Numinous Subjects

Virgin, whore, mother: too harshly literal to be ‘just’ metaphors, too potently imagistic to be ‘just concepts’, too suffused with sacred associations to be merely secular designations. That’s it, they are figures suffused with sacred associations, numinous subjects indeed, but how, and why does it matter anyway?

The sacred. ‘The sacred is equivalent to a power, and, in the last analysis, to reality. The sacred is saturated with being.’¹ So we are dealing with ontology then. But ontology with a kick, it would seem. ‘The full range of the term sacred, or rather, of the Latin sacer, which is sometimes translated “sacred,” sometimes “accursed,” … encompasses the maleficent as well as the beneficent.’² Accursed, maleficent. In his offering of a term that would return the “‘extra’ in the meaning of “holy” above and beyond the meaning of goodness,’ Rudolph Otto included in the numinous, in the mysterium tremendum et fascinans, ‘a moment whose singularly daunting and awe-inspiring character must be gravely disturbing to those persons who will recognize nothing in the divine nature but goodness, gentleness, love, and a sort of confidential intimacy’³. Indeed, those persons who prefer nothing but goodness, gentleness, love and confidential intimacy (the easily approachable virgin, the sweetly innocent whore, the perfectly powerless mother?) struggle to subdue the sacred, to dilute the holy, to filter out from it all that is disturbing, all that is uncontrollable, all the unknown bloody mess of life, of chaos, of all that threatens, via sheer overabundance, their annihilation, their nothingness.

There seems to be little desire for numinous subjects to be walking in our midst these days. Numinous subjects are disturbing of the social order; they have teeth, and they can bite.⁴ Curiously enough, numinous subjects are always feminine, though never docile. Virgin, Whore or Mother. Among the living none but they can fully achieve numinence.
And they, I believe, are too disturbing to be allowed to exist untamed, uncontrolled, unmanaged, undisciplined.

There was a time, I do not know how long ago, when, under the sacred canopy of the western christian symbolic universe, a woman need neither worry nor work at becoming a numinous subject. Born a virgin, her innocence and purity were given. As her body grew so too did her virginal potency increase, seeming to ripen, to burst forth precisely as her body, grown, knew naught. At that moment in her life she was the very incarnation of wonder, of a tremendous, awe-filled, unknown mystery. Present yet hidden, at hand yet untouched, possessed of a solitary sovereignty, a certain majesty, all the while flooded with an urgent energy. They were drawn to her in fear and trembling; they were filled with a stupendous desire to penetrate through the depths of such mystery, to partake of her power, a force incomprehensible. ‘Bewildered and confounded, they felt a something that captivated and transported them with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication.’ In the virgin the wholly unknown other was a presence, an earthly, unbearably immanent transcendence: radiantly, dangerously numinous.

And then she chose, more likely the choice was made for her, to know another in, with and through the flesh. It was not, was never pleasure that rendered her impure. Nor was it ever desire, yearning, longing, concupiscence. It was simply knowledge. The material, unspeakable knowledge that comes with touch. For her such knowledge arrived not with a mere ‘little death’, but with a veritable apocalypse. The mystery unveiled, revealed, now, at last, perhaps with an enigmatic smile, she knows. But he, alas, does not. ‘Woman survives man’s embraces, and in that very fact she escapes him; as soon as he loosens his arms, his prey becomes again a stranger to him; there she lies, new, intact, ready to be possessed by a new lover in an as ephemeral a manner.’ ‘No,’ he cries. ‘This cannot be, you are no longer wholly other, no longer worthy to be worshipped, neither innocent nor pure you are merely flesh and you must serve me.’ Thus the wife’s numinence is dimmed,
hemmed in, denied – on this side by the laundry, on that by the dishes, there is the vegetable garden, here is the cow, the sow, the chickens scratching in the dirt. A wife. No longer a virgin, no longer a numinous subject, nothing about her is perceived, allowed to reach beyond a kind of routine happenstance – ‘the inevitable, dull tediousness of the contingent – the senseless fact that happens to be so; it is as an irrational and unchosen presence, as an unavoidable and material condition’¹¹ that this woman happens to be simply, only, this more or less useful (to him) lump of flesh. Until, that is, she is born again in numinence – that uncontainable, threatening conjunction of immanence and transcendence – born again as whore or mother.

Whore. She who knows the most intimate secrets, the mysteries of the flesh. She who, it is imagined, has done the unimaginable with the uncountable, yet still remains herself unknown, accountable to none but herself. Seemingly known by all, yet she remains a stranger, a mystery. Again and again she rises, departs, newly whole, newly unknown. The whore. She who rules the night, the dark, who brings king and prince and peasant alike to their knees in desperation, adulation, worship. The whore. She who has given up all innocence and in return receives omniscience. She knows all, but he does not. If the virgin is the absolute presence of the wholly other, is the place of unbearably immanent transcendence, then the whore is the absolute absence of the wholly known, is the place of unbearably transcendent immanence. She is as dangerously numinous as the virgin, as the mother.

