

# Turning Back

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## Stephen Frosh

Not being a mother, and not having daughters, I am reticent about responding to Miri Rozmarin's paper. Reading it, I feel implicated in matricide; and anyway, what more is there to say about the exclusion of women from patriarchy, the silencing of femininity, the need to reassert the concrete over the abstract, intimacy over law, care over violence? It is all there, foregrounded and backgrounded in Rozmarin's account of how even in feminist writing, the voice of the mother gets lost – how she is so often seen only through the daughter's eyes and how rarely the attempt is made to really get inside the maternal subject and articulate the world from her point of view. This does happen, of course, and my two colleagues Amber Jacobs (2007) and Lisa Baraitser (2009), one contested and the other signalled in the paper, exemplify contemporary feminists engaging actively with the maternal and also, through their allegiances, the matrilineal. But as Rozmarin shows, it is not easy to keep this in view, in a philosophical and cultural context that continues to feed off the abstractions as well as the force-fields of patriarchy.

Also present is the currently prominent theme of how to think through the relationship between vulnerability and nonviolence – because matricide is obviously violent, but also because opposition to the violence of the Oedipal law has to be rooted in something pre- or non-Oedipal, and this suggests the maternal, though maybe it does not have to be that way. I am thinking here, of course, of Jessica Benjamin's (1995) propositions concerning polymorphous identifications and the loving *father* of both pre- and post-Oedipal functioning, and her critique of the binary thinking that Oedipus produces: masculine versus feminine, abstract versus concrete, prohibitive versus generative, reality-based versus narcissistic. But I think more of Judith Butler's reflections on precarity and nonviolence (Butler 2009, 2012, 2015), mentioned briefly by Rozmarin: how it is from the rootedness of all of us in experiences of vulnerability and dependency that we might find the strength to 'assemble' in relations of care, and how hard it might be to hold onto the knowledge of this rootedness, because it is so painful, because vulnerability is scary and dangerous. It can result in us finding ourselves turned into stone, or if we weep sufficiently, pillars of salt.

One claim Rozmarin makes is that 'as a lived experience, matricide happens through concrete socio-cultural practices and norms.' This seems irrefutable: if one is to oppose a generalised, abstracted masculinist Oedipality, it must involve showing how it works in practice, and it must include challenging, as Rozmarin goes on to say, 'specific norms, phantasies, and practices that constitute the maternal and mother-daughter relations within specific configurations of nationality, race, religion, and class.' Moreover, 'Undoing matricide as a lived experience therefore should also take into account the concrete discursive fields and practices which constitute the concrete conditions of the maternal in different contexts.' With all this concrete, which to my mind suggests something solid, grounded and specific, it might be slightly bewildering that it is to *myth* that she turns for her counter-instance, her challenge to matricide. Quoting Jacobs, she justifies this by seeing myth as a way to reveal the underpinnings of a social order and

of smuggling in an alternative vision. As I understand it, this means that myths that occupy specific places in the matricidal/patriarchal symbolic can be read against the grain in order to articulate an alternative, non-matricidal structure. This seems right; but how does it fit with the argument to *contingency*, that is, that part of the contrary strand to patriarchy that insists on the 'concrete', on intersectionality, on 'the relations between theorizations of structure, and structure's accidental appearances in reality?' Maybe that is where myth comes in: we read the myths of our own and others' cultures in ways that respond to the very specific positions that we find ourselves in, and those readings might indeed engender alternative thoughts to the 'mainstream', to the ways the myths are usually read. Perhaps this amounts to more than just saying that interpretations of texts will always be refracted through the lenses of specific times and places, that texts are sites of struggle. Whilst this is generally true, certain myths are of significance because of their power to provoke identifications and to govern identities – because they become knotted points around which cultural meanings accrue and through which people stake out their lives. I have claimed this about some Biblical stories in the past, in relation to Joseph, the spies who went into Canaan, and the Binding of Isaac, arguing in each case that counter-hegemonic readings of these texts can open up new possibilities for identification and being (Frosh, 2005, 2009, 2013). I had not previously thought of the story of Lot's wife and daughters as having such resonance, but this simply might be evidence of my own patriarchal bias, though the sparseness of that tale may also have something to do with it. But still, never mind, clearly the story is evocative and problematic, and worth pondering. Does, however, this story of destruction, punishment and incest lend itself to a reading of it as 'revealing an option of non-matricidal relations?' Well yes, clearly it does: Rozmarin has done this. But, I think, there are other possible readings, and these have more promise as an alternative to the simple 'Lot's wife was bad and she got her due' tradition; and they too, might suggest a way in which an economy of care could be read out of the Biblical text and into a contemporary world.

