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# Philosophy's Mother Envy
## Has There Yet Been a Deconstruction of the Mother Tongue?

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ABSTRACT: This essay approaches the problem of untying the mother tongue using Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of onto-typology, along with the concept of the *outre-mère* (the 'beyond-mother'), a limit-figure he and Jean-Luc Nancy devised in their critical assessments of psychoanalysis and its relationship to politics and the problem of mimesis. The essay argues that it will not be possible to deconstruct the figure of the mother tongue, or to untie ourselves from it, as long as we leave unquestioned both the theoretical dependence on figuration and our affective tie (*Gefühlsbindung*) to theory.

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In contemporary cultural theory, one would be hard-pressed to find uncritical invocations of the mother tongue. Given the thoroughgoing critique of the will to origins, as well as the abundance of scholarship that has reconstructed the multiple ways women have been figured as mothers in the conception and reproduction of the nation,[1] and given also convincing arguments that the very idea of the mother tongue is a relatively recent invention that appeared within the intertwined machineries of modernity and coloniality,[2] there is little to convince of the idea's continuing conceptual legitimacy.

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1   For an overview of the essential literature, see Alys Eve Weinbaum, 'Nation', in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), pp. 164–70. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Nationalism and the Imagination* (London: Seagull Books, 2010). For an example of how the suturing of woman and nation informs the figure of the mother tongue, see Kimberly Lamm, 'Getting Close to the Screen of Exile: Visualizing and Resisting the National Mother Tongue in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*', in *National, Communal, and Personal Voices: New Perspectives in Asian American and Asian Diasporic Women Writers*, ed. by Begoña Simal and Elisabetta Marino (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), pp. 43–65.

2   See Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

Yet, while few today would uphold appeals to the mother tongue, the figure upon which that suspect concept is based — the mother — puzzlingly maintains a tenacious hold on critical thought. Or, to put it in the terms that frame this volume's collection of essays on the mother tongue, critical thought remains tied to, and tied up with, the figure of the mother.

In *The Theorist's Mother*, for instance, Andrew Parker surveys the various ways motherhood and maternity have proven troublesome for the Western philosophical tradition. What he means by this is that motherhood and maternity remain intractable, as well as elusive, problems for philosophy to theorize. The mother, Parker reminds us, has been traditionally 'put to work theoretically' by philosophy; a key example he offers involves the ways philosophy has historically used the mother 'to regulate the distinction between the literal and the figural'.[3] In so doing, however, it ends up as the origin of both the literal and the figural at once (as in the case of 'matter' being derived from *mater*, 'mother', and matter being thought of as mother of particular things).[4] The mother thus confuses the literal and the figural and undoes the theoretical distinction it was put into place by philosophy to uphold.

In his survey of the problematic nature of the maternal for philosophy, Parker dutifully includes examples from Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray that reveal the mother as a destabilizing category within the French feminist tradition as well. According to Parker, their writings reflect the history of feminist ambivalence with respect to maternity. A question feminist thought occupies itself with, for example, is whether or not motherhood is essential to the feminine.[5] In Parker's telling, the history of this contestation belongs to the mother's disrupting force within the Western theoretical tradition.

Yet, despite his inclusion of French feminism's guiding thinkers (Hélène Cixous makes an appearance later on as well), Parker curiously overlooks a central critique that their reflections all share: the

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3      Andrew Parker, *The Theorist's Mother* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 18.

4      Ibid., pp. 18–19. In this context, Parker makes notable reference to remarks Freud makes in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916–17) about the etymology of the Portuguese word for 'wood', *madeira*, and its derivation from *materia* and *mater*.

5      Ibid., pp. 9–11.

maternal is a problem for philosophy precisely because the feminine is only permitted to appear as a problem in philosophical discourse. The theoretical work the feminine performs for philosophy is to serve as the raw, untamed outside that threatens the symbolic philosophical order. Through shaping, taming, and ultimately mastering the feminine, the philosophical order is able to constitute and cohere itself as Subject, as 'Philosophy'.