Mother. She who places her body at the crossroads of life and death; she who is the bloody threshold between this world and that other – from whence no one comes without her, to which none may depart without having been first carried by a woman.¹² She is again a holy, terrifying mystery, at once too close and forever too, too far away. She who has been purified by her own living waters, she who has been rent asunder, she who has poured out her own blood that another might have life, a life polluted, made always already impure by the very fact of blood (her fault!): she has survived a journey he will never can never make and she has returned, not alone. Both gifted and condemned to
life by her, he lauds and magnifies, loathes and fears her name and body.\textsuperscript{13} Woman the Mother embodies precisely ‘the infinite quality of the sacred, that inexhaustible reservoir from which all differences flow and into which they all converge.’\textsuperscript{14} His very being utterly dependent upon Mother: how excessive, and excessively disturbing.

Virgin, Whore, Mother. Numinous, disturbing subjects, each one incarnating, differently, the vexingly gendered conjunction of immanence and transcendence, and all, in different ways, under threat.

‘Good riddance,’ cry any number of secular feminist theorists. Those who might take up with pleasure the words of Beauvoir, ‘Today [a woman] can become an other who is also an equal \textit{only in losing her mystic aura}.’\textsuperscript{15} (italics added) But wait. I want to set aside, gently and indefinitely, the question of ‘equal to whom?’, and show how it is that the issue of numinence cannot, or at least ought not, be so hastily disregarded. Beauvoir used the word ‘mystic’ in a more than slightly derogatory manner, implying that anything to do with religion, or with the sacred or the holy, was merely so much primitive, magical, irrational, and thus to her ridiculous, nonsense. Nonetheless, \textit{The Second Sex} can be read as an agonisingly lengthy wrestling with precisely the issue of immanence and transcendence and their curiously gendered interdependence. And this, I believe, is precisely the issue of the sacred.

In her attempts to come to grips with ‘the strange ambiguity of existence made body,’\textsuperscript{16} which I interpret to mean something like ‘the disturbing fact of something \textit{other} manifest in the material forms given in the present’, Beauvoir began by providing her understanding of the ambiguous problem. ‘There are two interrelated dynamic aspects of life: it can be maintained only through transcending itself, and it can transcend itself only on condition that it is maintained.’\textsuperscript{17} She continued: ‘On the biological level a species is maintained only by creating itself anew; but this creation results only in repeating the same Life in more
Beauvoir repeatedly associated the maintenance of life with immanence with materiality with sameness with repetition with the feminine. Was she at all pleased with this state of affairs? Oh no. ‘Men have presumed to create a feminine domain – the kingdom of life, of immanence – only to lock up women therein.’

Trapped, Beauvoir refused to give any positive value to immanence, though she admitted its negative necessity. ‘In no domain whatever did she create [something new]; she maintained the life of the tribe by giving it children and bread, nothing more. She remained doomed to immanence, incarnating only the static aspect of society, closed in upon itself.’

I am afraid she loathed immanence, loathed the intractable fact of human, creaturely incarnation, enfleshment. ‘It is especially noteworthy that the pregnant woman feels the immanence of her body at just the time when it is in transcendence: it turns upon itself in nausea and discomfort; it has ceased to exist for itself and thereupon becomes more sizable than ever before.’

Having admitted, even if in a back-handed manner, that as she is embodied woman can be ‘in transcendence’, Beauvoir quickly clarified that for her gestation, necessary for life, ‘is but a condition of existence; in gestation it [a woman’s life] appears as creative; but it is a strange kind of creation which is accomplished in a contingent and passive manner.’

On and on she wrote, twisting and railing against all that is merely given, contingent, inward, still, material, immediate or past. She praised all efforts to ‘burst out of the present;’ ‘an activity that does not open the future falls back into vain immanence’. She valued highly every attempt ‘to emerge beyond the given world,’ ‘beyond all given actuality,’ to engage, that is, in the project of transcendence. She wanted more than anything for women to realise their, our, transcendence, to break out of the dungeon of immanence over which transcendence has been built. What she grudgingly admitted is that the only way to transcendence is through immanence; what she also admitted, but too late to consider seriously, is that it is not immanence which is, in itself, nothingness, but transcendence. ‘The contradictions that put the flesh in opposition to the spirit, the instant to time, the
swoon of immanence to the challenge of transcendence, the absolute of pleasure to the nothingness of forgetting, will never be resolved …’

Nothingness. Here, at the end of her monumental work, she at last places transcendence, with the spirit over against the flesh, with time-as-the-future over against the present, the instant, the moment, she places the nothingness of forgetting over against, oddly enough, pleasure. Pleasure, acting part-for-whole as memory. Earlier she had written of forgetfulness, though she had not described it as a nothingness. ‘What woman essentially lacks today for doing great things is forgetfulness of herself; but to forget oneself it is first of all necessary to be firmly assured that now and for the future one has found oneself.’

Earlier still she had written of ‘nothing’. ‘An existent is nothing other than what he does; … in pure subjectivity, the human being is not anything.’ (italics in original) ‘If one considers a woman in her immanent presence, her inward self, one can say absolutely nothing about her …’ But according to her own logic it is only in the flesh, in the moment, in the absolute of pleasure or pain, only, that is, in immanence that a self is known, remembered to be, to participate in and partake of Reality: a self able to reach out from a here and now, this place, this moment, into an unknown future. Should a subject choose not to reach, not to move, then would transcendence never be actualised. The ‘beyond’ that is transcendence (as Beauvoir defines it) is a nothingness until the instant it is pulled into the present – made immanent by a self whose memory lies in her flesh. Fleeting, finite moments of bodily pleasures and pains, felt, known, remembered, standing out in their differences from an otherwise monotonous sameness, interrupting the otherwise timeless never of transcendence, providing moments of distinction.

