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Cardinal's *The Words to Say it*: The Words to Reproduce Mother

Abstract

The Words to Say it, an autobiographical novel by Algerian-born Frenchwoman Marie Cardinal, earned praise for the accuracy with which it documents a classic psychoanalysis. Quickly sketched, the plot seems to suggest that the separation from an overpowering mother is effected by paternal language and phallic law—the normal, normative psychic itinerary of the human subject. In its reconsideration of the Oedipal, this essay explores Irigaray's idea of the ambiguities of separation from mother and the possibility that the story of (feminine) subjectivity begins with the mother, begins with affiliation and affirmation even as it speaks of separateness. From this perspective, the protagonist's cure comes about when she associates with her mother's belated madness and sees it as a revolt against the phallic laws of their bourgeois class and against the colonial laws of their Algerian homeland. In the last stages of analysis, the protagonist remembers the language her mother taught her to evoke all the particularities of Algeria; this maternal tongue connects the protagonist both to mother and Motherland. The image of a nurturing Algeria calls for a re-analysis of the cultural drama of the unnamed Algerian war. If the book models an investigation of other psychic versions that challenge what otherwise might be too readily assumed as psychoanalytic law, the book also suggests re-articulating what otherwise might be too readily assumed as cultural law and order.

Keywords

The Words to Say it, autobiography, novel, Marie Cardinal, psychoanalysis, mother, mother figure, phallic law, feminine subjectivity, bourgeois, cultural law

Cardinal's *The Words to Say it:*
The Words to Reproduce Mother

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In 1976, Algerian-born Frenchwoman Marie Cardinal, already an established novelist, garnered the Prix Littré for *Les Mots pour le dire* (*The Words to Say it*), an unusual autobiographical novel in that it filters the protagonist's life story through the lens of a seven-year psychoanalytic treatment. In fact, the novel appears to stand as the crowning achievement of her psychoanalysis; it "documents" a successful talking cure that reproduces, articulates, and definitively contains the sources of madness. Broadly summarized, the protagonist of the narrative progresses from illness to health, from uncertain to clearly delineated subjectivity, from mental and physical moribundity to what the narrator calls a birth of herself. Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote the preface and afterword for the English language translation of the book, gives generous praise to what he deems a true-to-life representation of the psychoanalytic process; he offers plaudits as well for the agent of this process, the analyst, "a compassionate guide who possessed the requisite wisdom to steer [the protagonist] along the right course of self-discovery" (viii). Indeed, he aggrandizes the analyst's power, noting that "a few words uttered by a psychoanalyst stopped a somatic symptom," indicating further that such occurrences are not that rare in clinical practice (305). Polarized, as Bettelheim sees it, against this positive, healing power is the source of the protagonist's madness in the person of her mother, whose "stranglehold of . . . hate" relaxes only upon her death, making her at last loveable (308). The narrator herself seems to subscribe to this notion of two competing forces when, at the end of her analysis (and the book), she thanks her doctor: "[m]y mother gave me the Thing [her term for

madness], you have given me the analysis, it's a perfect balance."¹ From this summary, one can gather that mother's insanity is held in check by the analyst's language, the "words to say" and to exorcise "it," the unspeakable madness.

Bettelheim's near-allegorical scenario—which I have intentionally simplified—recalls an earlier psychoanalytic account of the Freudian father who severs the relation between mother and child.² Or, in Lacan's refinement of Freud, of the imposed paternal, phallic law which reveals the subject as split (off).³ Theoretically, the movement from mother and her territory to father and his territory represents the normal, normative psychic itinerary of the human subject. From this perspective as well, Marie demonstrates dramatically the risks of (nearly) not maneuvering that rocky passage away from the mother. However, this predictable plot line accounts only partially for the narrative.⁴ In the reading that follows, I propose an alternative in which Marie very purposefully investigates the so-called pre-Oedipal, maternal domain not only to put an end to subjective disintegration—simply put, madness—but also in order to remedy or complete the process of subject construction by re-connecting with the mother.⁵ Marie's cautious reaffirmation of the maternal eventually serves to reaffirm her profound, personal bond to her native land, Algeria, equally conceptualized as a "mother" from whom she has been unhealthily alienated.