Examples of this core critique can be found in multiple sites throughout the French feminist archive. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir details how the Western philosophical tradition places the feminine as intermediary between raw nature and the foreign other, standing in for both so that the masculine subject can master both by mastering her.[6] In similar fashion, Kristeva describes the feminine as serving in the role of the abject, as that '"other" without a name' that the individual must confront and subsequently separate from in order to ascend to subjectivity.[7]

However, it is Irigaray who connects the systematicity of philosophical thought to the essential role the feminine plays as both a resource for and waste product of that system. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she characterizes this role as serving as a mirror for philosophical speculation, that is, as the condition that makes it possible for the metaphysical subject not only to engage in reflection, but to reflect on himself engaging in reflection. The psychoanalytic term for this speculative, reflective space (which is also a space of misrecognition, and is therefore at the same time a blind spot) is the imaginary. Irigaray writes,

> the rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) 'subject' to reflect himself, to copy himself. Moreover, the role of 'femininity' is prescribed by this masculine specula(riza)tion and corresponds scarcely at all to woman's desire,

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6    Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), pp. 159–63.

7    Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 58–59.

which may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety
and guilt.[8]

As the material condition that makes the philosophical imaginary pos-
sible, the feminine, according to Irigaray, is always-already excluded
from it. As a result, the feminine is essentialized as the non-essential, as
waste or by-product of speculation; she can only appear as a fragmen-
tary being, which is to say, as no being at all. The feminine is therefore
forever barred from subjectivity and is exiled in advance from the sym-
bolic order. Consequently, not only is she prevented from having a
voice, the very idea of a 'mother tongue' is a contradiction. If anything,
the mother tongue is merely the name for yet one more site where the
masculine subject employs the feminine as an authorizing figure for its
project of self-reflection.

Accordingly, Irigaray famously plays with the figure of the mirror
in her critique of philosophical speculation. This is to draw out the
specular/spectacular presumptions animating speculation, as well as
to connect a revealing cognate of those terms — the speculum —
to the speculative act. The figure of the mirror thus emphasizes the
passivity the feminine is assigned in the speculative system, the work
such passivity performs as the enabling ground of speculation, and the
invasive inspections to which the system subjects the female body, over
which the system installs itself as master.[9] The figure of the mirror is
that which undergirds the masculine figuration of the feminine in the
construction of philosophical speculation.

As Irigaray has later claimed, however, her initial deployment of the
mirror as speculum was not entirely negative: while the feminine histor-
ically has been assigned the task of reflecting the patriarchal imaginary
back to itself in order to confirm its self-presence, Irigaray states that her
invocation of the speculum was intended to introduce also the idea of
a feminine reflection, of a critical reappropriation and recovery of mi-
mesis as active production rather than as mere passive reproduction.[10]

8       Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn
        Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 30.

9       See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY:
        Cornell University Press, 1985).

10      See Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. by Alison
        Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 59–60, and Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A.

The speculum is a reconfiguration of the figure of the feminine as mirror. Irigaray's strategy in these early guiding texts was not simply to refuse the philosophical tradition's identification of the feminine with mimesis, but instead to repeat it, and in so doing, appropriate it as a means to rewrite philosophical speech. By taking occupation of the philosophical logos and submitting it to 'playful repetition', Irigaray intended for this strategic mimicry, as it had come to be known, to 'make "visible" […] what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language'.[11] Irigaray's own echoing of the language belonging to the Western tradition's major thinkers serves as an example of the attempt to deconstruct philosophical discourse from within, to interrupt and redirect its narcissistic self-reflections. Her echoing acts express a desire to free Echo from her role as a mere double of Narcissus and to enable Echo to sound her own voice.[12]

The question that has always haunted Irigaray's writings, however, has been whether the mimetic repetition of the philosophical logos really makes possible its deconstruction or simply reinforces it. Why does Irigaray not try to undo the identification of the feminine and mimesis? Why does she not question the figuration of the feminine as such? Why does she not try to think outside the figure? What prevents her from pursuing any of these critical approaches?

It is here, on the questions of the feminine's relation to mimesis and figuration, and the possibility of deconstructing that relation, that I wish to bring Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of onto-typology to bear on the figure of the mother tongue. What Lacoue-Labarthe contributes to an understanding of Western thought's historical suturing of the feminine to mimesis and figuration is an account of why it has been compelled to do so.

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Olson, '"Je — Luce Irigaray": A Meeting with Luce Irigaray', trans. by Elizabeth Hirsh and Gaëtan Brulotte, in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 141–66 (p. 147). Cited in Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 72–73.

11   Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 76.

12   On Irigaray's critique of Nietzsche's repetition of the myth of Echo and Narcissus, see Ellen Mortensen, *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1994). See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Echo', in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 175–202.