... The logic of pure transcendence is the logic of pure, undifferentiated potentiality, infinite, unrealised possibility. Forever wholly other and forever wholly unknown, it is the logic of absolute uncertainty. Eternally unbecome, yet it is, paradoxically, the logic of being, of ontology.
The logic of pure immanence is the logic of pure actuality, of the particular, distinct, specific, and uniquely real. Fully known, it is the logic of absolute certainty. Present only in the fleeting instant, yet it is, paradoxically, the enduring logic of knowledge, of epistemology.

…

Beauvoir, in her brilliance, knew that flesh and world could never be wholly transcended by the living, but still I think she dreamed of giving, upon the altar of ‘great things’, an offering of immanence – bound, and ready to be sacrificed. Rammed into a corner by her own relentless logic, she offered instead the sacred, substituting the holy for the flesh. There is a kind of violence in The Second Sex, an almost ritual violence strangely familiar to subjects of a certain genre, gender, kind. Troubling, no?


…

Once upon a time the logic of the western symbolic order was clear, distinct. There was no need to claim that it was shaped and sustained by a religious (christian) world view; indeed, one would have been ridiculed for stating the obvious. Once upon a time, not long ago, I was asked by a feminist theorist of some renown why I bothered to think and write about ‘the sacred’ at all. Somewhat stunned by the question, in response I said that I could not imagine living in a world in which the sacred, the holy was absent. This was and is still true, but incomplete, of course. What I left unsaid, having assumed that it was obvious, is that I could not imagine a sacred-less world because neither I nor anyone else in that room could step outside of a symbolic universe that includes a religious dimension. Further, and less obviously, I believe the religious dimension in western culture is comprised of a monotheistic symbolic order (ruled over by a masculine god) founded upon a sacred
imaginary (fiercely feminine and unruly). Though they are intertwined, they are not the same. Grace Jantzen puts it this way. ‘If it is the case that human life and culture is saturated with a religious symbolic so that even ostensibly secular positions do not escape religious structuring of consciousness, then the question is not whether or not we are religious, but rather whether we choose to become conscious of the way the … imaginary expressed in the religious symbolic permeates thought and social structures, or whether we remain unconscious of these ways.’

I am trying, then, to become conscious of the ways, within western christianity, that the monotheistic symbolic and the sacred imaginary are intertwined, expressed, distinguishable if never entirely separable. To quote Catherine Clément, ‘it seems to me that the sacred predates the religious.’ An obvious point, perhaps, but one to which there is so often such indifference. As an institution, religion adores order, privileges the symbolic (‘the organisation of the [divine and] social order according to the imperatives of paternal authority,’ or the Law of the Father) above all else. But the ‘all else’ remains. Frighteningly close, filled, overflowing with incomprehensible power and danger – irruptive and disruptive source of life-demanding-life, it is not safe. Nor is it possible to do without it.

Could it be that religions themselves were developed in part simply to manage the sacred, to temper and contain the dangerous, all-consuming force of it? ‘The fact is that it doesn’t take long for the experience of the Numinous to unhinge the mind.’ Which does not change another fact: the maddening numinous, the awe-full holy, the terrible, blindingly brilliant sacred is the basis for religion. The sacred, the basis, the foundation of religion. Crazy-making: such a singularly multiple, dark, frightening, bloody, radiant, alluring, unstable, unsuitable foundation for any institution. Precisely for this reason the relation between the sacred and religion, so often assumed to be self-evident, so often glossed over, so often left unmentioned (for really it’s quite unspeakable), is worthy of more consideration yet again. At least it should be touched upon, if that is possible at all. Perhaps a pseudo-Irigarayan reading of ‘one of the most provocative “religious” thinkers of our time’ might
help begin to limn the issue.\textsuperscript{36} That the relation between the sacred and religion is an issue, I am convinced; like certain other issues, however, it seems to resist inscription.

How to Avoid the Issue of Milk and Honey: A Reading of Derrida, 
Acts of Religion, ‘Faith and Knowledge’\textsuperscript{37}

How ‘to talk religion’\textsuperscript{(42)}? Especially in relation to the sacred. Who indeed would be so imprudent as to claim that the issue here is both identifiable and new \textsuperscript{(42)}? That an issue has been recognised as being present is surely cause, almost, for hope (of a most fluid sort). Surely a body has been at least implied – as the site, the source of the issue, of that which is flowing forth, identifiable yet new? But no. To avoid the issue, move directly to abstraction. Pretend you are in a barren desert, at the source of monotheistic revelations \textsuperscript{(42, 58)}. Surround yourself with other men (that you are male goes without saying), and, grasping the sacred with your theoretical forceps, abstract and extract it from its origins \textsuperscript{(59)}. Holding it in the forceps, raise your arm to the light then speak on its behalf. Declare it, define it (again, on its behalf, not yours): the holy, the sacred, the safe and sound, the unscathed, the immune \textsuperscript{(42)}. Issue? There is no issue present, most assuredly no issue of blood, no mucus, no placenta still in darkness. No, you are confident that your forceps have removed it all, the sacred, the safe and sound, the unscathed, the immune. You have seen it, you have spoken it, you have written it, you have named it so.