It would certainly be difficult to deny that the narrator's earliest descriptions of her madness at its most severe point suggest that Cardinal's Marie has never really gone beyond a pre-Oedipal existence.⁶ Language doesn't appear to control her mental processes any more than it appears to rule her body. Indeed, the language/body relationship operates quite the opposite way: Marie's body constantly "expresses" itself as female through incessant and prodigious menses, a condition that completely overruns her mental reality. I am not making an argument here that woman can be equated with the body, that the hysterical is the "naturally" female condition; instead, I contend that Marie embodies the specifically female problematic of separation from the Maternal Body as exacerbated by the process of reproduction. Perhaps nowhere in the book is this problematic more evidently displayed than in the narrator's distanced self-portrait as a *folle* mired in the near-autistic depths of mental illness:

It was between the bidean and the bathtub that she felt the safest when she could no longer control the thing inside. It was there

that she hid, waiting for the remedies to take effect. Curled up, heels against her buttocks, arms holding her knees tight to the chest, her nails dug so deep into the palms of her hands that they cut the flesh, her head rolling forward to back or side to side, too heavy, blood and sweat pouring from her body. (MPD 16-17)

The passage replays a return to the womb, a regression to the self-enfolded, heavy-headed fetus confined in the uterine-like security of a dark bathroom. This literally represented desire conflicts head-on with Marie's real physical circumstances, including her psychosomatic symptoms: she is the bloody, already-rejected fetus and the bleeding, rejecting womb. Reintegration with the Maternal proves impossible and her body phrases that thought in two ways: Marie fails to reproduce herself as fetus relating to mother and fails to reproduce herself as mother relating to fetus. Marie seems to be psychically severed from two flesh-and-blood generations—her mother and her three children.

Marie's dilemma between the bath and the bidet, infancy and motherhood, is however a false choice that poses the problem from the angle of assimilation. What keeps the (infantile) body from being assimilated to the ambient maternal body? What prevents the (maternal) body from engulfing the infant? How does the female body (and psyche) maintain its integrity without running the danger of rejection? Cardinal's character acts out the crisis that Luce Irigaray attempts to sort out when she addresses the nurturant Mother in *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre (One Doesn't Move without the Other)*:

You put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate. Put yourself less in me and let me look at you. I want to see you while you feed me. Not to lose my/your eyes when I open my mouth for you. And for you to stay near me while I drink you. Continue to be outside too. Keep yourself/myself outside too. Don't engulf yourself, don't engulf me, in what passes from you to me. I want us both to be there. That one not disappear into the other or the other into one. (9-10)

Restated, and perhaps a little simplistically: the story of (feminine) subjectivity begins with the mother, begins with affiliation and affirmation even as it speaks of separateness. Cardinal eventually

builds a story that comes to the same conclusion, but in order to arrive at that conclusion, she must reconstruct Marie's history as her mother's attempt to reproduce in the daughter the mother's denial of feminine subjectivity.

Returning to maternal influence, Marie's narrative illustrates unequivocally that incompatible differences exist not only between daughter and mother but also between the mother's ironclad conception of "the woman she [the mother] wished to bring into the world" (MPD 86) and the woman-child Marie is. Despite deep divisions between ideal and real, the little girl understands herself at the very least to share with her mother the desire that she be re-assimilated to her mother's image. Unlike Irigaray's wish for a bond that maintains separateness, the child seeks fusion with the mother. Marie recalls wanting—and at an age old enough to recognize the impossibility of her desire—to be the wine that her mother nightly, copiously imbibes. Failing to be assimilated to the mother-conceived image and thereby determined by maternal absorption/affection, the child invents alternative strategies to win mother's love. Many of the strategies have to do with ingestion in imitation of the maternal ideal. For example, she eats according to her mother's directives rather than according to her own appetite. She consumes the elements of communion, not out of any great piety, but in order to absorb the religious goodness that her mother venerates. Through her behavior and the meanings she assigns to it, the child tries desperately to emulate both a model daughter and a model mother—images that would conflate and create the sought-after harmony.

Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals that, early on, the young girl has reservations about following the maternal model of assimilation. Believing that, in the sacrament of communion, she is literally swallowing a minuscule Christ, Marie frets that the "tiny little man" will get lost "in the complications of [her] body" (MPD 93). Assimilation could mean engulfing the source of Supreme Goodness, causing Its total annihilation, and thereby losing a sure link with her devout mother. Assimilation has other risks that her mother expressly apprises her of: " 'If you swallow a cherry pit, a cherry tree will grow in your belly' " (MPD 93). The child has only to apply this "rule" to any inadvertently ingested seed to come to the conclusion that they will all root, sprout, and overrun her entire body. These childish fears can only readably play out deep anxieties about the maternal role of reproduction. From the child's vantage,

motherhood implies both the annihilation of differences (between inside and outside, between goodness and evil) and the loss of autonomy. Assuming mother's reproductive powers is more frightening than submitting to her powers, a notion that seems to confirm itself in Marie's later history: her mental and psychosomatic crisis becomes most acute following the birth of her third child, that is, at the moment she repeats her mother's pregnancy with herself, also a third child.

Given her associations with eating and "containing," Marie's numerous stories of uncontrollable expulsion and evacuation—specifically, vomiting and urination—begin to display logical patterns. Ingestion according to mother's orders would invest her with this terrible maternal capacity; expulsion becomes the obvious process to avoid that eventuality. Moreover, the processes of expulsion as she describes them become two different sources of "pleasure," peculiar as the word may seem. For example, her innovation on the process of urination—she fashions herself paper urinating tubes—leads her to the unconscious discovery of genital self-pleasuring and a sense of total well-being in the world:

Down in my calves I felt a sensation bordering between pleasure and pain, which moved up my thighs and invaded my abdomen. Finally, because I had lost control, I began to pee hot urine over my fingers as my body was taken over by a rocking, pitching motion that made me arch my back violently and gave me an extraordinary sense of complete happiness that frightened me. (MPD 127)

Marie doesn't recognize the experience for what it is (i.e., sexually pleasurable) until she has spent some time on the analyst's couch. Presumably she refrains for some time from mentioning this recurring activity on the grounds that it is insignificant or, at worst, mildly embarrassing. Put into words, however, the experience exposes a knot of ambivalences that can be linked to other parts of her analysis. First, what seems to have been denied for a long time in this memory of the paper tube is the independent, empirical discovery of a "complete happiness" of her own body. She was/is agent and beneficiary of her own fulfillment.

On the other hand, Marie recalls her "tube" experiences as being frightening for the inexplicable happiness they produce. A series of memories from the same era (but resuscitated only toward

the end of the analysis) sheds some light on this unexpected connection between pleasure and fear. Marie reports having “spied” regularly on her mother’s night solitude. Her mother danced alone, and in secret, to jazz:

Her features were relaxed. Her eyes almost closed, her mouth half open, let pleasure and an intense satisfaction escape. I found her indecent. . . . I couldn’t understand what connection there could be between her and those rhythms. It was music that came from the belly, the loins, the thighs, an entire area of the body that my mother couldn’t know and shouldn’t know. It seemed to me that I had caught her in an act of sin; I couldn’t have said why. (MPD 301-02)

Interestingly, the mother’s pleasure seems to originate in the same anatomical region (belly, loins, thighs) as her own in the afore-mentioned episode. Despite the connection, or perhaps because of it, the quasi-sexual nature of her mother’s dancing shocks, disgusts, and alienates the child. She doesn’t see as compatible the roles of mother and sexual being, a precocious indication of Marie’s fear of sexual autonomy or of unknown (sexual) connections to others—men, for example.