As Lacoue-Labarthe argues, the reason why philosophy has sought to master mimesis and the feminine, and the reason why they are typically sutured to one another via the figure in the history of metaphysics, is that they each challenge philosophy's sovereign ability to establish the ground of its existence. Mimesis does this by virtue of its dissimulating power to take on any identity whatsoever, thereby refusing all pretentions to fixed identities. The feminine does this by reminding philosophy that the image it has of itself as the sovereign subject of representation is ultimately fictive, that only the feminine possesses the creative power of engenderment. It is in this sense that philosophy's historical efforts to master both mimesis and the feminine through its figuration of the mother betray a profound and inconsolable desire, a mother envy.

As we just reviewed in our survey of Irigaray's critique, philosophy responds to and defends against this envy by putting the feminine to work, making it serve as the mirror for its self-speculation. But this act gives the lie to Plato's famous expulsion of mimesis from the *politeia* in the *Republic*. By subjecting the feminine to the role of mirror, philosophy has not banished mimesis; it has instead appropriated it. It then uses the power of figuration from its appropriation of mimesis to master Being as such.

The process by which philosophy attempts to master Being is what Lacoue-Labarthe calls onto-typology. It is through capturing Being in a type (*typos*) or figure (*Gestalt*) that it attempts to gain the ability to manipulate Being and thus assert its sovereignty over it. From Plato to Heidegger, he submits, the history of metaphysics is the history of the figure — Socrates, Oedipus, Spirit, Zarathustra, the Worker, *Dasein*. The figure delineates the scenography of philosophy's theorization of Being. However, to that list, we ought to add the figure of the Mother. Indeed, since Western theory is predicated on the identification of the feminine with mimesis and the figure, the Mother is the *Urgestalt* of theoretical speculation. The Mother is the name for the unconscious of Western theory.[13]

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13    See Jacqueline Rose, 'Of Knowledge and Mothers: On the Work of Christopher Bollas', in *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Vintage, 2004), pp. 149–66.

In order, then, to deconstruct the identification of the feminine with mimesis and figuration, it is necessary to deconstruct the speculative theoretical drive, to sever what Lacoue-Labarthe, in collaboration with Jean-Luc Nancy, calls our 'affective attachment' or tie (*Gefühlsbindung*) to theory. However, as Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of onto-typology indicates, this poses a vexing problem, one that I will show especially affects any attempt to 'untie' the figure of the mother tongue. As the language of untying reveals, even simply expressing the desire to escape figuration reinforces one's capture within it. And if theoretical speculation is also fundamentally a deployment of figuration, then how is one to theorize without replicating the figurative act or without reinscribing the speculative theoretical drive?

Above all, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy regard the problem of theorizing an outside to theory (and thus an outside to figuration) as a political one. For example, what else is *das Volk* but a figure of community? It is only in its figural dimension that community's reliance on myth — and myth as a vehicle of identification, as in the case of the Nazi myth — can be comprehended.[14] In Lacoue-Labarthe's view, only one path remains open: following both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, he argues that critical thought must try to subject the political to *Ent-gestaltung* — *dé-figuration*, de-figuration. Along with Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe says the task of the political will be that of following the *retrait du politique* — a 'retrace/retreat of the political' that insists on the dis-installation of the figure, on a practice of writing that effaces the figure and de-figures the appearance of the political.

Given their commitments to de-figuring the political, it is quite puzzling that in the very moment that they call for the figure's dis-installation, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy invoke the figure of the *outre-mère* (beyond-mother) as a way to break with the speculation/spectacularization of the political. How are we to think this figure? And what does Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's recourse to the Mother, even as a limit-concept or limit-figure, say about the prospects for realizing an untying of the mother tongue?

14    See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Nazi Myth', trans. by Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry*, 16.2 (1990), pp. 291–312.

The remainder of my remarks will be directed first at reconstruct-ing the path that leads to this puzzle in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, and then at delineating the implications of this puzzle for efforts to untie (critical thought from) the mother tongue and, ultimately, for the possibility of a re-con-figuration of the political that does not repeat the phallogocentric employment of the feminine. Although I believe Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's attempt to think community without appeal to a figurative/mythological — i.e., metaphysical — ground is needed now more than ever, their invocation of the 'beyond-mother' appears to be contradictory to achieving that aim. Assuming the valid-ity of their critique of the political, is it possible to adopt their project without reinscribing the figure of the Mother and all the violences that entails?

My discussion proceeds as follows: I begin with an overview of Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of onto-typology in the history of philoso-phy, which he traces from Plato's theorization of mimesis to Heideg-ger's re-casting of truth as *aletheia*. As we will see, Lacoue-Labarthe regards Heidegger as an exemplary case of onto-typology to the ex-tent that his fascination with National Socialism illustrates the social-political stakes of philosophy's specular capture by, and identification with, the figure.

