Subjects in Abundance

‘Appearing as the Other, woman appears at the same time as an abundance of being in contrast to that existence the nothingness of which man senses in himself…’

Simone de Beauvoir

‘For feminism, in the beginning there is alterity, the non-one, multiplicity.’

Rosi Braidotti

‘Abundance,’ says the sacred. A statement at once descriptive and demanding. At once restful in its placid certitude: there is abundance, now as it was in the beginning, reality is abundant; and unrelenting in its insistence: there must be many, must be more and other. The sacred refuses to be placed in the service of the singular, of the static, of the unchanging.

…

What might it mean, what might it change if female subjects were loved, imagined, thought, known in accordance with the abundant logic of the sacred? How might such an abundant imagining, abundant knowing answer Michel Foucault’s (still) urgent question: ‘How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge?’

Subjects in abundance. Time and again Luce Irigaray reminds us that humankind is not one, but two. Two genders, genres, kinds. Different from each other, irreducible to each other. It’s a start. But the logic of the sacred suggests that one of those kinds is not one, nor two, but three at least. Virgin, whore, and mother: a gender which is not one. A gender abundantly disruptive of the eternally fixed mono-subjectivity required by the logic of the theistic order. A gender gorgeously, hysterically trinitarian. A sacred gender of multiple persons, multiple knowledges. A gender as faithful to its own alterities as it is to its own perichoresis.

…
How might the virgin, whore, and mother be imagined as subjects of their own knowledge, each subject-knowledge separate yet somehow coinhering with the others?

The virgin. She whose knowledge of herself, of others, is so uncertain. She simply does not know for sure, not yet. Around her transcendence gleams, dazzles, hints the as yet unrealised, as yet unknown. Her yearning for knowledge blazes, undimmed, unbound, unclarified by any specificity. In her, knowledge is an urgent possibility; she leans toward knowing, leaning, yearning close almost but not quite touching. Such a burning radiance can act as beacon or as brand: drawing some near, frightening others away. The light she casts both illumines and blinds – herself, and others. Burning, she both is and risks the flames: too bright, too high, and they will consume immediately, will turn to ash their source. Too dim, too low, and they will disappear before any more enduring embers have been formed. The virgin. Sparks of epistemic fire, ephemeral flashes emanating from her dazzling demand. Her insistent yet uncertain demand for something she knows not what.

The virgin, in and through her untouched, untried immanence, incarnates transcendence, the swirling uncertain insistence that the beyond that is transcendence be made real, be made knowable and known. She is the place of its always possible, always improbable promise. About a powerful ontology she has much to teach. About epistemology, her lesson is far more brief but no less vital. Uncertainty she knows. All her knowing trembles, quivers with uncertainty. Whatever she senses might be could well be otherwise, will inevitably become, like the virgin herself, somehow otherwise quite soon. The virgin does not embody doubt; rather, she is the opening, in knowledge itself, to the unknown, unexpected, unpredictable. She is the promise that all knowledge can and will be otherwise. She reminds us all that knowledge itself is as transitory as any, as every being-made-knowable. She who yearns for knowledge senses that in the touching, in the holding both she and it will change. That every touch leaves a mark like a brand seared into flesh. The virgin is the knowledge that knowledge will bring
change, that knowledge changes both the knower and the known. But she does not know how. Uncertain. The virgin answers Foucault, ‘Subjects in abundance know ourselves as uncertain subjects, subjects uncertain of our own knowledge, of our own selves as knowing subjects. As subjects, uncertainty is a part of our very constitution.’

... Uncertain then, but how she burns, burns with questions. Epistemologically, this is the essential point: without the questions of the virgin, no answers would ever come into being. Without the burning questions of the virgin, no knowledge of any sort could ever be. As uncertain as she is, the virgin is the without which not of knowledge.

Uncertainty. It conveys a fragile, tentative quality, hopeful and fearful all at once. A reaching out, but also a drawing back. Promise and fright intermingled, inseparable. The overwhelming abundance of all that is is not guaranteed to be always benign. Uncertainty. Does it evoke a wistful hope for something, anything to provide for just a moment an answer, a pause, a rest from the swirling intensity of transcendence, the ravenous demands of the as yet unrealised? Maybe the grounding, comforting embrace of solid immanence? Or, perhaps, the affirming shock of undeniable otherness. An otherness so ‘other’ that the virgin is confronted with her own immediacy, with the unspeakable boundaries and limits of her self – a self truly as immanent, immediately and uniquely present, as she is unrealised, transcendent. An immanent subject known only in the immediate presence of an other.