### **Does she have a name?**

It is slightly surprising that Rozmarin does not ground her reading of Lot's wife either in the classical Jewish texts which make it into a significant myth, or in any contemporary readings. I won't labour the classical side, because I want more to focus on the best-known relatively recent alternative evocation of Lot's wife's story – one which leaves out the daughters, but also conjures the presence of a loving father and even (in an ending that might be sincere or ironic) a loving, patriarchal, maybe somewhat ashamed God. But before that, some classical hits, probably well known to Rozmarin but still worth mentioning to help identify where the faultlines in the story might lie. First, the question of Lot's wife's name. Rozmarin correctly points out that she is not named in the Biblical text, an anonymisation easily understood as part of the process of marginalisation that is itself an element in matricide. Yet the Rabbis went to some trouble to find her a name, and alighted on Irit or Idit (this is found in the text *The Pirké of Rabbi Eliezer*, which dates from around the ninth century CE, and which itself draws on a Talmudic source). These are interesting names for someone exposed to calumny and criticism: Idit means something like 'rich soil', so something good and fertile; and Irit is a flower, an asphodel, which as I understand it was thought by the Greeks to cloak the ground of the underworld, but which here is probably meant to signify something pleasant. The point is that someone – this group of male rabbis who sat around discussing the meaning of Biblical texts – saw something to be rescued in Lot's wife; and

rather than casting her out, they hinted that there might be something in a name that hauls her back into the community again. She was not so wicked in their eyes, it seems, as not to be fertile and good.

This generosity did not extend to all their dealings with her. Rozmarin does not mention the dominant interpretation of why she was turned into a pillar of salt. This is that she was a Sodomite herself, mean and rejecting of visitors, and she resented Lot's relative generosity and hospitality. Specifically, says the foremost classical Jewish commentator, the eleventh century scholar Rashi (Rabbi Schlomo ben Yitzchak), 'By salt had she sinned and by salt she was punished. Lot said to her, "Give a little salt to these strangers" and she answered him, "Do you mean to introduce this bad custom also into this city?"' Lot insisted, but Irit/Idit found a way to undermine him. As she had little salt in the house, because salt was a luxury, she went round to the other women in the town to borrow some, and when they asked why it was needed she told them they had visitors from outside Sodom, knowing this would antagonise them. As a consequence, the townspeople came to surround Lot's home, and the visitors were only saved by their miraculous ability to blind everyone. So Lot's wife is presented not only as impertinent (she disobeyed God's command), but as inhospitable, xenophobic and scheming; not exactly material for maternal heroism, but then the story was written by men.

Rozmarin also emphasises the abstractness of heavenly justice, the way it is faceless, and has a rigidity about it which is countered by the individualising tendency of the maternal, or at least of the feminine resistance to it. She writes, 'The gaze that insists on seeing the suffering of the people of Sodom reveals the erasure of violence, which is always at the heart of justice, and thus the violence of law itself. The principle of abstract justice, which balances evils, erases the multiplicity of lives that constitute any collective.' This may be so, but the context is omitted here. Just before the story of Sodom's destruction, there is the famous and absolutely central passage in which Abraham bargains with God. 'Will you also sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' he asks (Genesis 18:22). And even more compellingly: 'Shall the Judge of all the earth not act justly?' (18:25). He then gets God's agreement that should there be even ten righteous people in the town, it will not be destroyed; unfortunately, there are not that many, but the point remains. It is not that 'the multiplicity of lives' are erased in the context of a general, sweeping judgement; it is rather that a small number of righteous individuals, if they could be found, would have saved them all. Indeed, Lot himself is not protected because he is righteous, as Rozmarin claims; he is not in fact regarded as righteous at all. He is saved only through the merit of Abraham, his uncle. Rashi writes about why Lot was not allowed to view the destruction: 'You have sinned as much as they, and therefore it is not fitting that you should look upon their punishment.' One might note in relation to this that Lot looking at the punishment meted out to his neighbours was viewed as somehow indecent: he deserved the same. And perhaps it was also protective of God to stop him looking, as he might be overwhelmed by the realisation of what could have happened to him, of what he deserved.