Lacoue-Labarthe's treatment of Heidegger sets up a basis for understanding his collaborations with Nancy and their call for a de-figuration of the political. Although a number of their collective writ-ings are concerned with this problem, I will focus specifically on their essays 'La Panique politique' and 'The Unconscious Is Destructured Like an Affect (Part I of "The Jewish People Do Not Dream")'. It is in those texts that they invoke the beyond-mother most explicitly.

Ultimately, my aim in this essay is a modest one. It is to introduce some hesitation into the prospect of deconstructing the Mother, and as such, into the possibility of disentangling from the mother tongue. To be sure, the political project of forging affective, non-identificatory, and non-essentialized forms of belonging relies on deconstructing both the Mother and the mother tongue. Yet, unless we inhabit first the hesitation for which I am calling, any non-metaphysical form of community, such as the one projected by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, risks repeating speculative metaphysics' act of simultaneously employ-

ing the feminine, conflating it with the maternal, and burying the actual work actual women (as well as racialized others) perform in maintaining and reproducing the social.[15] So while Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's critique of the figure will help us move forward with engaging the seemingly intractable affective dimension of the mother tongue, capitalizing upon their critique will depend on how well we can integrate it with feminist thought and critical theories of race without repeating their re-invocation of the Mother.

## PHILOSOPHY AND THE MIMETIC THREAT

In his critique of onto-typology, Lacoue-Labarthe returns to the scene of philosophy's first confrontation with mimesis, what Plato referred to and staged in the *Republic* as the ancient *polemos* between poetry and philosophy.[16] Initially, we recall, Socrates questions the place of poetry in the just polis, specifically in terms of its role in the education of the guardians. Poetry is immediately suspect because of its depictions of heroes and cowards, as well as because of what Socrates says is its false representations of the gods. This critique, offered in *Republic* II, aligns closely, though not completely, with the critique given in *Republic* X of artistic mimesis being three steps removed from the truth. What gives rise to poetry's expulsion from the *politeia*, however, is the fact that the poet often speaks in the voice of an other. When poets speak in their own voice, in the mode of diegesis or narration, everything is fine. But when poets speak in an other's voice, i.e., when they engage in mimesis, this is unacceptable. In the mimetic mode, the poet is a pantomime, occupying many roles, thus disrupting the just order of the polis, which relies on each doing their share in their assigned role.

If, politically, poetry is the threat of disorder, philosophically, it is the threat of madness. This, too, Plato pursues in such dialogues as the *Phaedrus* and the *Ion*. But as Lacoue-Labarthe argues, what we miss

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15    See Kimberly Lamm, '"Mouth Work": Deconstructing the Voice of the Mother Tongue in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Video Art', in *Voice as Form in Contemporary Art*, ed. by Wenny Teo and Pamela Corey (= *Oxford Art Journal*, 43.2 (2020), pp. 171–83) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcaa011>.

16    Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Typography', in Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. and trans. by Christopher Fynsk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 43–138.

when we take Plato's conception and critique of mimesis at face value is the fact that he gives us a theory of what, properly speaking, cannot be theorized. For mimesis, again, is, properly speaking, the improper as such. This is its threat but also the reason why it is invulnerable to the philosophical concept.[17]

It is at this point also that Lacoue-Labarthe reminds us that Plato connects mimesis's threat of madness at the beginning of *Republic* III to the threat of hysteria, which is to say, the threat of feminization.[18] Yet, while mimesis threatens philosophy with both, they are not completely the same. Madness stands for the loss of control, for the loss of the integrity of the subject; feminization reminds the philosopher (the masculine subject of representation) that he is not the origin of his own existence, despite whatever promises representation makes to him.[19] Thus, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, in response to this double-edged challenge that mimesis poses to the philosophical logos, Plato offers a theory of mimesis, thereby neutralizing its threat and pulling off what Lacoue-Labarthe describes as a speculative trick designed to ultimately master it.

As we recall, it is Book X where Plato describes the artist as having the demiurgic power of being able to recreate the world through artistic mimesis. But the example Plato calls upon in order to illustrate this power is that of someone taking a mirror and turning it around so that everything it is pointed at is reflected in it. The question Lacoue-Labarthe poses concerns the status of this mirror and the occupation of the demiurge. Which is the demiurge, the one who merely holds the mirror, or the mirror itself? Who or what is doing the work of mimesis? Where is the mimetic act to be located? How is mimesis actually 'like' a reflection in the mirror when a mirror's reflections lack permanence?[20]

As Lacoue-Labarthe argues, Plato's critique of mimesis relies on a series of mimetic gestures that elide or draw a relation of similitude between heterogeneous elements: the demiurge and the mirror; the

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17    Ibid., p. 116.