Does your arm grow tired, do your eyes begin to water (affected by the light, suddenly too radiant)? Is that why, so soon, you declare with such a lack of confidence – the entire question of religion comes down, perhaps, to this lack of assurance \textsuperscript{(44)}. A lack of assurance that you have any pre-understanding of that which you have declared, defined already – the sacred, the safe and sound, the unscathed, the immune. Do you glance ’round at your colleagues, at those with whom you have gathered as though in a desert, but in fact on an island \textsuperscript{(43)}? You must have, for you seek sanctuary, for just a sentence, in their/your Mediterranean
magnetism – a bastion of virile masculinity, no doubt (47). Uncontaminated by any femininity. Safe and sound, not a single woman!, are you still haunted by your momentary lack of assurance (45)? No. You’ve moved on (have you?), you are apprehensive now of an abyss, of a/that place where one neither can nor should see coming what ought or could – perhaps – be yet to come (47). Apprehensive of that deep, dark place – into, or from which, something may come – you pay homage to the light, to that which enables you to see. (Does it really? Not if it is too bright.) The abyss, the hole remains. And you, you seem to remain almost aware that that which you grasped, extracted, abstracted-into-the-light (perhaps excessively bright?) by means of your theoretical forceps – came from the abyss, the dark, the other. Hence your pressing obligation: not to forget those <of either gender> whom this implicit contract [between a moderate Enlightenment and Mediterranean magnetism?] is obliged to exclude. We should have, we ought to have, begun by allowing them to speak (47). Ah… obliged to exclude them, but obliged not to forget them (which is not the same as remembering them). Curious. How unspeakably present in their absence are those others. Less curious, but no less noteworthy, your self-assurance that they do not speak unless and until they are allowed to speak.

Beginnings. We should have begun by allowing them to speak. But you did not allow, did not suffer them to speak. Perhaps, is it imaginable?, they were speaking all the same. Which is to say, differently (than you). Perhaps you did not allow yourself, your magnetic selves (attracted by and repelled from each other, simultaneously?) to hear them? Beginnings. You remind yourself and your colleagues that before the island [which you stress is not the island of revelation – do you protest too much deliberately?] there will have been the Promised Land. How not to fear and how not to tremble before the unfathomable immensity of this theme? The figure of the Promised Land (48) – How not? Via abstraction, again, and immediately. Voilà, the historicity of revelation and a history of political and technoscientific reason (48). You make, so quickly, quite a leap of faith in quite the opposite direction from the unfathomable immensity of the Promised Land. And what might be the issue with the
Promised Land that inspires such fear and trembling within you? Could it be what the excluded feminine others will have been speaking, not allowed/aloud? Words you will not have been hearing? Sans permission, sans obligation, now I will speak. A performance for which lips are required, and tongue – that extraordinary muscle blessed with such mobility, and taste! Tasting these words, then, moving them with my tongue, allowing them freely to pass between my lips, never fully closed ...

The Promised Land. A land flowing with milk and honey, it is said. Milk and honey. How seldom do we remember how fluid are the delights (the pleasures?) of the promised land. How seldom do we remember that what is promised is milk and honey. Milk – camels’ milk? Goats’ milk? Cows’ milk? Mother’s milk? Milk. At a minimum it presupposes breasts, whether animal or woman (and when/is there a difference?). Freely available breasts. Abundantly present breasts. Breasts never hidden, never taken away. Breasts, in fact, from which there is no escape. Unless one turns to honey. Ah, honey. That most deliciously sticky, gooey, indivisible, uncountable of foods. That most viscous, mucus-y of foods. Sweet and raw...in search of honey, honey and milk, where else do we find them but under the tongue of the female lover in the Song of Songs. Under the tongue of she who is dark and beautiful, she whose lips drip with nectar... Alas, such a paradise, in which two lovers meet and taste the milk and honey of the other, such a paradise was never promised to those included in the desert contract. Instead, the included were given, or at least they say they were given ...

The Promised Land, figure of unfathomable immensity, where all are safe and sound, unscathed – no hint of an originary wound, not there – surrounded, protected, nurtured by milk and honey. Soft and sticky but light, bathed in gentle light – it must be, for the dark is never safe, and those within the Promised Land must be always already immune to such unsafety... Come, we must spread our imaginations open wide to a moderate light and, voilà, this, perhaps, is what I would have liked to (101) hear of a certain abyss – while on that island of no revelation – that the Promised Land, that figure of unfathomable immensity, resembles
nothing so much as a womb with a view. A womb containing breasts. So phallo-fantastical. Already, though remaining unsaid, such a safe and sound distance from the accursed power of the sacred – but still a trace of the product of a breast remains. And just a slight, sweet trace of a viscous, sticky, mucus-y fluid … Only a trace of a trace of the sacred: neither forgotten entirely nor remembered at all, infantilised, projected into a promised future land (a place no man ever will have been before, a pure, virginal land abounding with maternal, dripping breasts … a land gooey with the honey of the whor … shhhhh … it can’t be said, can’t be written.) Why such difficulty, such fantastical avoidance of the issue of the sacred – an issue present nonetheless, present in its unfathomable, unspeakable, unwritable immensity?

