

**Daniela Bruni – 21 July 2011**

**Demeter and Kore**

The maternal discourse has been for millennia the preserve of a patriarchal system. To speak of women, their sexuality and subjectivity, of their being mothers and daughters is to refer to discourses and images created by men. Females are represented and forced to recognize themselves in the imagery created by the other (sex). Women need to find new images through which they can think or re-think the maternal outside the patriarchal paradigm. For Irigaray revisiting the maternal is an essential part of each woman's search for their own subjectivity. While Freud was searching for a universal understanding of female subjectivity, Irigaray argues that this is not a fixed state but that each woman needs to find her own subjectivity by mourning the mother, and re-connecting with the images and fantasies that surround the daughter's relationship with her mother. I suggest that myth and art can provide the imagery for this rediscovery - to get a sense of something that is unavailable through everyday language.

I turn to the Greek myth of Demeter to evoke images of the journey of separation and connection between mother and daughter. Myth speaks through archetypes. It is an expression of universal experiences and therefore it can offer us the chance to explore our own psyche and the fantasies surrounding our relationship with the mother. Art, like myth, communicates with the primitive levels of our mental life, with our own unconscious, evoking images that are absent or silent within us. The experience of art can support our reflection on the maternal by allowing fantasies and images of the maternal to arise. I explore the work of Artemisia Gentileschi which through her painting articulates her relationship to her own body and to the body of the mother - to men and to other women. It seems to me that her work is the shaping and re-shaping of her being a woman, a daughter and a mother - a work of searching, of being in touch with and of giving expression to unconscious maternal images.

For Freud, the Oedipus myth provides a structure for understanding both individual psychic agency and the modality of social relationships. It celebrates the centrality of the bond that unites mother and male child. The mother/ daughter relationship remains silent, almost impenetrable both in our culture and within the system of

knowledge of psychoanalysis. In her work Irigaray critique Freud's attempt to explore female subjectivity on the basis of a one-sex model. Through his male understanding of the world, she argues, Freud created a universal theory that reduced women to what is 'other' to men. Her research focuses on claiming ways that women can exist as autonomous subjects- rather than being defined as a lack in relation to men. Irigaray is against universal definition of femininity, and refuses to proscribe or fix a female position. Instead she invites women to find for themselves what defines them. This is to be found by challenging and deconstructing existing definitions of female subjectivity; re-configuring the relationship between mother and daughter and affirming the female body (1985).

Irigaray(1985) says that the maternal is shapeless, magmatic but that precisely from this indistinct nature of the relationship with the mother that a new language needs to be found. Therefore, while the patriarchal discourse has kept the maternal in the pre-symbolic- sealing it in the childhood- the word of women will start from the maternal and its obscure side: the identification with the mother. To recognise and mourn the omnipotence of the mother is an essential psychic experience which allows every woman to give life, flesh and words to the mother. Essential in this process is the reconnection with the primordial body of the mother that in its wholeness/ fullness contained everything. The body of which she speaks is not only related to anatomy or a biologic product but is the meeting point of fantasies, drives and images, a body as a place of folly, regression and confusion, of affective scars, psychic symptoms and emotional knots. The journey of the woman towards the maternal body, similar and distant and the archaic pre-oedipal scene, shaken by inexpressible fantasies is barren, as is outside the coordinate of time-space of our society. However for Irigaray (1982) becoming woman is linked to the re-presentation of one's body in relation to and as separated from the mother's body. It is from this point, the unspeakable quality of the mother/daughter relationship that the work of Luce Irigaray and other female analysts starts, to grasp that which escapes any universality of knowledge.

The passion of the girl for the body-world of the mother remains silent if we don't recover the maternal images that, even if remote, live in us. Irigaray (1980) believes that only an archaeology of the female imaginary, as an attempt to bring to the surface those hidden concretions, phantasms, enigmatic sedimentations, could lead to a

subjectivity which constitutes itself in the very act of its searching. This archaeology is conceived not as a going back to a past where our destiny is already decided but as a possibility to go back to oneself, with new images, words, gestures and symbols. It is at this point that psychoanalytic knowledge as archaeological search meets the myth, as there is in fact concordance between unconscious fantasies and myth.

I suggest in our rediscovery of maternal images that we go back to the myth as it allows the exploration of our imaginary world. Going back to the Greek myth, as going back to the maternal doesn't want to be a looking backward but a re-turn to one's origin. Ginette Paris (1991) speaks of the experience offered by the myth as a turning within, a return into oneself that is based on a reconnection with the past: reconnection as reinterpretation, re-gaining of memory, of feeling, a re-visiting that is a re-birth.