18    Ibid., p. 129.

19    See Alison Ross, *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 116–17.

20    Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Typography', p. 88.

demiurge and the artist, and; the artist and the poet. And this is all after the originary elision that serves as the condition of Plato's philosophical corpus — viz., Plato's ability to speak in the voice of Socrates (among others). This logic of substitution, which is the logic of mimesis, that one thing can stand in for an other, authorizes Plato's text in its critique of mimesis, which it then mirrors (for example, by appropriating and deploying the dialogue form and speaking in the voice of 'Socrates').[21] If Plato is exemplary of Western thought's relation to mimesis, therefore, it is because he provides the model and direction for all subsequent treatments of mimesis within the Western philosophical tradition: master, through figuration, that which undoes all forms of mastery and all stability of figures.

Yet, while *Republic* x designates the site where Plato executes his speculative sleight-of-hand by presenting the proper theory of mimesis in its threatening impropriety, it is in *Republic* II, says Lacoue-Labarthe, that Plato dramatizes philosophy's appropriation of both mimesis and the feminine/maternal labour most immediately associated with mimesis. It is at this point in the *Republic* that Socrates discusses the education of the guardians, specifically, their formation in relation to that language called myth.[22] He has not yet banished the poets from the *politeia*. In fact, quite the opposite. He argues there that the guardians ought to be told the myths that would make the desired 'impression' (*tupos*) upon their souls.[23] Explicating the passage, Lacoue-Labarthe writes that mimesis, 'imitation', involves 'the imposition of the *sign*' upon 'the infant soul. That is to say, of course, of the soul that is yet *in-fans*', without language.[24]

But Lacoue-Labarthe also observes that this site of mimetic appropriation is not without ambivalence in the Platonic text. In one respect, the infant soul's 'vulnerability to fables' makes myth a suitable tool with which to shape the future guardians' characters; in another respect, this vulnerability underscores the infant's dependency on the stories

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21    Ibid., p. 135.
22    Plato, *Republic*, 376e–77b, cited in ibid., p. 126. See Plato, *Republic*, trans. by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004).
23    Ibid.
24    Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Typography', pp. 126–27.

'mothers and nurses' tell.[25] Noting echoes with Lacan's theorization of the mirror stage, particularly its role in clearing the space for the emergence of the subject's aggressivity, Lacoue-Labarthe submits that this passage from the *Republic* is thus also a scene where the text of philosophy acts out its envy of and concomitant 'resentment against the original maternal domination and original feminine education'.[26] The scene is a response to a double 'panic', as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy characterize it elsewhere:[27] before mimesis's threat of dissolving the integrity of philosophy's subjectivity and before the maternal feminine's intimacy/identification with mimesis. Appropriating mimesis by subsuming it within the education of the guardians, philosophy masters that which threatens it with subjective dissolution, and it also claims ownership over the 'acquisition of the "mother" tongue',[28] allowing it to disavow the fact that it (i.e., philosophy) must also have received its voice by virtue of feminine/maternal labour.

As Lacoue-Labarthe argues further, the history of philosophy is nothing less than the history of philosophy's repeated disavowal and appropriation of mimesis in constituting its self-identity as 'Philosophy'. He shows that, even as they critique Platonism, both Nietzsche and Heidegger inherit and unquestioningly re-enact Plato's speculative sleight-of-hand, and with it, philosophy's narcissistic investments. Rather than a rejection of Plato's critique of mimesis, the enthusiasm for art that characterizes Nietzsche's and Heidegger's respective philosophical projects clearly amounts, in Lacoue-Labarthe's eyes, to an attempt to control mimesis and subsume it to philosophy's self-realization. Tellingly, both Nietzsche and Heidegger theorize mimesis through the figure, the former through Dionysus, and the latter through his recasting/recovery of truth as *aletheia* (un-concealment).[29] In so doing, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, they reinforce

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25    *Republic*, 377c, cited in ibid., p. 127.

26    Ibid., p. 127. See Jacques Lacan, 'Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis', in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), pp. 82–101.

27    Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'La Panique politique', trans. by Céline Suprenant, in *Retreating the Political*, ed. by Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1–31.