A purely rational analysis brings the following paradox to light: that the foundation of law – law of the law, institution of the institution, origin of the constitution – is a ‘performative’ event that cannot belong to the set that it founds, inaugurates or justifies. Such an event is unjustifiable within the logic of what it will have opened. It is the decision of the other in the undecidable. Henceforth reason ought to recognize there what Montaigne and Pascal call an undeniable ‘mystical foundation of authority’.

Cannot belong (but cannot be absent). Unjustifiable within the logic of what it will have opened (unjustifiable but present, continually opening into that authoritative logic that would seal it shut, fill the abyss, close the gap, plug the leaky hole). It is the decision of the other (we have been named ‘other’, we who do not, cannot belong). What choice then can we make in relation to religion? If we insist, and we must for some time still, upon the names that are given us as our heritage, it is because, in respect of this borderline place, a new war of religions is redeploying as never before to this day, in an event that is at the same time both interior and exterior (58). A borderline place, a threshold, simultaneously interior and exterior – and a war. A new war? Forgive me if I laugh aloud while availing myself of the names given as my heritage. Now the virgin, now the mother, now the whore, now I have disappeared behind these names. Do not await my words, for this material shrouds [my] irreducible duality
[duality?, oh no, my trinitality!] in silence, in a manner precisely that is secret and reticent (72). Reticent. Translation: my choice not to be revealed, not to be open fully unto you.

...

Religions require the sacred, but most of them prefer it in small doses: controlled, manageable, non-threatening. They seek to gather and bind the sacred to their service. In Christianity this was accomplished, brilliantly, through the Marys. The Virgin Mary, the Mother Mary, and Mary Magdalene. The sexual body, immanent, immediate presence, pleasure, messiness, physical knowledge, all this was strictly sectioned off, granted to Mary on the condition that she already had renounced it all, that the sins and demons of her flesh had already been washed away, driven off. Thus was the Whore tamed, thus was the Whore allowed, demanded to have been. Always already in the past tense. And now, another Mary. The unbearable presence of the wholly other, the question never to be answered yet never to be escaped, the transcendent, unknowable Mary, quick – make her into the eternally untouched Virgin – but no, it’s not enough, bodies seek out bodies, virginity is too uncertain, add another Mary to the mix but say that she’s the same. There must be a Mother, there is always a Mother but we’ll pretend that she did not give life, that she was just a vessel, a pouch, a sort of bag in which the child was carried for a while. Still, give her a small body to look after and the Virgin will be satisfied, will not seek the touch of any other. Say that God is the Father, the only giver of life, that He did not have to enter her, and the Mother (virgin? whore?) will no longer threaten with her devouring power; she’ll just be tender, gentle, loving. Brilliant. Power, being, life, knowledge, flesh, joining, ecstasy, love … the very stuff of the sacred neatly gathered, bound, parcelled out between the Marys.38 Controlled, manageable, non-threatening.

And it does not bother anyone that Mary the whore and Mary the virgin and Mary the unentered mother had to be invented, made up, that they were fantasies laid upon the bodies of those women, the Marys. The point, the issue is that they had to be … without them, too much of the
sacred would have been missing from christianity. Could it be that with them, too much of the sacred is still present?

Within the western christian symbolic universe, the Protestant Reformation brought the elevation of the subject-role of wife. The virgin became a daughter or a shrew – no longer the immanent, immediate presence of transcendence; the mother – a woman simply doing no more than her job; even the whore, through God’s own grace, could be reformed, tamed like a woman-made-into-wife. All women could become respectable, if only they would become well-behaved, white middle-class wives.

Without that aura Beauvoir was so disdainful of, individual female subjects become no more than interchangeable, replaceable, more or less useful entities. According to the logic of the western christian symbolic order, they become wives. As virgins, whores and mothers, women are subjects whose words and actions matter in the world: subjects whose numinence accords them, in different ways, a potent degree of agency, whether moral, epistemic or political. As wife, woman is but a pale reflection, a derivative subject whose very being is dependent on her husband’s. In the absence of any other serious contender, the logic of the post-Reformation western christian symbolic continues to function, to spread its word.

But there is another logic at play, a logic revealed through the touch of the virgin, whore, and mother.

Virgin, Whore, Mother. Numinous subjects all, and only to be found at the conjunction of immanence and transcendence – the dangerous, bloody, trembling site of the sacred. What else have they in common? It’s unavoidable. Sex. The virgin is the hope, is the promise, is the fear, is the longing; the whore is the present, is the place, is the moment; and the mother, the creation. Not, never exclusively in the sense of the
creation of a child who in return creates the mother-qua-mother. That is but one of the many possible consequences of sex. I mean the mother is/as the creation of sex, sex’s creation, in the sense of lovers bearing each other into existence as lovers. You, my love, create me as your lover – each time anew. We bear each other into being the particular, specific, exact lovers we are. In our arms we carry each other, breast against breast. As fully and as deeply as we enter one another eventually we must withdraw, must part into two, must undergo the wrench of separation. And when we do, it is done. We have given birth to each other as lovers. We have been born again as lovers. In this way we are all of us mothers of each other, of each lover. All of us are newly born, repeatedly. Strangers to ourselves, strangers to each other, yet strangers who know the other, know ourselves strangely better than before our births as lovers. We know ourselves as capable of being born anew, and as capable of creating with another a new life where before was not this life.