Burning, questioning, yearning … at last, so soon, she touches an other, seeking answers.

... The whore. She whose knowledge comes through touch. She who learns, in that first instant, in that rushing, flooding, burning commingling of touches, that to touch at all is to risk immense change, is to make a claim upon an other, is to name a world in which the other is. That to touch at all is to be claimed into, and to be confronted as, a world more
immediate, more filled with pleasure and with danger than the virgin could ever imagine.\textsuperscript{6} That to touch at all is to be named incarnate into this specific life – as fleeting, finite, uncertain as it is. Seeking answers, the whore comes to know, first of all, that ‘this is required: to allow oneself to be questioned during one's inquiry of the [other] … and to listen to its claims.’\textsuperscript{7} Touch me, says the whore, as I am touching you. Question, speak, name my body into a whole with your hands. Interpret my flesh with your fingers, lips. Lay your claim upon me and listen as my skin and muscle and bone respond. Ask me to acknowledge your demands, confront me with your needs. Reply with arms and thighs and arching back as I answer, speak claims and queries of my own. As I discover, within the confines of my body, the expanse of this new world. We are here to give meaning, each to the other. Claim the response I owe you for affirming the immediacy, and the otherness, of this world, of my being, my body, the flesh and blood of me. Accept my touches as affirmation of your own uniqueness, your otherness, the borders of your singular being.

After her mother, who touched her, all of her? What, whom did she desire to touch, and who, what, through their touch affirmed again her otherness? Flesh only knows itself as unique, singular, present subject, when touched, stroked by an unpredictable, uncontrollable other. For are we not touched and touching everywhere, all the time, something – air, water, the ground we stand upon, the metal of this chair, the plastic of this keyboard? But is this touch? We are so fully a part of our surroundings, our locations, that we cannot separate ourselves from them. We cannot trans-locate ourselves from them; we cannot, by ourselves, translate the difference between self and surroundings. Only when an other touches through to me, mediates for me an opening in time and space, or, could it be the same, translates my foreignness to me, can I know myself as immanent, immediate, present, as subject, through translation.

‘But let us look closely at the translation process itself. First, it presupposes bilingual translators, thus flesh and blood mediators …’\textsuperscript{8} To translate you, I must know your tongue. Interrupting me, you take my tongue
between your teeth. Who is speaking whom? Your hand glides across my stomach; my finger traces the outline of your lips. Flesh translating flesh – to translate, to bear or carry to the other side, to change from one condition to another, to transform, transmute, transport, entrance, enrapture.\(^9\)

…

Having crossed the threshold the virgin could only approach, the whore is flooded with knowledge. She herself has been translated into an immanent immediacy. She has tasted certainty: at a minimum, the certainty of the other as an other, an uncontrollable, unpredictable, yet immensely real presence. And she has known, for a fleeting, flooding moment, the enormity, immensity of her own presence – told to her, translated to her through the other. Suddenly here is a world in which she is a presence. Her flesh made flesh made word made known made present in the world. From the confidence of her new certainty, the whore reaches for the other. But now, as newly born, her touch has changed, old words are newly said and thus it comes to her, a knowledge bittersweet.\(^{10}\) No one is ever to be touched or told or known the same again. As translations, subjects are never twice the same.

…

‘… translations are called for only because of the plurality of languages.’\(^{11}\) So very many tongues, each one a language foreign to itself. In the midst of such babel, in an upper room somewhere, tears and laughter flow … Plurality: the hint of an ethics yet to come, an imperative dismaying in its demand – maintain plurality, maintain abundance. Allow nothing to evade translation. The cursed blessing of the whore, by the work of her hands and brow and sweat and lips and tongue to translate others present, immanent, to translate them, that is, always away from either worship or abhorrence. For the whore knows that that which remains untranslated is only ever worshipped or abhorred beyond all reason, all expression. In either case (and perhaps they are the same case) the untranslated is unbearable, can never be endured for long, and would, if left unnamed (untongued?), be savagely destroyed – or expelled from the confines of this world. From the whore then, and who
would have imagined it, first glimpses of an ethics … to preserve plurality, preserve abundance, translate as though life depends upon it, for it does.

…

‘The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.’ Always affected by the foreign tongue, the gate swings open for the whore, her knowing begins to dance as veiled flames.