28    Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Typography', p. 127.

29    Ibid., pp. 61, 122, and 79–80.

their commitments to speculative metaphysics in the very moments that they call for its closure.

Yet, this mimetic repetition is just one part of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's 'mimetology': another part appears in the 'mimetic *agon*' that they sustain with the Ancients, who they posit, in a gesture Lacoue-Labarthe classifies as emblematic of modern thought, as a model both to imitate and surpass.[30] In one respect, such mimetic rivalry explains both Nietzsche's and Heidegger's reaching back to the Greeks as part of their respective critiques of modernity. In another respect, it also exposes the way art and politics are connected in terms of identification: both Nietzsche and Heidegger (and also Hölderlin) identify with the aesthetic practices of the Greeks — particularly, Plato's appropriation of mimesis in the 'political *Bildung*' of the *politeia* — in the project of calling for and identifying with a German nation to come.[31] In 'the case of Heidegger', then, his adoption of Plato's mimetology undergirds the metaphysical aspirations he pins to National Socialism (which Lacoue-Labarthe derisively refers to as 'national-Aestheticism').[32]

As we will see, Lacoue-Labarthe carries his critique of onto-typology over to his work with Jean-Luc Nancy on the *retrait* (retreat; retrace) of the political. As indicated above, their focus in their collaborations is on the affective ties that identification employs, and it is in that direction that Lacoue-Labarthe's various references to psychoanalysis, specifically Freud's theorization of group or 'mass' psychology (as in *Massenpsychologie*),[33] receive sustained development. The figure of the Mother, in the form of the 'beyond-mother', appears in this collective project as well. However, the question that emerges when we look at their investigation into the relation of identification to affect is whether Lacoue-Labarthe's attention to maternal labour also appears there, or instead becomes buried in the figure once more.

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30    Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 79.

31    Ibid., p. 85.

32    Ibid., p. 86.

33    Freud's *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921) is a key point of departure in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's 'La Panique politique' and 'The Unconscious is Destructured Like an Affect'.

IDENTIFICATION, MIMESIS, AND THE MOTHER'S RETREAT

For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, psychoanalysis, particularly its real-
ization in Freud's work, opens a new chapter in the legacy of specu-
lative thought's project to master mimesis. On its face, since iden-
tification is central to psychoanalytic accounts of subject formation,
it would seem that psychoanalysis might offer a privileged view into
the mechanism by which the philosophical subject identifies with the
figure. Relatedly, psychoanalysis promises to clarify also how identifi-
cation works on a political level, as in Heidegger's identification with
National Socialism. For while Heidegger's affiliation with National
Socialism can be considered exemplary in the way that his thought
combines both the philosophical and political instances of identifica-
tion at once, the problem of identification is not raised by his example
alone. Just how identification works — both philosophically and pol-
itically, but also in terms of how it connects the philosophical and
the political — becomes the focus of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's
attention to the text of psychoanalysis, and specifically Freud's texts on
culture: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, *Totem and Taboo*,
and *Moses and Monotheism*.

Yet, despite this promise of psychoanalysis, what Freud's texts on
culture reveal to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy instead is that Freud, too,
participates, like Heidegger, in the Western philosophical tradition's
speculative mimetic economy. As they outline in their essays 'La pan-
ique politique' and 'The Unconscious is Destructured Like an Affect
(Part 1 of "The Jewish People Do Not Dream")',[34] Lacoue-Labarthe
and Nancy show that, rather than clarify identification and the mimetic
relation identification presupposes, Freud's texts on culture constitute
a continuation of the attempt by speculative thought to master mi-
mesis by proliferating the figure. Each time Freud tries to reconstruct
the role of identification in constituting culture, he ends up engaging
in a series of substitutions and figures that, like Heidegger with the

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34   Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Unconscious is Destructured
     Like an Affect (Part 1 of "The Jewish People Do Not Dream")', trans. by Brian Holmes,
     *Stanford Literary Review*, 6.2 (1989), pp. 191–209. (Note that this translation is only
     the first part of 'Le Peuple juif ne rêve pas'. For the complete essay, see Philippe Lacoue-
     Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Panique politique* suivi de *Le Peuple juif ne rêve pas*
     (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2013).)

figure of *aletheia*, reveals a reliance on mimetic logic that obscures the workings of identification, in effect mimicking mimesis. Rather than explain culture, then, it is identification that results in need of explanation, thereby forming a lacuna in Freud's thought and exacerbating those questions the concept was projected to answer in the first place, namely: What is the relationship between individual psychology and the psychology of groups? And, how, exactly, does the group's development mirror (i.e., mimic) the individual's? For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, Freud's attempts to analogize individual and group psychologies via the figure of the Father reveal how the problem of identification exposes psychoanalysis to its limit and how this limit is the political itself.

