophy always constructs its own space between the *matheme* and the poem, between the mother and the father, after all.<sup>5</sup>

Badiou is not, of course, simply recounting here his own origins as a philosopher whose distinctive interests include set theory as well as the writing of fiction and drama; he is telling us the genealogy of philosophy itself as the dialectical sublation of its literary and mathematical parentage. Philosophy is thus conceived by Badiou as an only child with no rivalrous siblings or cousins, queer aunts or uncles. Badiou's next biographical installment, "about mother and philosophy," carries this theme forward:

My mother was very old and my father was not in Paris. I would take her out to eat in a restaurant. She would tell me on these occasions everything she had never told me. It was the final expressions of tenderness, which are so moving, that one has with one's very old parents. One evening, she told me that even before meeting my father, when she was teaching in Algeria, she had a passion, a gigantic passion, a devouring passion, for a philosophy teacher. This story is absolutely authentic. I listened to it, obviously, in the position you can imagine, and I said to myself: well, that's it, I have done nothing else except accomplish the desire of my mother, that the Algerian philosopher had neglected. He had gone

#### 4 Introduction

off with someone else and I had done what I could to be the consolation for my mother's terrible pain—which had subsisted underneath it all even until she was eighty-one.

You may be astonished (as I certainly was the first time I encountered this passage) at the speed with which Badiou transforms his mother's tale about her attachment to a philosopher into an "absolutely authentic" story about himself. Oedipally conflating the singular with the general, Badiou never pauses to consider the possibility that, rather than saying "on these occasions everything she had never told me," his mother may have been exercising her literary license, knowing well from her experience "the position" her auditor then asks *us* to imagine him in. She may have been playing with him, in short, knowing that he would take the bait—and that he could scarcely keep himself from turning her story into his tale of philosophical inheritance, a transformation that enables him to supplant his mother as the tale's protagonist: "The nature of philosophy is that something is eternally being bequeathed to it. It has the responsibility of this bequeathal. You are always treating the bequeathal itself, always taking one more step in the determination of what was thus bequeathed to you. As myself, in the most unconscious manner, I never did anything as a philosopher except respond to an appeal that I had not even heard." I am, indeed, willing to believe that this was an appeal he had not even heard.

Even while exploring the nature of creativity and the paths of philosophical vocation, Critchley and Badiou exemplify two of the prominent ways that the mother can be made to disappear—in the first instance as the *object* of Theory, and in the second as its *subject*. Critchley's omission of the mother from a discussion of human creativity bears on the question of whether her absence is contingent or constitutive: can there be a philosophy of the mother, a philosophy that includes maternity within its disciplinary purview? Badiou's replacement of his mother as the protagonist of a story about philosophical calling raises a different question: can mothers ever be philosophers? As we will observe often in the pages to come, this second question can occur in tandem with the first, though the two retain some formal independence from each other. Throughout his corpus, for instance, Derrida repeatedly frames maternity as an ineluctable



problem for philosophy—as an incapacitation of its virile pretensions to transparent self-knowledge.<sup>6</sup> And yet Derrida was clearly flummoxed when asked the following in the recent documentary film that bears his name:

*Question:* If you had a choice, what philosopher would you have liked to be your mother?

*Derrida:* . . . I have no ready answer for this question. Let me . . . give me some time. [Five-second pause] *My mother?* [Laughs] A good question, it's a good question, in fact. [Eighteen-second pause] It's an interesting question, I'll try to tell you why I can't . . . It's *impossible* for me to have any philosopher as a mother, that's a problem. My mother, my mother *couldn't* be a philosopher. [Switches to French] A philosopher *couldn't* be my mother. That's a very important point. Because the figure of the philosopher, for me, is always a masculine figure. This is one of the reasons I undertook the deconstruction of philosophy. All the deconstruction of phallogocentrism is the deconstruction of what one calls philosophy, which since its inception has always been linked to a paternal figure. So a philosopher is a father, not a mother. So the philosopher that would be my mother would be a postdeconstructive philosopher, that is, myself, or my son. My mother as a philosopher would be my granddaughter, for example. An inheritor. A woman philosopher who would reaffirm the deconstruction. And consequently, would be a woman who thinks. Not a philosopher. I always distinguish thinking from philosophy. A thinking mother—it's what I both love and try to give birth to.<sup>7</sup>

It is fascinating to observe Derrida struggling here to respond to a question to which he had not previously given thought (an eighteen-second pause is an eternity of screen time). In replying finally that a philosopher could never have been his mother, he seems not to be affirming the classical prejudice that *women* are unfit for philosophy. Derrida is even willing to imagine himself as a mother who gives birth to himself, to his son, and to his granddaughter—but not to his mother. Indeed, as with Badiou's biographical sketches, philosophical inheritance proceeds generationally in one direction only, and the mother never receives her due when reckoned from the vantage of her son: "My mother *couldn't* be a philosopher. [Switches to French] A philosopher *couldn't* be my mother." Though strikingly similar in