…

The words, the worlds, the bodies which flow from the commingling of tongues, the incantations, transmutations – the alchemy of an immanence shot through with translation. In which the darkest navel brims with wine, the belly is the wheat-filled bowl, fingers do drip myrrh, thighs are alabaster/gold and wild honey is distilled from lips of crimson. Immersed in one another, yet the whores know this one thing with bone-deep joyful sorrow. Their gardens are enclosed by walls, and though each may visit, may linger for a moment in the strange earth of the other, speak every hill and stream and bush and fruit and flower, yet they cannot there abide, cannot pronounce a final name. Claimed into the present, ceaselessly translating the immediacy she tastes, words pouring from her lips and tongue and fingertips, this the whore comes to know: the names for immanence are infinite. The knowledge whorrifying and salvific.

…

The whore answers Foucault, ‘Subjects in abundance know ourselves as one, and as other, and as always yet one more. As subjects we are made, made meaningful, made multiple, only through translations given and received. We are subjects in translation. As translations we are as numerous, as numberless as many waters.’

…

‘Uncertain,’ knows the virgin. ‘Many,’ knows the whore. With them, through them, ‘meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to
become lost in the bottomless depths of language.’ 13 But then, this numinous subject is never lost in language, is never without the (abyssal?) knowledge of the mother. A trinity, perhaps not economic, but, amazing grace indeed, epistemic. A female, epistemic, sacred trinity.14 The sacred: adverse to too much order, too much control, yet still it is a logic, is comprehensible – on its own terms, all of its own terms, always all at once. And the uncertainty of the virgin, the multiplicity of the whore, they are calmed, strengthened, held together and apart by the particular gift of the mother.

The knowledge of the mother. 'The meaning of every [subject] in a given passage has to be determined in reference to its coexistence with the [subjects] surrounding it.’15 The mother. She who surrounds, though not for long. The mother, who is the passage through which all must journey into meaning. Coexistence: whereby the being of each one is given meaning, substance, made knowable, only through the surrounding others. ‘Uncertain,’ murmurs the virgin. ‘Many,’ reminds the whore. ‘Yes, and yes,’ accepts the mother, ‘but neither nothing, nor every.’ And she knows that meanings are gifts we can live neither wholly without nor wholly within.

Paul Ricoeur, if I do not misunderstand him, suggests that the ‘economy of the gift’ is always accompanied by a ‘logic of superabundance’.16 And when I asked her what she thought when she first held her daughter in her arms she wondered aloud, ‘How is it possible that she is so small?’ The mother knew that the gift she had given was too large to be held. As she answered my question she was smiling. The mother. Always already virgin whore. Who knows already, always, the uncertainty of transcendence, knows already the overwhelming multitude of immanence, the clamouring abundance of both. Who responds to the cries, the claims of an other, not pretending to hold their only meaning.
Yet in the midst of it all, she pauses, smiles. She knows she has acceded to life, to the life happening within her, through her, around her. She knows she wields the power to give life, and more, to give meaning unto life – ‘the impossible and nevertheless sustained connection between life and meaning.’ Such a connection, she knows, is hers to make. It is hers to give, to insist upon, to protect, or to prevent. It is hers to enable the improbable, the unpredictable meanings arising from the tangled coexistence that is being-in-and-of-the-world.

But what life, what meaning will she give? What lives, what meanings will she try to hold at bay? How will she keep open a passage for the other, the passage to uncertainty and the multitude of immanence? A passage in which the strange newcomer might move about in relative safety, both protected from and exposed to meaning? (For we are all of us born immediately into excess, overabundance, the ceaseless crashing waves of far too much – of too much to notice, too much even to sense it all, too much everything refusing to sit still, to sound the same or look the same or smell the same or taste the same or feel the same, too much too much requiring attention, demanding translation, too much uncertainty too much plurality it’s all too much and we, we are far too little, we cannot make sense of it all, not by ourselves.) Such a strange new little one, always already abundantly other, hugely foreign to the mother – a knowledge she can never forget. ‘The mother who must learn that the infant who was but an hour ago a part of her own body is now a different individual, with its own hungers and needs, and that if she listens to her own body to interpret the child, the child will die, is schooled in an irreplaceable school.’ Imagine. The suddenness of a coexistence with that which exceeds you, with that which you are not, with that which you can never fully comprehend (a fact of which you are reminded again and again), with that to which you must begin to offer meaning, just as it begins to translate you anew. In you the virgin and the whore unite, begin to whisper.