And then again, there is the problem of Lot's daughters. Rozmarin sees them as heroic, and there is some Rabbinic support for this view. There is praise in the commentaries for their action, which was also regarded as not forbidden at the time. They thought everyone else was dead, and impregnation by their father was the only way to repopulate the world. Sforno (a major sixteenth-century commentator) notes: 'because

the intentions of Lot's daughters were good, their descendants inherited the land.' Rozmarin reads the incest between Lot and his daughters, and particularly the childbearing that comes from it, as a sign of maternal lineage that opposes patriarchy: 'I suggest that the daughters' actions reveal that Lot's wife's life, through her act, has succeeded in establishing new relations with her daughters, for whom her ethical stance has become an aspiration and a basis for a different feminine subjectivity.' It is not clear how this works, and it is undermined, surely, by the fact that the daughters give birth to *sons*, and from them to nations who are seen as violently opposed to the Israelites – so much so that intermingling between Israelites and Moabites, one of the nations, is expressly prohibited. It is true that Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, was a Moabitess, and indeed it is worth considering how much better a model of feminine solidarity the story of Ruth is than the story of Lot's wife, a point that Rozmarin makes. But what we are left with here is a woman who is turned to salt, and two daughters who seduce their father, producing sons who grow up antagonistic to the descendants of the person who saved their grandfather, the descendants of Abraham. If one was to read this sardonically and cruelly, it would not be difficult to construct a Freudianising story about Lot's daughters focused on Oedipal triumph over the mother rather than feminine solidarity.

### Looking Back<sup>1</sup>

None of this implies that we cannot read this myth against its apparent grain, and against too the rendering of patriarchal judgement and matricidal exclusion that seems to come with it. In a compelling, influential rendering that admittedly deals only with Lot's wife and not with the daughters – but then, we are seeking some access to maternal subjectivity, are we not? – Rebecca Goldstein (1992) does exactly that. Her account takes the form of a 'modern midrash', a specifically Jewish format (so fitting the requirement for 'concrete' social positioning) that describes an emerging awareness of the possibilities within the myth, alongside her own thoughts on philosophy, Judaism, the Bible, and her father. Intriguingly, there is no mention of her mother anywhere in the piece, except for one brief mention of being warned 'to avert my eyes' (p.37).

Goldstein's story goes, in outline, like this. Learning about the story of Lot's wife in school, she understands the punishment that comes for looking when you are not supposed to – that is, after all, a common experience of childhood. However, she is troubled by the question, what *made* Lot's wife look back when she had been told expressly not to. What was the compulsion? This is not just an intellectual question, but an existential one, linked to her awareness that she too would probably have felt 'compelled' to look even if – or perhaps precisely because – it was forbidden. Why do people do what they are supposed not to do, in the full knowledge that they will not get away with it, but nevertheless they do it, as if some force takes them over, against their will? She asks her father why Lot's wife looked back and he consults his books, as Jewish men do, finding the name (Irit or Idit; Goldstein prefers Irit) and then the following, which he reads out. "According to this midrash, Irit had pity on her two older daughters who were left behind with their husbands. She turned around to see if they were following her and she saw the Presence and was turned to salt" (p.38).<sup>2</sup> This is clearly a

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Maureen Kendler for alerting me to Rebecca Goldstein's paper.