Thus, Marie’s dilemma structures itself between two desires, two sources of satisfaction: first, the familiar pleasures of being inseparable from mother; and, second, the unfamiliar pleasures discovered with her own body (and witnessed in her mother’s) that imply severance of any mother-child connection. Embarkation into woman- and mother-hood emphasizes the movement from oral to genital/reproductive but not so much as a transition as an aggravation of the same problem of how to maintain separateness and connection.⁷ Marie’s constant hemorrhaging in adulthood functions as a peculiar physiological compromise. As a “release” rather than a containment, it allows her the same furtive gestures associated with private, almost unconscious pleasure; she remarks that twenty years after: “I realized that the gestures I used to adapt the tube to my body, my fumbling movements to find the exact source, were the same as the motions I used to check the flow of blood” (MPD 126). It is also a real condition that symbolizes non-reproduction, non-maternity, and perhaps even unavailability for sexual relations.

Finally, the condition is perceived by her family as a physical illness. The attentions of mother and of the (male) medi-

cal establishment, thus reducing her from independent woman to sick little girl, a position she willingly assumes for some time.

Marie's regression, as confirmed by her onslaught of psychosomatic illness in adulthood, doesn't fit the girl-child's Oedipal compromises as proposed in the Freudian theory of psycho-sexual development. As Freud posited it, the female child, upon discovering mother's lack of penis, redirects allegiance to the more "appropriately" equipped father with the growing realization that a baby born of alliances with males would be the closest she could get to having a penis of her own.⁸ (Lacan renovates Freud's account of the castration complex in his conception of a signifying, non-biological phallus which determines the sexual subjectivity of women and men. The Lacanian phallus—inevitably male-associated—is the instigator of desire and the marker of subjective difference.)⁹ Marie consciously reviews her relationship with her father, no doubt for knowing the emphasis laid in psychoanalysis on the paternal role. In some respects, her father presents a distortedly virile profile in the family album. Divorced from her mother for most of Marie's life and thus associated with a larger, outside world, he appears to be a free-wheeling bachelor with an appetite for the ladies and a keen appreciation of the budding femininity of his daughter. But Marie opens the chapter on her father by denying his, or any other man's, impact on the extended matriarchy in which she lives ("No man intervened in my youth. I was in the hands of women" [MPD 63]). Moreover, she recounts her childhood relationship to her father as one of mutual lack of understanding and of detachment on her part. As she describes it, she consciously excluded him from her "universe," an indication that he had no power to sever the child from her mother-oriented world.

Indeed, if obliged to judge Marie's relationships to each of her parents along Oedipal lines, one might see in the narrator's characterization that the parental gender attributes appear to be crossed. Her mother is "so hard"—a strict enforcer of social, religious, moral, and hygienic laws; her father is "so pathetic"—emotionally soft, vulnerable, needy, but also, as comes to the narrator only in retrospect, unconditionally loving. Furthermore, her father's lack of hardness manifests itself as fluidity; suffering as he does from acute tuberculosis, he is surrounded, in Marie's mind, by an invisible aura of germs episodically reified as bloody sputum. Marie last "remembers" her father in the narration of his funeral wake, during which his unembalmed body, despite her mother's efforts to control all

aspects of this last ritual, reduces itself in the Algerian heat to a penetrating, ambient odor nearly indistinguishable from the smells of dying floral pieces. As insidiously as the smell of his putrefaction floats up the nostrils of his disapproving, bourgeois in-laws, the father's unrestrained, sickly essence flows beyond his own body into the bodies of his offspring: a daughter who dies in infancy of TB and a son whose lungs and general constitution are exceedingly fragile. The third child, Marie, shows no signs of the disease, thus "differing," if only temporarily, from her father for reasons of her robust resiliency.