I look at the myth of Demeter and Kore, so that through its archetypes we can become more aware of what we, singularly and as a society are dismissing, neglecting or denying of the relationship mother/daughter.

The two goddesses Demeter and Kore, are at the centre of what is perhaps the most famous story of the mythic and cultural Greek tradition. The story is told by the author of the hymn to Demeter (Homeric Hymns 2003) and later by Orpheus. The myth tells of a mother Demeter goddess of the earth and agriculture and so of life, and a daughter, who significantly, does not have a first name but a generic name of Kore, or 'girl' and is destined to become queen of death. Mother and daughter, goddess of wheat and of death, seem to be the symbolic pair for the foundation of existence, since agriculture and its laws are as inescapable as death.

In the myth, there is a conspiracy between Kore's father, Zeus and Hades his brother, to kidnap her, and take her with him to the underworld without the mother's knowledge. The beginning of the myth is based on the contrast between the will and power of men and the will without power which is female. Kore is taken away with violence, symbolic rape, and calls the name of the father who does not respond. His will takes her away from her mother into a new family. Demeter, in pain, starts her restless search for Kore. In grief and despair, Demeter responds to the abuse of the

father with rage, and using her own powers, creates a year of misery in which the earth remains fruitless and the human race risks extinction from starvation. To avoid the catastrophe, Zeus allows Kore to come back to the mother. She is happy to return to her mother, but she will be bound to return for a third of the year to the underworld. When Kore is reunited with her mother, the earth flourishes, and when she returns to her husband the earth becomes barren and dry once more.

For Irigaray (1989) this myth represents how the maternal is neglected from the patriarchal order, how male uses female and their sexuality as a commodities- objects of exchange. The patriarchal culture, as Hades, represents the power that takes apart mother and daughter. In the myth it is through the father (as in the best Lacanian tradition) that this separation takes place. This painful division seems to be the precondition for the daughter's entry into the world, a kind of 'initiation' to sexual and social life. Both our personal experience and the social reality carry the signs of this violence which for Irigaray corresponds to the destruction of the genealogical relationship between mother and daughter. On the other hand the myth shows the intensity and unbreakable nature of this relationship. The wrench/rift from the mother does not erase the underlying identity that ties mother and daughter together, an identity rooted in the sharing of the female nature.

Art, like the myth, creates connections between elements without giving them a specific signification; it catches the free-floating fantasies and represents them. With 'Creative writers' and 'daydreaming' (1908), Freud states that the source of inspiration of writing is the unconscious. The artist therefore goes into the depth of what is most primitive in him, and, without understanding it consciously, is able to represent it into the work of art. Lacan (1959) says something more, that the artistic endeavour is the expression of the work that the artist does around the search for the first and lost object. The work of art is the attempt to give shape and substance to a void. It originates from the void of 'la Chose', *das Ding*, (a term taken from Freud as shorthand for *archaic experience*), the unmediated contact with the Other, usually the mother, the primitive gratification and the loss of immediacy that point to a lost object and establish the trajectory of desire. For Lacan sublimation is therefore an attempt to bring us into contact with the body of the mother, that from which the child receives nourishment and *jouissance*. The work of art is the transformation of that *jouissance*,

which will lose its substance of repetition in the moment in which the artist- with the artwork- deepens into the contemplation of the void and accepts it. With the artwork the artist then engraves (impresses, affects) his *jouissance*. The creative act is the way in which the artist gives shape to the mother of his phantasies, dreams and powerful unconscious drives.

At this point rather than focusing on the maternal through representations of maternity, which in the history of western art, at least until modern time, is focused primarily on the religious representation of the Virgin Mary (in Annunciation, with the child, with Christ, with her own mother) what I suggest we do is to look at the painting of a female artist Artemisia Gentileschi to see how she articulates the maternal in her work. My intention is therefore to explore together the question of the interrelationship among Gentileschi's experience as woman- mother and daughter- the state of her psyche and her art.

Not only the art but the biography of Artemisia Gentileschi, and the connection between the two shows the difficult journey of this Italian Baroque painter of the seventeenth Century. She was the only female follower of Caravaggio and the first woman artist in the history of western art whose historical role was significant. To be a woman painter at the beginning of the XVII c. was a difficult and uncommon choice but not an extraordinary one. Before her, between the end of 1500 and beginning of 1600, other women had worked as painters and with some success. And yet Longhi, who had the merit of rediscover the work of Artemisia writes about her as «..the only woman that in Italy knew what painting was.».