<sup>2</sup> Pirké of Rabbi Eliezer (Chapter 25) has "The pity of Edith the wife of Lot was stirred for her daughters, who were married in Sodom, and she looked back behind her to see if they were coming after her or not.

convincing explanation, and in itself stands alongside Rozmarin's reading of a maternal genealogy in the myth. Irit yearned for her lost daughters to follow her and this yearning took the form of a compulsion to look back, exactly the kind of feeling-centred disruption of patriarchal justice that one might understand as an ethical stance against divine, and masculine, cruelty. This is indeed how Goldstein reads it, and so it seems does her father. He looks at her, and she back at him; despite the obviously satisfactory answer that the book has provided, he is not at ease, and says he will seek out others. Goldstein understands exactly why he says this, and she is grateful to him.

My father was telling me that he, too, was confused by the story of Lot's wife. And from his confusion I knew many things. I knew, first of all, that, in looking back at Irit, he, too, looked back with pity. But far more importantly, I knew from his confusion that my father, just like Irit, would also have looked back to see if all his daughters were following. (p.38)

Goldstein then develops her midrash with a brief account of her own journey from Jewish learning to Western philosophy; the undutiful daughter: 'Don't even look, the teachers said. So even before I was graduated from high school, I used one of my summer vacations to take a course in philosophy' (p.39). Her commitment drifts towards the rational enterprise of philosophy, to its purity of thought and neglect of family ties and the humdrum demands of ordinary life, and indeed of affect and emotion and muddled thinking. But even in this she is aware of how the contrast between the 'life of the mind in Western philosophy' (p.39) and the densely emotional context of the Judaic world may not be easy to resolve. In fact, she thinks, philosophy holds 'a vision of life as pellucid with rationality as the other is thick with the ties of blood and with the heavy decisions one is asked to make between the orders of one's love' (p.39). This other dimension, the one that has ties of blood and orders of love in it, haunts her ('that old dilemma... the conflict between the demands of transcendence and the backward pull of love and accidental attachment' - p.39); and strikingly, it is embodied for her in the person of her father.

On the one hand, I still remember my father's admission of confusion about Irit's fate, and the knowledge and comfort I gathered from his confusion. On the other hand, my father never could work up any enthusiasm for the luminous vision of the life of pure reason I tried to paint for him. I argued that it was the life that was the most consistent and thus right. He agreed with me that it was consistent, but he wouldn't agree that it was right. In fact, he thought it was all wrong. He thought it was right for human life to be subject to contradictions, for a person to love in more than one direction, and sometimes to be torn into pieces because of his many loves. (p.41)

The story ends with a very striking return, implicitly after the death of her father, a moment of discovery that Goldstein cannot share with him, but which is imbued with his presence and through that, with a distinct, even revolutionary (in the sense of turning things around and back on themselves, as well as overturning the usual understanding) rendering of the God who turns Irit into salt. The new midrash comes

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And she saw behind the Shekhinah, and she became a pillar of salt.' The Shekhinah is commonly thought of as the feminine aspect of God.

from the Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, a thirteenth century commentator) who takes up the point that when at the end of his life Moses warns the people about the dangers of forsaking God, he uses the imagery of Sodom but refers (Deuteronomy 29:22) to 'brimstone and *salt*.' Radak 'says that in fact all the people of Sodom became pillars of salt. The outcome of the physical devastation wrought upon Sodom was that the place itself became sulfur, while the people became salt.' Goldstein glosses this:

Hence, at least if one follows Radak, it seems that Lot's wife was not the spectacular aberration I had always thought her. Her fate was continuous with those who had been left behind. Suddenly I felt the whole story of Lot's wife shifting.

She was told not to look and she looked, says the Bible. And her punishment came swift and horrible, added my teacher, following the traditional interpretation I too had thought inevitable. But I read the story differently now: Irit looked back to see if her two first-born daughters were following, and she saw that they weren't and what had become of them.

In such a moment of grief one knows only one desire: to follow after one's child, to experience what she's experienced, to be one with her in every aspect of suffering. Only to be one with her.