However, Marie's illness in adulthood brings forth some resemblances precisely to the father's differences from the mother. Marie's pathological symptoms repeat some aspects of her father's disease: his spongy, disintegrating lungs that occasionally hemorrhage find their displaced analogue in Marie's bleeding, fibromatous uterus which, she is initially convinced, is physically deteriorating. In addition, Marie's "disease" creates a subtle connection with paternal sexual activity: although an overt refusal of sexual conduct, her condition promotes, as traced above, gestures having obscured connotations of sexual pleasure. Seen from the primly bourgeois perspective her mother has adopted, illness, whether tuberculosis or psychosis, and sexual activity are both sources of deep shame to be divorced from, excised, or repressed. But seen from a psychoanalytic perspective, Marie's vaguely sexual activity promoted and disguised by illness establishes a non-Oedipal relationship with her father, an ungendered (or ambiguously gendered) sameness with him. Through therapy, Marie reveals another non-Oedipal angle of her development *vis-a-vis* her father: "[h]e never wounded me, never marked me, never touched me" (MPD 80). In other words, he never made a difference for who she was, never marked her with his difference, never exercised his theoretical Law over her. "[A]nd perhaps it's for that reason that I have never sought to have any father but him" (MPD 80) she concludes—leading us to the un-Freudian interpretation that this paternal non-intervention has made of him, not an alternative to the maternal, but a theoretical version of the maternal.

Leaving aside the paternal—since it can't account for the difference between the child and its mother or between sanity and madness—we are confronted with the possibility that Marie's mother may have made the Oedipal difference, separating the daughter from the maternal." In one of the book's most trenchant chap-

ters, Marie comes to the unpleasant terms that already implicitly separated her from her mother, explicitly referred to in the chapter as her mother's "dirty deed" (*saloperie*). The mother relates her numerous failed attempts to abort the daughter—a story curiously intended to initiate the daughter into the new meanings of her pubescent body. Her mother tells this shocking pre-history while the two walk the streets of Algiers, a world representing an unfamiliar aggressivity for the adolescent and, for the grown woman who reminisces, anticipating the self-butchery of the French-Algerian conflict. In this second narration, the daughter can't help but grasp her mother's violence toward her:

There, in the street, with a few sentences, she put out my eyes, she pierced my eardrums, she tore off my scalp, she cut off my hands, she shattered my knees, she ripped open my belly, she mutilated my genitals. (MPD 164)

In other words, Marie understands her mother's words as the tools to effect a successful "abortion," a grisly verbal "operation" that seems to leave the mother's mind and body unscathed.

While the narrator presents this brutal rupture as the final transition into a peculiar but passively "feminine" adulthood, "Oedipal" ill describes the character's process of separation from the maternal and the consequences of that process. The divergences bear examination. First, the child doesn't give up mother as libidinal object so much as she herself is given up by the mother. Nor does the daughter subsequently transfer her affections to the (absent) father; he is acknowledged as a forgotten source of love more than love's object. It should be noted too that making the "appropriate" Oedipal transfer remains a hypothetical move entertained much later in her life ("he would have attracted me" [MPD 80] she says, studying a photo of her father in the full vigor of youth). Finally, as Marie rehearses the events and articulates her adult reactions to them it becomes apparent that her recovery of mental health isn't founded on an acceptance of presumed castration but on a whole-hearted rejection of the mutilation of both her femininity and her independent subjectivity. She understands that her mother's "unnatural" desire for separation sparks Marie's profound hatred, efficiently repressed and sublimated into a feminine disease.

On the other hand, these divergences from the Oedipal plot don't seem to disqualify entirely the simple fact that, in this chapter, Marie as recovering adult, now suitably equipped with the words to do it, returns to make final her severance from mother.¹⁰ In so doing, she resolves the untenable ambiguities raised in that paradigmatic image of her madness "between the bidet and the bathtub." She historicizes her status as aborted fetus and delivers herself from the non-subjectivity her mother wished for her. Furthermore, recreating the mother's desire for fatal separation allows Marie to locate the origins of alienation and to see them as outside herself, imposed by the mother rather than inherent in herself.