At that time the work of other female painters was limited to portrait, imitative poses, still nature and floral compositions. Even when religious or historical painting were created they directly related to that of their male contemporaries and confirmed the dominant artistic, social and religious ideology- one of spiritual reform expressed through prayer, devotion and contemplation.. Artemisia was the first woman to paint major historical, mythological and religious scenarios and the first that negotiated a new relationship to dominant cultural ideology. Before looking at her paintings I'd like to say something about her life as I believe is essential to understand this painter and her art.

Artemisia was born in Rome in 1593 when her father was 30 her mother 18. Orazio a major followers of the revolutionary Caravaggio and Prudentia had four sons after Artemisia, two of whom are recorded as dying in childhood:

1. Giovanni Battista, born Dec 1594, died Sept 1601.
2. Francesco, born June 1597.
3. Giulio, born Sept 1599.
4. Giovanni Battista, born Oct 1601, died Feb 1603.

Artemisia's mother died aged 30, in childbirth, on 26th Dec 1605. Artemisia was just 12 years old. Artemisia received her early training from her father. From him she learnt drawing, how to mix colours and how to paint. Since childhood Artemisia spends a lot of time in her father's studio where she was surrounded by men, the artists friends and colleagues of her father. In this male environment, in which soon she loses her mother, Orazio becomes emotionally and professionally a dominant figure in her life. She completes her apprenticeship by age seventeen, but could not go to art academies as they barred females from sketching or painting male nudes. To continue her training, Orazio arranged for a friend, Agostino Tassi, to tutor Artemisia.

In 1612, Orazio brings a lawsuit against Tassi for raping the 19 years old Artemisia and withdrawing a promise of marriage. There followed a highly publicised seven-month trial during which Artemisia was given gynaecological examination and was tortured using thumbscrews. Tassi was sentenced but never paid his charge. From the records of the trial emerge a sense of shady dynamics in which are involved Tassi, Tuzia her godmother/ friend (which helped Tassi in his pursue) and her father who waited a year before suing Tassi.

Some feminist writers have seen in her graphic depictions, cathartic and symbolic attempts to deal with the physical and psychic pain of the rape. The heroines of her art, especially Judith, are read as powerful women exacting revenge on such male evil doers. Susan Sontag speaks of the heroism of Artemisia as related intimately with her disgrace, the rape and the scandal that followed allowed her to be free to say and to speak- to be free as a man-which for a woman means a freedom of choice.

It would be reductive considering her work only as redemption or sublimation of the violence experienced, because in her art it's expresses a powerful and variedness

poetic that goes beyond this biographical vicissitude. However there is no doubt that the trauma of the rape and the trial impacted on Artemisia's life and painting.

### **Susanna and the elders**

This is one of the earliest work by Artemisia, signed by her Arte Gentileschi 1610, it was executed in Roma when she was 17. The story is told in the Old Testament, in an apocryphal of the book of Daniel and was quite popular in the xv, xvi century Italy. The attempted seduction by the two elder of Joachim's wife offered the opportunity to portray a female erotic nude. While Susana bathes in her garden, having sent her attendants away, two lustful elders secretly observe her and threaten to claim that she was meeting a young man in the garden unless she agrees to have sex with them. The story is based on sexual desire, visual temptation, femal castity and masculine law. It focuses on the sexual dynamic of looking and the interplay of male aggression and female seducion/ resistance.

Gentileschi's version depart from this tradition in a significant way. First of all she doesn't represent Susanna in the garden, but against a rigid architectonic frieze which contains the body in a restricted space. It is through the way in which Susanna occupaies this limited space: with the twist and impetus of her body that Artemisia transforms the image in one of distress and resistance.

Artemisia plaies on the contrast between Susanna's statuesque body, the firmness of her flesh and her being so exposed; between her sculped nakedness, seducteveness and her vulnerability and repulsion. The classical scene is also contravened as one of the eldest assumes the feature of a bully while the other resembles her father( as he's represented in a portrait by Van Dyck). The two man are inclosed in an embrace which makes of them a single entity. Their disquieting presence, hovering over the naked body of Susanna makes one think of the future connivence between her father and the her rapist. Beneath the male couple, united and complicit, Susanna stands alone and naked. Her hands expressing bashfulness and rejection. Her brows knit with fear and suspicion. Susanna is alone as in memory of a great deprivation: the loss of her mother!

Orazio arranged for Artemisia to marry so to give her a certain respectability. So a month after the end of the trial Artemisia marries PierAntonio Stiattesi, a modest Florentine artist, with whom she moves to Florence. Here Artemisia is very successful: she become a court painter, she receives patronage from the Medici and is accepted at the Accademia del disegno, the first female painter to become a member of an Art Academy. It is in Florence that she gives birth to four children, although only her daughter Prudentia will survive. During this period she creates the painting that we are going to look at now.