...
'Let us not seek to solidify, to turn the otherness of the foreigner into a thing. Let us merely touch it, brush by it, without giving it a permanent structure'\(^\text{20}\) (keep open the passage to uncertainty). ‘A translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course …’\(^\text{21}\) (the names for immanence are infinite). In the mother, a knowledge of passages, movements necessary if meaning is ever to brush against the other, touch through to the surrounding subjects. Passages – in which subjects are not trapped within a cage of certainty, paralysed within a rigid structure of set names, nor set adrift into an infinite, unsettled, undefined un-knowing. Within the mother, knowledge of the passages into open yet always already populated spaces where meanings coexist and co-create, jostling each other for attention. Where, nonetheless, overabundance is held in check, though not denied entirely, by the surrounding others. Where the unexpected will, from time to time, occur. Passages into a life, that is, with an opening for wonder. A space/time where/when the miracle that anything is at all refuses to be closed off, appears as cause for aching, touching wonder – a where/when ‘faithful to the perpetual newness of the … other, the world. Faithful to becoming, to its virginity, its power …’\(^\text{22}\) Passages. Where/when all are drawn to move toward the others, toward and away, giving and receiving sense, meaning.\(^\text{23}\) A where/when neither frozen in Contemplation (wonder rationalised, abstracted wholly away from the world of the mutable and the mundane?), nor emptied out by Doubt (uncertainty trapped in its most dis-eased, disfigured form?), nor filled to bursting with Too Much (excess to an extreme, continually distracting attention away from any one particular other, and therefore from all others?). Movements, meanings passed along, the passage from one to another never finally complete.

Thus the mother balances the knowledge of the virgin and the knowledge of the whore, combines an openness to uncertainty with the myriad, changeful touches of the others – all irreducibly other, yet translated as meaningful in and through the passages of which we are
a part. The mother pauses, looks at Foucault and says, simply, ‘Subjects in abundance know ourselves as subjects in passage.’

... ‘How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge?’ The feminine trinity replies: ‘As subjects in passage, subjects through translation, subjects inherently uncertain. And, oh yes, as subjects changing with every touch.’ Why might such knowledge matter?

... Religion is returning, so they say. Here in the west it seems to be a curious sort of ‘religion’, teeming with the political and techno-scientific, secure in its interpretation of the sacred as ‘the safe and sound, the unscathed, the immune.’ Could it be a religion attempting to substitute the supposedly controllable force of technology for the dangerous, unruly, contaminating power of the sacred? There are those who say they seek to rid the world of terror, which may well mean, of all power they can neither comprehend nor control. Where I write these words the ‘problem’ is deemed primarily a foreign one, and on so many levels. Open any newspaper, turn to the international page, and traces of the sacred, that demanding bloody (sacrè!) something that defies description, that would kill for life abundant, that endures beyond all reason, that erupts, explodes, wreaks havoc – traces of the sacred will rub off those pages onto your fingertips. It is possible, here, where there is running water hot and cold and anti-bacterial soap in seventeen scents, to wash one’s hands of the matter. Possible, but perhaps unwise. The cleansing of the sacred is, I suspect, intimately connected to the washing away of the terrifying, alluring, fecund agency of all who have ever been named ‘foreign’, ‘stranger’, ‘other’, ‘feminine’.

... The sacred. A knowledge we do not acknowledge. A power of which we do not speak. An authority ‘we’, particularly we white western christian women, hasten to deny. Why, I wonder, why? What frightens us, what keeps us from approaching that which is our heritage, the names given as our birthright? We’re back, it seems, to wonder.
Wonder. In the beginning, wonder. Speechless, nameless, wordless wonder. Wonder. Noun. A cause of astonishment or surprise. An attitude or feeling of amazed admiration or nascent, perplexed, or bewildered curiosity aroused by the extraordinary and unaccountable; a state of fascinated or questioning attention before what strikes one as strange beyond understanding; a feeling of uncertainty. Wonder. Verb. To be in a state of rapt or questioning attention toward the extraordinary or mysterious. To wish to know something.26

In the beginning, wonder: awareness of the other, not of self. Coming from the other, a something. An amazing, astonishing, curious something that calls for attention, calls us to attend to that which is other than ourselves. First, the extraordinary, astonishing other. First the other, cause of wonder, and only after, only later, a being/self responding, wondering. A self that wonders only because of the other. In the beginning, then, the other, not I. The logic is as follows: You are a marvel, thus I wonder. You appear, extraordinary and mysterious, and you are the cause of my appearance as a wondering being, a bewildered being with the nascent wish to know … something. You are the cause of me – a being in whom the desire for knowledge has been aroused – by you, the other. You are, and my attention is directed toward you. Your appearance evokes from me such attention, first of all attention toward you, and only after, only later, does it dawn on me that I too appeared, that I too must be, a being-who-appears-and-evokes-wonder. You are, thus I am. And both of us surprised, astonished, unable to account for whatever strangeness has led us to this meeting, this particular meeting between two separate beings, each Other to the other. Each of us newly uncertain, newly aroused, newly bewildered, and newly curious. How extraordinary.