And it was for this desire that Irit was turned into a pillar of salt. She was turned into salt either because God couldn't forgive her this desire . . . or because He could. (p.41)

What is extraordinary about this reading, in its acute sensitivity to motivation and confusion, is that what appears to be a cast-iron reading of God's act as a cruel punishment is undermined by finding in it a possible act of care. God turns round from His business of destroying Sodom and sees Irit aching for her daughters, and He says, either in hate or in love, 'I will make you one with them.' This could be the force of paternal rejection, unforgiving of Irit's refusal to follow orders; but it could also be an imaginative leap in which God sees that the maternal ache towards these daughters is insurmountable, and finds a way to acknowledge it for all time – the 'rock' or pillar that Rozmarin refers to, standing forever not as a reminder of Lot's wife's culpability, but of Irit's maternal longing.

I am not trying to suggest that the gendered elements in the story are irrelevant – that Rozmarin's reading of the story of Lot's wife as one that provides a possible model of intergenerational feminine resistance to matricide is illegitimate. However, I am drawing on Goldstein's midrash to point out how a reading grounded in the textual sources and interpersonal relationships that arise directly from its 'concrete' community can offer something both surprising and quite radically other than this. For Goldstein, it is not the matricentricity of the myth that stands out, but what it evokes between herself and her father, and how this refracts itself back onto her reading of the gendered elements in the original tale: the mother's turn, the father's (God's) compassion for her, even in the midst of His fury with Sodom. This comes out very poignantly in a reflection she has, in passing, on another one of the Biblical patriarchs and his wife, the blind Isaac. Isaac reached out for (turned back towards) his brutish, wild son Esau even after the scheming of his wife Rebecca had resulted in his other son Jacob receiving the blessing destined for the first born. 'Because she was my namesake I wanted to love and admire Rebecca,' Goldstein writes (p.39). 'And I did, and do, admire

her. But it's Isaac whom I love. I love this blind and confused father, who can't see clearly because of love, who's so utterly and pitifully confused, because of love.'

To reiterate: it is not my point that paternal love is more profound than maternal, or that fathers can be confused and loving and not necessarily strict and censorious. I do not think the former is true and I hope very much that the latter is. My point is rather to juxtapose Rozmarin's rather ungrounded reading of the myth – or at least, it is a reading that is *philosophically* grounded, in the tradition Goldstein articulates – with a more 'Jewish' reading in the sense that it draws directly on classical commentaries, takes the Jewish form of a 'midrash' (a speculative, exploratory story that tries to evoke the hidden possibilities in a text) and that it is sensitively attuned to its own conditions of creation, which in this instance seem to have to do with a process of mourning a loving, tolerant father. This provokes a reading that omits the mother in any direct way (which invites a big biographical question, I suppose), but still finds a deep and profound space for maternal love. However, it is no longer so clear that matricide is at stake here, nor that there is an obvious opposition in the myth between rigid punishment and relational care.

### **Witnessing**

Rozmarin makes another claim that is worth considering. She states that,

The address of subjectivity beyond phallogocentric matricide constitutes a space of witnessing, wherein mothers react in relation to their socio-political contexts, and daughters become the addressees of the testimonies that are their mothers' subjectivities. ...In these acts of witnessing the harm of the phallogocentric logic in its different manifestations, mothers open the way for their daughters to see beyond the phallogocentric scheme. The space between them becomes a space of negotiation with reality and its alternatives. This space validates their relational desire and subjectivity.

Witnessing here seems to become a space for communication between mothers and daughters, in which mothers witness 'the harm of the phallogocentric logic' and daughters learn from this, specifically as a mechanism whereby their own experience is validated (or at least that is how I understand the final phrase in this quotation). Lot's wife is seen as such a witness, and the fact that she is calcified in the process is an additional element in her testimonial power. Drawing on Cavarero (2007), but with echoes of Agamben (2002), Rozmarin reads Lot's wife as a kind of perfect witness – the one who cannot testify, because she has the full experience of suffering and this is inexpressible, a situation of silencing that in itself speaks for the difference between seeing and being. 'By turning into a pillar of salt, Lot's wife attests to the horror she saw and the limits of her testimony,' writes Rozmarin, apparently arguing that Lot's wife resists the law of patriarchal/divine justice and becomes testimony to the event through turning into salt. More broadly, Lot's wife as a silent spectacle (she does not speak in the text, and once transformed she stands silent, looking back over the plain) is a witness precisely in that voicelessness: it is what she *stands for* that comes to count, read by Rozmarin as a refusal and consequent suffering. It is this that the daughters take as a starting point for their own assertive acts. 'The daughters' ability to respond to their mother's testimony,' Rozmarin claims, 'allows them to affirm their own subjectivity and agency.'