Yet, it is within this very lacuna in the psychoanalytic archive that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy see an opening: it is precisely in this space, where Freud's text breaks down and his attempts at theorizing identification lead to the text's 'dis-sociation', that it is possible, in one respect, to see Freud's theorization of the Father as an artefact of subjective/group 'panic' and, in another respect, to identify with the 'withdrawal' (*retrait*) of identification.[35] According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the 'infigurable' figure of this withdrawal would be the Mother.[36]

In Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's reading, everything centres on the status of 'affect' (*Fühlen*) in Freud's theorization of identification. It is around *Fühlen* and its cognates, they contend, such as *Einfühlung* (empathy) and *Gefühlsbindung* (affective tie), that Freud's text both dis-sociates but also coheres.[37] Affect leads to the text's dis-sociation because, although it appears to explain the mechanism of identification, as in the 'affective tie' by which a group coheres around a figure of authority (i.e., the Father or Leader), it leads to difficulties that Freud is ultimately unable to resolve. For if his expansion of the Oedipal schema to the political plane is intended to explain the relation of the individ-

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35    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'The Unconscious Is Destructured Like an Affect', p. 201. '*Retrait*' is rendered throughout the text as 'withdrawal' in this English translation. See *Le Peuple juif ne rêve pas*, p. 72.

36    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'The Unconscious Is Destructured Like an Affect', p. 201.

37    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'La Panique politique', pp. 16, 19, and 20–21; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'The Unconscious Is Destructured Like an Affect', pp. 196–97.

ual to the social, it does so by ignoring the fact that the Oedipal schema already contains this relation in theorizing the individual subject's development from the family structure. The 'sexual "integration" of the ego and socialisation', write Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, means that the 'integration *to* society and the integration *of* society' are essentially connected.[38] This is to say that 'the *socius* is thus in the ego'.[39]

There is thus already an irreducible intrapsychic dimension to the Oedipus complex. Consequently, Freud's theory of identification presumes social plurality as a fundamental given. In so doing, the theory of identification, whether on the individual or collective plane, ends up begging the question of the social, as well as that of affect. As a result, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy assess Freud's theory of identification as a kind of theoretical repetition compulsion, a compulsion that, instead of clarifying the mechanism of identification with the figure of the Father, gives way to a proliferation of figures of identification.[40]

One such figure is that of Narcissus, who, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy remind us, appears in addition to or on top of the figure of Oedipus that already occupies a position in Freud's theorization of sociality.[41] Not only is the figure of Narcissus one of a number of figures installed by Freud into the matrix of the *socius*, it emphasizes the isolation of the subject and exacerbates the question of how the *socius* is held together through an affective tie. For if the social is basically a collection of 'several narcissi', including the Father, who in *Group Psychology* Freud describes as the 'absolute Narcissus', then the question remains of how these narcissi ever break out of their solipsistic confines and relate to others.[42] In their figuration and multiplication as figures, Narcissus and Oedipus are expressions of what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy charge is Freud's 'archeophilia', a drive to arrive at an '*arkhé*' or origin.[43] Since this drive gives rise to nothing more than 'a series of

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38    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'La Panique politique', p. 10.

39    Ibid., p. 10.

40    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'The Unconscious Is Destructured Like an Affect', pp. 200–01.

41    See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'La Panique politique', p. 20.

42    Ibid., p. 21.

43    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'The Unconscious Is Destructured Like an Affect', p. 201.

[mimetic] displacements' in the form of the multiplication of figures,[44] Freud's archeophilia is also, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy contend, an 'egology',[45] a repetition impulse to deploy figures of identification that he shares with Heidegger and the rest of the speculative metaphysical tradition in their attempts to master mimesis. By producing and re-producing ever more figures of identification, identification in Freud simply appropriates mimesis, mimicking its movement, and in no way explains the mimetic relation of an affective tie that it posits among the multiple narcissi constituting the *socius*. The failure of identification in Freud is thus also a failed theory of mimesis.