Having set up the mutual desire for separation doesn't quite close the long-sustained "developmental" account of the mother's sphere of influence (the Imaginary?). (A significant hiatus occurs at this juncture in the narrative-analysis: Marie attends therapy sessions without saying anything at all, as though assuming all has been said once she has aired mother's villainous *saloperie*.) But from this point, Cardinal almost doubles the book, detailing, among other events of psychic importance, the mother's differences from Marie, as though to make thoroughly sure to break the metaphorical link of "telle mère, telle fille" 'like mother, like daughter.'

Even if only poetically engineered, the near concurrence of her mother's rapid deterioration into death and the conclusion of Marie's seven-year-long analysis seems to indicate that the daughter's complete recovery of health and self-hood is contingent upon fatal severance with her mother. However, Cardinal's narrative also reveals a development in the maternal psycho-history that, in some highly significant ways, brings the mother closer to Marie. Toward the end of her life, her mother finds herself exiled from the beloved Algerian homeland, alienated from her comfortable milieu, her colonialist cronies, her upper-class family—indeed, entirely alienated from all except her third child. Before the latter, she lets herself sink into complete negligence, immodesty, incontinence, and alcoholism. Rather than diagnose her mother's condition as precocious senility or severe substance abuse, Marie understands it as the undeniable manifestation of madness. It is as though she were viewing a caricatured version of her own earlier unstable existence. But within the mother's madness, Marie also recognizes a benighted revolt against once fervently held beliefs. All that was once ardently and rigorously observed in her mother's life is ostentatiously rejected before Marie.

The relationship of the two characters reaches a breaking point in a last scene when her mother, in an intoxicated stupor, defecates in Marie's living room and in her presence. The scene reactivates some of the symbols and the mechanisms of the psycho-narrative shared between mother and daughter, although with important distinctions. For example, the mother has, figuratively at least, accomplished that long-desired expulsion of the fetus (an image strengthened by Marie's term of "*fille-étron*" 'turd-daughter' for the unwanted, unabortable baby). With distinct resonances with her daughter's madness, the mother appears to replay her rejection of maternity, only this time, in the context of her rejection of what she perceives foggily as the false institutions of her class. Just as ambivalently as her daughter, she appears to play out infantile needs of (maternal?) reassurance: the "baby" who has soiled herself rocks back and forth in her bed "as though to rock herself" (MPD 329) and looks to her daughter to excuse this unbecoming behavior, to give her some sign of motherly, loving tolerance.

Marie, however, recognizes in the mother's behavior her own former symptoms of revolt misdirected into self-destruction. In a supreme effort to prevent turning her own rekindled violence against those two primordial objects, her mother or herself, Marie commits the unexpected in their ancient mother-child dynamic: she brutally calls attention to her mother's ignoble reality, not to effect some overdue severance, but rather to prod her mother into the self-preservation that Marie has painstakingly achieved. In the mother's case, however, rescue is impossible; she has replicated too well the daughter's madness and pursued it to its logical conclusion, epitomized in a corpse in fetal position, a grimace of terror on her face.

This literal separation from the mother and her insanity still doesn't bring resolution and closure, as Bettelheim et al. might wish to think. In the last phases of therapy, Marie dreams resolutions having nothing to do with separation from mother's power; in fact, quite oppositely, the dreams represent a reappropriation of a mother- or woman-associated power. A first dream, or more accurately Marie's interpretation of it, reveals language's power to articulate anything and everything. For instance, Marie must overcome her own resistance to using the unbecoming words that describe her dream of a gigantic toilet in which she euphorically swims in the company of silver cases of excrement. The very language she has so long resisted authorizes her to acknowledge and revel in the full

range of human experience, from the sublime to the repulsive. Marie's discovery about language parallels her recollections, away from the analyst's couch, of a happy complicity with her mother and a mutual love for their world. Marie recalls how her mother shared her affection for their native Algeria and its "treasures," teaching Marie the names of the shells on its beaches or the constellations in its night sky. Mother and daughter employ this common "mother tongue" not to separate, but to enumerate and celebrate variety and vastness. Mother links Marie to Algeria, the motherland by all its associations, somehow harmonious in all its Mediterranean loveliness, sensuality, insane conflicts, and downright ugliness.¹¹ As she says: "[Mother] put me in touch with the cosmos" (MPD 238).