The logic of the sacred, of the numinous, is not concerned with moral principles, comprehends no neat distinction between clean or unclean, right or wrong. The sacred turns away no substance, looks askance on no behaviour, does not shy away from sex. Nothing, in and of itself, is ever denied or banned by the holy. But. But the logic of the sacred is driven by a single pulsing, pounding commandment. Life. From the most fragile, momentary existence to its wildest extremes, the sacred tends and celebrates, demands and revels in Life. ‘Life,’ commands the sacred. ‘Let there be Life.’ Life and more life, life lived yes to its extremes – the sacred knows no moderation.

Life, demands the sacred. Let there be life abundant. Profuse, exuberant, prodigal, multiple, many ... Let there be Life and let Life be plural, always plural. Rejoicing in what is, in the immediate, preposterous presence of all that is as it is: wallowing in the immanent, yet the sacred never ceases reaching out to the not yet, never ceases insisting upon a host, a glorious, infinite host of possibilities. The sacred thrills in what might be. More, demands the sacred. More, and Other. Let that singular, uncertain mass of no-thing, let that amorphous nothing of as yet
unrealised potential be made incarnate, be divided, multiplied, again and again and again. Rooted in immanence yet always open to the cascading-in of transcendence, the logic of the sacred is the logic of plurality. Boundless plurality, or, a plurality unbound. 41

The sacred is unbound on the ‘side’ of immanence by the endless action of acceptance – all that becomes particularly, uniquely real, all that specifically IS is accepted as it is. All of it, accepted as it is. From the mundane to the grotesque, from the minuscule to the monstrous, the sacred makes no value judgement, ever. All the sacred ever offers is acceptance. On the ‘side’ of transcendence, the sacred is unbound by the endless action of demand – the ceaseless demand for More, and Other. Amen, whispers the sacred. Let it be, allow it to be, suffer it all to be as it is. And amen, allow it all to become, demand that it all become. Yes, Yes to each and all.

... No. Such excess religions have no choice but to limit, to bind. Life too abundant can consume itself if left unchecked.

... In christianity the logic of plurality was tightly wrapped in swaddling clothes. The logic of the singular, the logic of mono-theism, of the only Father-god, bound to itself the More and Other of the Son. Claimed, against all common sense and reason, that the Father and the Son are, with yet another, but one God.

Was it fear of profusion, of abundance, of over-abundance, of potentially over-abundant pleasures and pains that led the Father and the Son to be depicted as always already incapable of sex? As always already unable to co-create new Life with any other? As always already unable to be reborn as a lover? I’m not making this up; it’s right there in their story, which goes a lot like this. The father sent an angel as a messenger to the virgin who would be the mother. The angel told the virgin she would conceive and bear a child. ‘How?’ asked Mary. She was told that the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and the power of the Most High would overshadow her. Note: Not the father but the third member of
the trinity – usually grammatically feminine – would ‘come upon her.’ The feminine holy spirit enlisted as the surrogate father of the son: for this reason alone will I remain a christian until I die … But the point is that the sacred demand for More and Other was overshadowed by a monotheistic insistence on One and None. One god, no lovers.

In a move Freud chose not to analyse, the Father never ever touched the Mother. The son could never desire to take his father’s place, for the father had never been in place. The son could never desire the object of his father’s desire, for the father never desired … Finally, sadly, the son was never permitted to be a lover, the lover/mother of any other.\(^{42}\) The son was supposed to be just like the father.\(^{43}\) Fortunately, there is still more (and other) going on. The story can be told again, and differently. Although the logic of the theistic order, taken to its logical extreme, seeks to sever any link between immanence and transcendence, traces of that sacred conjunction remain.\(^{44}\) The feminine Spirit comes upon virgins.

At least it used to. At the end of the twentieth century I went searching for virgins within the contemporary western cultural imaginary, but the only ones I found at that time were dead. Hauntingly present, yes, but present only through their inexplicable, unbearable absence. They killed themselves, you see. *The Virgin Suicides*, both a best-selling novel and a major motion picture.\(^{45}\) Narrated by the boys with whom they never had sex, the book concludes with all the confused emptiness and petulance to be expected of a religion recently relieved of the sacred. ‘The girls took into their own hands decisions better left to God. They had become too powerful to live among us, too self-concerned, too visionary, too blind … It didn’t matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and they hadn’t heard us calling …’\(^{46}\)

Too powerful, too self-concerned? To whom, exactly, are virgins supposed to respond? Who has the right to decide whom a virgin will love? For whom are they supposed to save themselves? And what exactly is it that they are supposed to provide when at last they offer themselves
to another? What is it that those boys, now men fumbling to re-tell the tale, feel lost without, deprived of, cheated? Is it precisely all that sacred power, wasted? The virgin: she who promises salvation through her touch. ‘You could have saved us from our lives, from the wives we find we do not like.’ Words not uttered by the narrators, but written nonetheless. The virgins did not choose them. And of course it matters that they were girls when they died. A virgin at the age of forty-five is perceived to have lost her sacred power, to have withered, dried up. She is nothing but an old maid spinster, useless, except perhaps for teaching French or violin to bored young children. No, sacrifices must be offered in a timely fashion, and the girls, selfishly, chose their own appropriate hour. The problem, perhaps, was that they neither saw nor heard anything in the world around them that they wanted to save; they touched nothing but elm trees already stricken with the blight. The trees died. The girls died.