### **Judith and Holofernes** 1612 Capodimonte Museum Napoli

The story of the heroic Judith that liberates her people from the domination of the Assyrian enemy is devoid of all its biblical connotation and filled with her own world. It becomes a sort of pretext to work on the theme of abuse and her own identity as a woman. In the Judith of Capodimonte, two women Judith, self portrait of Artemisia, and her maid Abra are united and complicit in their effort against a man. While Holofernes is pinned down the two women emerge from the dark background with bright of dresses: electric blue and blood red. Our attention is captured by them- the concentration in their faces, their arms like columns, the hand closing into a fist pressing Holofernes's face, the other holding the sword down on his neck; the breast that slips from the neckline. Then one look at Holofernes: his fist against Abra's chin to push her back, his head thrown back and pressed against the sheet spattered with blood.

When we look at Caravaggio's painting of the same subject: Holofernes is the tragic hero and Judith a tender virginal figure. Judith doesn't appear as a fearless heroin but as an elegant, refined woman symbol of redemption and civilization. The tragic sense of the scene is minimized by representing Judith as young, beautiful and pure woman. Through her the scene becomes the symbol of the virtue against the vice, the justice against savagery. Artemisia is influenced by Caravaggio in the chiaroscuro, the realism of expression, the diagonal structure of the scene, but her scene is a drama in action in which Judith is the heroin. Judith is determined, moved by a great inner force, by a mission. With the pathos of a classic tragedy she acts without uncertainty, conflict, nor possibility of choice but as following a destiny that transcends her. The

other essential and new aspect of this painting is that Judith does not act alone: Abra is with her, physically and spiritually, almost as her double. Here as in Susanna there is a triangle between the figures. The two women here are not united as the two men of that picture but 'together in action', in solidarity with one another. Holofernes's position with his knees apart suggests the idea of rape and abortion in relation to which Artemisia's implacable gesture can be explained as her identification with the aggressor- it is this that transforms her from victim to oppressor. The position of his knees can also be an allusion to giving birth, which was lethal in the case of Artemisia's mother. This scene could be a screen-memory: beneath the memory of the rape an earlier trauma may be at work- the loss of her mother. A mother lost at the moment of her adolescence, which may retroactively have revived the trauma of the original separation.

### **Judith and Holofernes** Uffizi 1620

In the painting of Florence the composition is more complex, the thirst for blood even more tragic. Judith is not only a female heroine but the celebration of female energy that find expression in a direct action. Longhi (1916) comments that is a cruel slaughter what occurs on the immaculate sheet and that there is no sadism but detachment from the part of the artist- that has even painted little drops of blood to decorate the central squirt/jet .Her only concern- to save her silky dress from the blood(symbol of rape)! The resistance of Holofernes, the position of his legs, the tangle of arms, resemble the desperate struggle during a rape. The painting has had various interpretations: vengeance for the rape, appropriation of men attitudes and attributes and competition with her artistic father. All focus on conflict with the other sex. I would like to focus on the solidarity between women and on the fact that here Artemisia is trying to articulate her own subjectivity as a woman. It is in the use of bright scintillating colours, the way in which she mixes them, in her drawing, her love for the matter and materials of silky luminescence and in the movement of her brush that Artemisia speaks of what is unspeakable, of what is Other: unconscious fantasies, her way of feeling, her relation with herself and the world.

### **Judith and her Maidservant** 1613 Palazzo Pitti Florence

Here the psychological complicity amongst the two women is created by squeezing the figure in a narrow space, by creating a composition in which the two bodies are mirroring each other and by directing their look in the same direction. This is very different from Orazio's version of the same subject where the two figures look in different directions which lessens the sense of shared mission.

### **Judith and her Maidservant** 1616 Lemme Collection

Here Artemisia portrays herself again as the protagonist but looks more like a child-uninvolved, puzzled, and unaware- almost questioning who has performed the deed, while at the same time she holds Holofernes's head. Her maid seems more mature but has a dull, awkward expression she also seems to say she does not know what has happened- while she holds the sack and a sword. Again the tension between the two is one of complicity, their hands cross on the victim's head to show they acted united.

### **The penitent Magdalene** 1617 Palazzo Pitti

This is a very feminine and elegant portrait of herself. Magdalene is anything but penitent. Her hand is on her breast as if to control an excess of sensuality, or as an expression of maternity, nourishment and sustenance. I remain perplexed on the significance of this gesture but the fact that Artemisia very often represents it, seems to show her interest towards the first object of nourishment/ desire. In her paintings of mother-child problematic aspects of this relationship emerge.