Wonder, an attitude toward the other, toward the world of others, the world in which others appear and move about.27 Wonder: an attitude of rapt and questioning attention. Attention toward the other. You (every other ‘you’) are a marvel, and because you arouse and evoke it, you are
worthy of attentive wonder. Simply by appearing in this world, you are worthy of attention. There is a nascent onto-ethics here, most deeply rooted. Simply by being, the other is worthy of wonder. You are, thus you are worthy. But now, surprising movement, split passage simultaneous to ontology to ethics, passage required by that attitude of questioning attention. In that passage, in that realisation of a coexistence with surrounding others, I begin to wonder. ‘What kind of a being are you? and How kind of a being are you?’ That you are worthy, worthy of wonder, is the onto-ethical beginning, but not the end. (Yet it may be the hurried (harried?) affirmation of this conjoined beginning, dare I write it, that binds so many women, keeps them attentive to so many others long after those others have proven themselves undeserving of attention. Undeserving, which is not, is never the same as unworthy.) That you are, therein lies your worth; what and how you are, therein lies the question. What kind of a being are you; how kind of a being are you? (Deceptively brief questions, considering the time that must be taken, and given, to answer them – even partially. Time, which begins, perhaps, not with a bang, but with a question.)

The questioning begins. The virginal, uncertain questioning. For we have not yet touched, not yet brushed our queries each against the other – though we will, we will. Wonder has aroused in us just such desire: the desire to touch, to stroke, to press against each other, to meet incarnate, most bodily encounter. Bodies and wonder. Each body a mass of wondering desire. Each body its own mass. Each body, each mass possessed of its own gravity. Gravity, which, inexorably, attracts. It must be done: reaching out, reaching through that open passage in order to touch the other, the whore begins to celebrate the mass, the body of the wondrous strange. In that sacred act, blessed confirmation of the real; in that sacred act, the movement, the passage of meanings between, amongst the gathered others, each mothered into partial meaning through the touch, the translation of an other. No mothering apart from whoring, here. No whoring apart from the most virginal of questioning.

Wonder: the substance-less substance connecting the feminine trinity, flowing equally from and between the virgin, whore, and mother.
Wonder: the stuff of mutual co-inherence, the unbinding glue of perichoresis. Inexhaustible, uncontainable, uncountable, uncontrollable. Simultaneously a questioning, an honouring, a celebrating. ‘Yes?’ says wonder, in the beginning. ‘Yes.’ The sacred response to the astonishing, perplexing, and deeply strange fact that anything is at all, even momentarily.

Rich in knowledge, suffused with wonder, the virgin, whore and mother are sacred subjects, subjects who could, perhaps, teach us that we are all of us subjects in abundance; we are all of us subjects only because of abundance. Where there is no abundance, do not expect us to remain. Honour abundance, says the sacred. How might we do so? The question remains open.

Endnotes
1 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p. 160.
5 Perichoresis is a christian theological term meaning ‘mutual coinherence’. It is generally used in reference to the trinity, and conveys the sense that each term of the trinity is radiantly distinct yet fundamentally inseparable from the other two terms.
6 Tod Linafelt, ‘Biblical Love Poetry (… And God),’ Journal of the American Academy of Religion 70, no. 2 (2002), p. 325. ‘The commingling of selves exists only in the violation [which is simultaneously the establishment] of borders, only in the state of being affected by an external agent, which, though we may know such violation [establishment] as an experience of ecstasy, is no less an experience of anguish.’
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12 Ibid., p. 81, quoting Rudolf Pannwitz.

13 Ibid., p. 82.

14 On this matter I would suggest that Luce Irigaray’s claim, ‘We have no female trinity,’ is simply erroneous. See Luce Irigaray, ‘Divine Women,’ in *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 63. She is correct when she asserts that there is no ‘mother, daughter, spirit’ trinity (p. 62), but there are other possibilities, other trinitarian combinations, among which the virgin/whore/mother.


20 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 3.


22 Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 82.

23 ‘Wonder is the motivating force behind mobility in all its dimensions.’ Ibid., p. 73.


25 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*.

26 *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*. Taken from numerous definitions of wonder.

27 The sense of ‘appear’ or of ‘the appearance of others’ which I am trying to express/convey here is entirely in accordance with that of Hannah Arendt, who described ‘the space of appearance’ as ‘namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me … To be deprived of [this space] means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. To [humans] the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all …’ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 198-199.