... The western cultural imaginary is running out of virgins. Elsewhere demand for them is running high, desperately high. In South Africa a new legend has it that sex with a virgin can cure a man of AIDS. Within the space of a year both a nine-month-old and an eight-month-old baby girl were raped, along with thousands of other girls. There was an enormous march in Cape Town, an out-pouring of protest. In the country where I am writing these words most of us are sitting still. Vaguely haunted by the memory of trees and virgins, we mostly sit and gaze at moving pictures of replacement bushes and their wives. I fear what will happen if we realise we too are desperately in need of the sacred. I fear what will happen if we do not.

... The need for virgins is not, has never been benign. Virgins’ own needs are of no account. It’s their saving power that is desired, sought, taken. At best the virgin can arrange her own kenosis, can choose the time and place and Other with whom she will be born again as lover/mother/whore. The kenosis of the virgin, the bounty of the sacred: as she empties of that pure, untouched power, she fills with sacred
knowledge. Sacred knowledge. Neither good nor evil, moral nor immoral. Often enough painfully acquired, often enough accompanied by blood. The knowledge of touch. At times hesitant and tentative, at times sweaty, straining, demanding knowledge. Sometimes all-consuming, sometimes almost imperceptible. The knowledge of touch, the knowledge of the whore. Knowledge as dangerous as the virgin’s power. Simply, whores do and know too much. They don’t behave within the bounds of decency. Perhaps the need for whores has never been stronger, but perhaps not. Perhaps both the need for and the fear of whores is a constant in the western symbolic universe. And perhaps the threat of the whore can be discerned in the threats freely floating in the western cultural imaginary.

…

They will call you a whore. They will call you a whore if you fuck a poor man. They will call you a whore if you refuse to fuck a poor man. They will call you a whore if you fuck with the richest, most powerful men in the world. They will call you a whore if you refuse to fuck with the richest, most powerful men in the world. They will call you a whore if you have borne too many children. They will call you a whore if you have borne none. They will call you a whore if you work outside the home. They will call you a whore if you work inside the home. They will call you a whore if you speak too loudly. They will call you a whore if you speak with too much confidence. They will call you a whore if you whisper, if you whisper what they do not want you to say at all. They will call you a whore whenever you know too much.

They will call you a whore to shame you into silence. They will call you a whore to discredit every word from your lips. They will call you a whore in a common, desperate attempt to destroy your credibility. You know too much therefore you must not be perceived to know at all. Your epistemic agency must be annihilated. You must be made impure, everything you touch will be tainted with your impurities, everything you say will be cast into darkness, sin and doubt. Your only chance for salvation, whore, is to become a pretty woman. Marry him, obey him, and he’ll protect you. He’ll buy you dresses.
The whore. She to whom man’s most intimate secrets are revealed. She to whom he turns for pleasure, for comfort, for the confirmation that he is a man. The whore. She who knows that his manhood is not certain, is not strong, is not hard as a rock, that no edifice can be built upon it. Poor Peter. No wonder he felt threatened by Mary Magdalene. She knew him in his weakness. Was that why he called her a whore? Simply because she knew him in his weakness?

Only one woman was ever allowed to know another in their weakness, to hold and comfort openly. She who bore the sacred power and knowledge of Life, she who bore Life itself. Once upon a time mother knew best, mother knew all. Increasingly, mothers in western culture are perceived to know nothing at all. Whole brigades of experts are now required to tell her what to do and how to do it, to monitor her actions, to chastise and prohibit what they choose. Left to her own devices, it is imagined, mother would probably kill her child. Oh that threatening, devouring, monstrous mother. At last she’s being properly disciplined, restrained, required by law to behave.

It’s ironic, really. For, no, the sacred is not safe. But it is on the side of life. Religions used to comprehend that the sacred must be channelled but not denied entirely, for it will erupt. It will erupt. The western christian monotheistic order has been working steadily to put out the sacred fires, cut down the sacred groves, pollute the sacred springs, and tame its more numinous subjects. In their place it now offers a portable grill on a concrete patio next to a pool in the suburbs. Whose dream of ‘life abundant’ is this?

In our time, as ever, there are ‘ongoing contests over who and what gets to count as fully human, … occasion[s] for registering anxiety, rehearsing fear, imagining monstrosities, and retelling stories of origin and identity.’50 The mysterium tremendum et fascinans too is being retold
– and the terrible radiance of all that is grows dim. The sacred demand for life abundant, more, and other seems finally to have been crucified for good, or at least driven out of decent people's homes. The sacred, the holy, the numinous. Why might it matter, here and now, to some of us?