### **Madonna and child** 1609 Galleria Spada Roma

Here there is no communication of emotional attachment on the part of the mother. She keeps her eyes closed and seems totally concentrated on herself. While she offers the breast to her son, he touches her neck, searches for her face, for a more intimate contact with her. He is not interested in her breast but in her attention. There is in this maternity a sense of existential difficulty in nurturing and being present to the child.

## **Lucrezia** 1621 Cattaneo Adorno Collection Genova

Here Artemisia represents herself as the roman Lucrezia who, after been raped turns the blade on herself to cancel the shame of the abuse. A model of virtues and injured dignity, Lucrezia is seen by Artemisia as model of androgynous woman: a very strong body, a male visage and muscular thigh, Herculean shoulders. It is an image of force and dramatic violence where the male and female elements don't fuse together.

What's communicated is a sense of confusion, ambivalence and conflict in face of one own femininity. The choice of male's attribute is a way in which Artemisia resists the consolidated image of a femininity that accepts to be circumscribed to a domestic role. Artemisia decides to provoke. The flesh of Lucrezia is flung in our face with all its provocative charge: excessive, irrepressible and enigmatic. Enigmatic is the gesture of the hand holding her breast maybe an act of self-grasping and containment? or a going back, with the memory, to the mother's body?

## **St. Catherine of Alexandria** 1617-20 Uffizi Gallery

The Saint/ Artemisia with almost a masculine visage stand out from the darkness in a regal pose and wearing a crown. The crowned head could symbolize the primacy of the head over the body. The male feature may symbolize the refusal of traditional female role and the adoption of male attributes. The refusal of female attributes seems to be the price to be paid for social recognition and success. However, the hands that holds the palm, rests on her breast- as if making contact with it she makes contact with her own sexuality and the maternal body in which she seeks reassurance.

Artemisia is showing the difficulties that women face when trying to affirm themselves outside their domestic role, the struggle to overcome dualistic representations: male/female, mind/body, matter/spirit and affirm them in their own uniqueness. This painting represent another step in Artemisia journey towards overcoming the competition/ imitation/ identification with men and being at ease in a female body- at once passionate and maternal-that feels and thinks, imagines and creates.

### **Allegory of painting** Palazzo Barberini Roma

Artemisia represents herself as a mature woman, but with a red and sensual mouth, crowned with a laurel wreath, reasserting her position as a successful artist. The male figure from the oval of the painting, is a common man; there is nothing heroic or grandiose about him. The competition with men is still present as she represents herself triumphant over the small shabby male, only her body dominates the scene. Something though gets lost in this play of omnipotence- she looks detached and arid. The attempt to adapt one's subjectivity to the male stereotype is hard and useless. The pointless effort produces in fact an image of woman that has lost her nature and her vitality.

### **Allegory of painting** 1630 Kensington Palace London

Here Artemisia paints herself as a young woman in the act of painting, brush in hand, palette in the other. She's alone with her work, or better, alone in the action of painting- totally absorbed in it- her eyes fixed on the canvas we cannot see. Now sure of her ability to create, to give life through painting, she doesn't have to compete nor exhibit, nor challenge us- she doesn't have to fight against men. What we see here is not a woman/heroin, nor a goddess that to affirm herself needs to borrow male's attributes but a feminine figure of powerful realism, with locks of hair out of place, in an informal and yet complex pose( in fact Artemisia needed two mirrors to catch her profile in that angulations). We see a woman totally concentrated on her work, identifying with it and making a statement: this is who I am, I am an artist, I'm Painting: this very act of creation. The colours that she uses for her figure are the same used for the background. In part of the painting she seems merging with it, in other she emerges from it, as if absorbing it. Artemisia has united herself with painting, with the light, the pigments and the space surrounding her. She has united herself with the act of creation which is maternal.

Looking at Artemisia's work we have followed her in her journey through the body. In its nakedness and materiality, in action and as subject and object of violence, the body enslaved to human passions and free to express them. There is another body to which her paintings give expression - the body/mother/world in which we've dwelled

and being a part of, the one that first communicated to us - before words - sound, silence, warmth, contact, smell, rhythm, desire and movement. The mother of fantasies, dreams and powerful unconscious drives. This is a body of which is difficult to speak, but that in Artemisia finds a voice - through the colours she uses and the ways she mixes them, the movement and rhythm of her brush - the pathos and lyricism of her pictorial language. It is through her work and the archaeological search that her work allows that Artemisia finds a way to articulate her femininity and subjectivity.