Seen from a different angle, a second set of dreams raises the specter of the fear of male power (a less positive inheritance from her mother), a fear that Marie comprehends as being also universally female.¹² On close analysis of the words and symbols of her dreams, she discovers that her mind has already worked through this fear as unfounded. Awe-inspiring phallic power is symbolized in one dream by an unimpressive little pocket knife, "an inoffensive weapon" (MPD 297) wielded by an Algerian *fellagha*. More empowering is her second dream, rife with worn sexual imagery (a benevolent Mediterranean *mer-mère* 'sea-mother,' a bathtub of warm water, a series of phallic snakes). The dream concludes when Marie, carrying the last snake, joins her husband in the bathtub where each takes hold of the writhing creature together to tear it into halves. Marie analyzes: "It sufficed to share this [male] power; my fear disappeared" (MPD 315). But I find Marie's conclusion somewhat wanting and so propose an extension of her thought. Male and female power, equally represented and equally exercised by Jean-Pierre and Marie, is itself a power over the phallic (law). Gender-balanced power—or perhaps it is ungendered power—over the symbol translates as the ability to dissect language's Symbolic power, to reduce its inordinate might, to dismantle it into inoffensiveness, and to let the semiotic emerge. In this version of subjective independence, "female" neither submits to nor supplants "male"; rather, analytical language becomes an effective, and perhaps essential, tool for reestablishing a holistic ambience, represented in the dream by the enveloping and inclusive waters of the bath. Marie wields the language of articulation her mother attempted

Marie's literal return to the mother's grave to have an unmediated, unanalyzed "conversation" carries out the dreamt resolutions, effecting something like an affirmation of the pre-Oedipal.¹³ Her statement of unequivocal love reveals much:

"I" (me, crazy, not crazy, child, woman) "love" (attachment, union, but also warmth, kissing, joy still possible, a hope of happiness) "you" (my mother, the beautiful, the expert, the proud, the demented, the suicide case). (MPD 341)

Her language acknowledges the multiple positions she and her mother hold, without denying the absolute experiences of love and madness, the extremes of merger and alienation. Marie's language reproduces the origins of her mother's progressive alienation ("the demented, the suicide case") as a severance from her own womanliness and from her native Algerian motherland by the fraudulent ideologies of bourgeois culture and of colonial law. What separates both mother and daughter—not to mention a host of Algerian colonialists and, briefly, the indigent populations—from their native soil is paternalistic France, *la patrie*, that imposes its rigid (social) constraints and its inflexible laws on its developmentally infantilized colony.¹⁴ Only toward the end of analysis can Marie see in the reproduction of "her" madness in her mother the crippling effects of an internalized paternalistic authority resulting in the same mutilations to femininity and to individual subjectivity. Only in analytical retrospect does it emerge that the mother's tragedy exemplifies on a tiny scale some of the effects of the Algerian conflict, the madness of colonization itself. In re-articulating the brutal mother-daughter struggle as symptomatic of these larger repressive/oppressive clashes, Marie justifies her own schizoid reflexes to identify with her mother and with her madness and to separate her mother's failed revolt from her own more successful revolt. But precisely that difference from her mother, learned from her mother, permits that last comprehensive movement toward union ("I . . . love . . . you").