Endnotes

4 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1953, 1974), p. 172. ‘Certain peoples imagine that there is a serpent in the vagina which would bite the husband just as the hymen is broken; some ascribe frightful powers to virginal blood, related to menstrual blood and likewise capable of ruining the man’s vigor. Through such imagery is expressed the idea that the feminine principle has the more strength, is more menacing, when it is intact.’
6 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. xx. ‘“Holiness,” as we called it, was natural, a part of living as simple as drawing breath. “She’s so holy,” we’d say in admiration of a classmate who spent particularly long hours on her knees before the thirteenth Station of the Cross: “Mary takes her beloved son to her bosom.” Only moments before we had been stifling our giggles at that risqué word “bosom.”
9 Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 31. The original quote was in the present tense, with a singular subject.
11 Ibid., p. 528.
13 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 187. ‘Thus what man cherishes and detests first of all in woman – loved one or mother – is the fixed image of his animal destiny; it is the life that is necessary to his existence but that condemns him to finitude and to death.’
16 Ibid., p. 810.
18 Ibid., p. 72.
19 Ibid., p. 73.
20 Ibid., p. 83.
21 Ibid., p. 553.
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22 Ibid., p. 553.
23 Ibid., p. 71.
24 Ibid., p. 659.
25 Ibid., p. 788. (Italics original)
26 Ibid., p. 672.
27 Ibid., p. 813.
28 Ibid., p. 781.
29 Ibid., p. 290.
30 Ibid., p. 291.
31 Jantzen, Becoming Divine, p. 224.
35 ‘The universal religious basis is the experience of the Holy within the finite.’ Tillich, Future of Religions, p. 86.
37 All page references to follow are taken from Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge.’
38 I use the term ‘love’ not in the sense of tender gentle caring, but in the sense offered by Iris Murdoch, ‘love [as] the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.’ Iris Murdoch, ‘The Sublime and the Good,’ Chicago Review 13, no. Autumn (1959), p. 51.
39 Luce Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 187. As Walsh describes it in Lisa Walsh, ‘Between Maternity and Paternity: Figuring Ethical Subjectivity,’ Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 12, no. 1 (2001), p. 86, ‘For Irigaray, a truly amorous exchange does result in a birth, not the birth of the son to the father, but the rebirth of each lover who moves fearlessly in and through the other as a desiring, speaking subject without sacrificing his or her own time and space, and returns to her or himself with the trace of flesh forever etched in memory.’
40 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, Second ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 9. Arendt grounds her characterisation of the human condition upon ‘the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers,’ affirming that ‘the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.’ Unpredictable births, always beginning something anew, acting unexpectedly … this accords beautifully with the logic of the sacred as I understand it.
41 Ibid., pp. 7-8, 176, 220, 237, on the human condition of ‘plurality’. Obviously I am using the notion in a slightly more metaphysical, slightly less anthropological/political manner than Arendt did.
42 Not officially permitted, but the early christians and the mystics knew better, knew enough to press their lips to the breast of the son/lover/mother, to drink of his milk … see Catherine Keller, ‘Seeking and Sucking: On Relation and Essence in Feminist Theology,’ in Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms, ed. Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), pp. 54-78.
This peculiar story seems to be what Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, was longing for; instead, forced to take into account the fact that most fathers do touch most mothers, he justified sex (and simultaneously erased the mother’s existence) by lauding paternity. That fathers beget sons is what makes it tolerable, is what makes fathers just like God. See Walsh, ‘Between Maternity and Paternity: Figuring Ethical Subjectivity,’ pp. 83-86.

Nietzsche was perhaps the most enamored of the logic of the theistic order and its paradoxical culmination in ‘God is dead.’ Which can, I suggest, be interpreted as ‘there is no longer any link between transcendence and immanence’. Martin Heidegger, pondering Nietzsche’s thought, proposes the following: ‘In the word "God is dead" the name "God," thought essentially, stands for the suprasensory world of those ideals which contain the goal that exists beyond earthly life for that life and that, accordingly, determines life from above, and also in a certain way, from without.’ Martin Heidegger, ‘The Word of Neitzsche,’ in *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 64. If one follows the logic precisely, if God is dead then what there is, is only immanence, only this world, this life as it already is. There is no more transcendence pouring in upon us, nothing new, nothing unexpected, unpredictable; we can expect only, dare I say it, ‘the eternal recurrence of the same’. Yes, there is an over-abundance of immanence, but given enough time, it can all be known, with certainty. Nothing new can possibly be willed, for nothing new can be imagined. Logically it cannot be any other way. Pure transcendence can in no way be tainted by immanence, must be so utterly separate as to be non-existent, as to have no relation at all to reality. And pure immanence can only be the same, can only stay the same as it ever was. In the utter absence of transcendence, immanence cannot imagine itself differently than it is – and can ‘seek’ only to remain exactly as it is. Others have noted that death is a transcendent occasion, and that what is seems always to decay unto death. This alone would suggest, if the regularly unpredictable occurrence of new births is not enough to prove it, that transcendence cannot ever be severed entirely from immanence. Or, that the logic of the theistic order can never be the only logic at work in this world.


Oddly enough, certain conservative christians seem to be aware of this problem, and recently have begun (p)raising the miraculous possibility of revirgination. See Lorraine Ali and Julie Scelfo, ‘Choosing Virginity,’ *Newsweek*, 9 December 2002. In fact, virgins are now being mass produced in western culture through sexual abstinence education programs, the rapid explosion of which occurred as I was writing this text.

‘S. Africans March to Protest Surge in Rapes of Baby Girls,’ *The Los Angeles Times*, 26 November 2001, p. A14. ‘About 21,000 cases of child rape were reported in the last year in South Africa.’

See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.188, ‘Initiation usually comprises a threefold revelation: revelation of the sacred, of death, and of sexuality. [The initiate] is also reborn to a mode of being that makes learning, knowledge, possible.’