In their reading of Freud's theory of identification as an appro-priation of mimesis, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy imply that Freud (or at least his text) betrays an awareness that this theoretical fail-ure also signals that psychoanalysis has encountered its limit. They consequently read Freud's proliferation of figures as a symptom of theoretical panic: when faced with the inability to explain identifica-tion and the affective tie it assumes, Freud, they assert, seeks refuge in the shelter of figuration that theory, as a mode of mimesis, provides. Installed in and through theory, Narcissus serves as a figure for the identification that *theory* furnishes. 'Freud seems never to have really shaken off this Narcissus', write Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. 'Even when he recognizes it as a theoretical fiction, he emphasizes all the more its function: the Narcissus is the ultimate object of the *theory*, it offers the theory its absolute figure as a *visible form*, and so assures the identity of psychoanalysis.'[46] So while the text of psychoanalysis meets its limit with identification, setting it underway towards dis-sociation, Narcissus, the symptom of this dis-sociation and failure of identification, nonetheless allows psychoanalysis to cohere around the figure in order to consolidate its identity as theory.

If identification's failure is one way Freud's text undergoes dis-sociation, then the second way it comes under dis-sociation is as an expression of a theoretical panic before identification's explanatory impotence. Curiously, this panic also announces the return of affect,

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44    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'La Panique politique', p. 15.
45    Ibid., pp. 18–19.
46    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'The Unconscious Is Destructured Like an Affect', p. 201.

but the affective tie does not refer to the mechanism of identification within the social writ large. Rather, it refers to Freud's affective tie and identification with theory and the theoretical community that is psychoanalysis. As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy observe,

> identification, for Freud, is first and foremost identification with the Father — and the Father means here: he who is always-already identified, he who has presented himself before disappearing, he who has symbolized himself before being symbolic.[47]

In place of a theory of identification, Freud identifies with theory as such, and psychoanalytic theory specifically. It is an identification that consequently places Freud himself as Father and absolute Narcissus.

So, if the Father proves to be a vanishing point on the horizon of psychoanalysis, this leaves open the question of how to think the figure of the Mother. If the Father is the figure for the role of figuration in (psychoanalytic) theory, for the narcissism of theory, the narcissism that is theory, and the identification with this narcissism, then what is the status of the Mother? Does the Mother stand outside of theory? Is the Mother a figure at all? Does the Mother make possible an untying of the affective tie to theory?

According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, it cannot be as simple as a turn to the Mother once the emptiness of the Father is exposed. 'One must not, above all, simply let the original Narcissus of the Father figure return in a figure of the Mother', they caution.[48] For this reason, they eschew the terminology of 'the Mother' and refer instead to 'the maternal substance', the 'beyond-mother' (*outre-mère*) which would resist serving as yet another narcissistic figure for identification.[49] For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the beyond-mother would be the name for 'the infigurable', and the task for thought would be to identify with the beyond-mother as the withdrawal of identity.[50] With the Mother, or, to be more precise, the beyond-mother, then, there is the promise

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47    Ibid., pp. 200–01.

48    Ibid., p. 202.

49    Ibid., pp. 202 and 203.

50    Ibid., pp. 201 and 203. In *Retreating the Political*, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy identify this withdrawal of the Mother with 'the retreat (*retrait*) of the political' (pp. 119 and 133–34).

of 'de-figuration',[51] the promise, in other words, of breaking free of the speculative metaphysical economy.

There is, however, one hazard that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy do not fully acknowledge. While they may recognize that this turn to the beyond-mother risks participating once more in the economy of figuration, and therefore, risks a reinscription of the speculative theoretical drive, they appear to overlook the fact that they are still putting the Mother to work. Assigning the beyond-mother the work of delineating the outside of the theoretical is no different than the reproductive labour that both French feminist thought and Lacoue-Labarthe in his earlier work proved the Mother has been assigned historically within the speculative tradition. Whether for theory or against it, the Mother still appears in order to disappear. Positing the Mother, even as the infigurable, would amount once more to appropriating the maternal and using 'her' to accomplish what theory cannot do on its own.

As it concerns the project of untying the mother tongue, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's engagement with Freud's affective tie to theory shows that it is not simply a matter of dismantling the theoretical apparatus. For how would one theorize doing so without being entangled further in the affective ties that put the Mother to work? Untying the mother tongue perhaps requires then an 'other' tongue, a tongue other to and otherwise than theory. It is perhaps here that we reach the limits of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's text as well and that we might realize the need to come into dialogue with those discourses that attend to actual work that actual (not only figural or theoretical) women perform in maintaining the fiction of the mother tongue and its theories.

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51    Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 'The Unconscious Is Destructured Like an Affect', p. 204.

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