Globally considered, Marie's reinstatement to mental health is not founded in a total abandonment of the Maternal, literal or figurative, in order to embrace and submit to the Law of the Father. At the same time, she seems to avoid the alternating risks of absorption and separation between which Irigaray wavers. Marie creates an alternative representation that, in the larger scheme of things,

appears almost sororal: two women sharing the same metaphorical womb and loving the same metaphorical mother, Algeria. In this psychic matrix of less rigidly defined sexuality and subjectivity, Marie can maintain a relationship of contiguity with her mother.

But beyond the happily concluded psychodrama of *Words*, Cardinal's insistence on the image of a nurturing and maternal Algeria calls for a re-analysis of the cultural drama that she and all of France witnessed in the years of the unnamed Algerian war. She cautiously but surely draws attention to what in 1975 and even 20 years after are the unspeakable differences, the binding irresolutions, and the pure insanity created by cultural imperialism. If the book models an investigation of other psychic versions that challenge what otherwise might be too readily assumed as psychoanalytic law, the book also suggests re-articulating what otherwise might be too readily assumed as cultural law and order. All we need now are the words to say it.

Notes

1. MPD 343. Subsequent references to this book will appear in the text. All translations from the French are my own.

2. Hirsch has a similar interpretation of *Words'* plot, saying that it "follow[s] Freud in blaming the mother for the daughter's victimization and make[s] mother-hate the condition of female liberation and self determination. Interestingly, [the book] show[s] a strong reliance on the (male) doctor/(female) patient relationship. Compensating for failed maternal nurturance, the doctor can thus induct the woman patient into a system which will only separate her from other women" (131).

3. In their introduction to several articles from Lacan and the Freudian school, Mitchell and Rose lay out with great clarity the organizing framework that Lacan lent to Freud's evolving and often self-contradictory theoretical corpus. As Mitchell and Rose point out, Freud's foundational castration complex becomes Lacan's subject primordially split by the Father's law (the phallus) that rules all humans. My reading of *Words* doesn't challenge the notion of a subject primordially split, rather the "phallic-ness" of the organization of human subjectivity.

4. Powrie argues for a strong correspondence between Marie's recovery and the Oedipal "story." I find the argument less compelling since it requires a distorting emphasis on penis envy and on the prominence of male

characters in the book to be able to conclude with the definitive separation from the mother.

5. Hirsch, while having an interpretation of *Les Mots* quite different from mine, nevertheless supports the concept that female subjectivity is established through the maternal, or as she states: "I came to see the pre-oedipal period as a determinant of women's difference" (20). Even more broadly, Nancy Chodorow, in her revision of object-relations theory, posits female identity as based on mother-daughter bonding.

6. Cardinal doesn't distinguish herself from her autobiographical character: "[I] need to be the woman in each of my books," in *Autrement Dit (In Other Words)* 86. For the purpose of this essay, however, I prefer to maintain the distinctions between Cardinal as writer, Marie as analysand, and the young Marie—to the extent that such distinctions are possible.

7. See Freud's "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (vol. 7). Freud posits an oral phase in infancy as the first pregenital organization which will lead, in "normal" development, to genital primacy in puberty and adulthood.

8. In "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" in Freud, vol. 19.

9. See "The Meaning of the Phallus" (Mitchell 74-85).

10. See Hirsch, in which the author suggests alternate paradigms to the Oedipal story more suitable to account for the narratives of women's lives.

11. Le Clézio first commented on this three-way association.

12. Hall states: "The narrator . . . uncovers her personal oppression as well as the collective oppression of women exacerbated by the colonial situation" (60).

13. Judith Sarnecki observed to me that because the analyst plays the part of the Law-enforcing Father who separates Marie and her mother, it is logical that the reverse process of bringing the two women together must be done out of the analyst's office.

14. Lionnet develops at greater length the Algeria-mother-daughter connections. She notes, for instance: "The agony of the mother, the bleeding of the daughter, the torturing of Algeria—all collapse into one and the same image: that of pain inflicted on the female body of woman and the geographical body of Algeria by the discourses of patriarchy and colonialism" (205).

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