Again, and more briefly here, I can see how Rozmarin's argument might work, but it also seems to work against itself. Rozmarin makes the very important points that the

assertion of life in the continuing fertility of the daughters – life at all costs, one might suggest, in the shadow of the mother’s demise – can be read as the beginnings of a ‘hesitant and stammering’ female lineage (but as noted before, the children are *sons*) and that this is also a valorising of particularity against the generalising law of patriarchy. As she says, this is an ethical standpoint: ‘Although muted and killed by patriarchal law, the dead body of Lot’s wife addresses to her daughters a testimony about the value of life, as an immanent aspect of life itself. The daughters bring their mother’s inheritance to life in their pregnant and birthing bodies.’ This ethics is one of *particularity*, rooted in the specificity of individual being; it is built out of the mother’s ability to witness the violence of patriarchy and the daughters’ capacity to honour that witnessing, ‘to find attentiveness beyond the phallogocentric renunciation and hurt.’ ‘There is a value,’ Rozmarin concludes, ‘in concrete singular lives that cannot be negotiated or obliterated by any form of logic.’ Concreteness appears again, and again I agree: it is in the particularities of encounter that the abstractions and cruelties of patriarchy might indeed be opposed.

But silent witnessing, is that what we want? The most compelling argument against the fetishising of witnessing as a space of impossibility is I think, the one that suggests that it is not impossible at all; it is, rather, that those who receive this witnessing might take refuge in it being ‘impossible’ and ‘silent’ precisely so they do not have to deal with it. Thomas Trezise (2013, p.211) expresses this clearly in his forensic dissection of Agamben’s claims around Holocaust witnessing:

The routinely repeated claim that the traumatic experience of the Holocaust is unrepresentable or unspeakable appears to stand in for a refusal to listen. Of course, this is not to say that those who make the attempt to listen can ever claim success, for it can hardly be a matter of success when listening itself is interminable.

It may be impossible ever to complete the task of listening, but this does not mean that trauma is inexpressible or that it cannot be witnessed; it just describes the difficulty that people have in holding themselves together sufficiently to allow the speaking to occur, to avoid leaping in to smother an emerging story, which can include denying the legitimacy of the speaker but can also include sanctifying the speaker so that the testimony cannot be engaged with. The issue here is how to hold oneself in response. Silence might at times be a necessary refuge, but breaking silence in a way that respects the witness is crucial for the historical record.

What I am interested in here is why it should be that the witness must be killed off in order to be heard, in order for her daughters to enact agency themselves, even the peculiar agency chosen by Irit’s daughters. Naming her is important in this: she has her own subjectivity, and there are things that can be done to resurrect it, if we read the texts carefully enough and integrate them as a living testimony. Witnessing is indeed an essential aspect of mourning, resistance and becoming; without it, we live without memory and history, and in a suffering state in which there is no capacity to understand what structures the cruelty around us. But the problem about witnessing (and trauma) is not in the silence of the witness: people try to talk all the time about what they have been through, and if words are inadequate it does not promote silence, only attempts to find better words. Yet for this to happen the interlocutors for such witnessing – the witnesses of witnessing, to adapt Trezise’s terms – have to sustain the capacity to listen, to be present in the dialogue and to imaginatively adapt to its terms. All this is implicit, I



think, in Rozmarin's argument and explicit in those moments when she addresses the daughters' receptivity; but it is lost if we regard the only true witness as the one who is turned to salt. Better, I think, is the re-creation that occurs in such responses to this ambiguous, horrific and yet living text that takes it into the warp and weft of a contemporary life and its relationality, that stays in contact with it for much of a lifetime, and uses it both to honour a memory and to understand how it might point to the possibilities of care-full, loving identification.

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