"My Body Knows Unheard of Songs"

Variations of Maternal Intimacy in the Works of Cécile Sauvage, Hélène Cixous, and Maggie Nelson

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Fallait-il que je sois la plante
Qui voit le vent ravir son grain
Et qui reste sèche et craquante,
Les pieds enchaînés au terrain?

Tu n'es plus tout à moi. Ta tête
Réfléchit déjà d'autres cieux
Et c'est l'ombre de la tempête
Qui déjà monte dans tes yeux.

Did I have to be the plant
Who sees the wind steal her seeds
And who retires dry and crisp,
With feet chained to the earth?

You are no longer mine alone.
Your head already reflects other skies,
And the shadow of the storm
Already rises in your eyes.

Excerpt from *Te voilà hors de l'alvéole…* ("Here You Are Outside The Honeycomb…") in *L'me en bourgeon* ("The Soul in Bud") (1910) by Cécile Sauvage, translated by Alice Donnellan.

In 1908, shortly after giving birth to her first son, Cécile Sauvage, a young poet from rural south-eastern France, grieves the alteration of physical, emotional, and spiritual intimacy with her newborn son. Sauvage engenders her coming of age as a mother in twenty poems, which together comprise *L'Âme en bourgeon* ("The Soul in Bud") forming the latter part of her first 1910 collection *Tandis que la terre tourne* ("As the Earth Spins").Through the poetic figuration of her conflicting joys and melancholies with maternal status, Sauvage's works reflect an oscillation between her embodiment of and detachment from the natural environment. While pregnancy manifests the closest and most fulfilling relationship possible for Sauvage, childbirth signifies a distancing of the relationship with her son, herself, and the natural world. She shifts between embracing and subverting the romanticization of motherhood through natural imagery to de-romanticize the reckoning bound up with the decentering of self intrinsic to motherhood. Her poems serve not only to foreground the subjects of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood in an art form that about these experiences, but functions, moreover, to complicate facile notions of maternal agency, eroticism, and death.

Sauvage grapples with her own fatalistic arc of maternity that moves from prenatal unity to maternal loneliness. In doing so, she both foreshadows and frustrates more recent feminist writing. On the one hand, Sauvage celebrates the ecstasy of communion with nature through pregnancy and seems to embrace dominant narratives that naturalize and thereby glorify motherhood. However, her disempowered subjecthood following birth leaves her questioning the natural beauty of reproduction's teleology.
But perhaps this is not a contradiction: Sauvage's poems seem to both accord with the notion of compulsory motherhood even while they expose painful revelations of the fleeting nature of maternal intimacy. As comparative aids in navigating Sauvage's troubled notions of motherhood, two seminal works of feminist and queer writing help bring her ardent confessions into conversation with more recent discourse.

The first is Hélène Cixous' 1975 essay *La Rire de la méduse* ("The Laugh of the Medusa) and its exhortation for *écriture féminine* ("feminine writing"), writing that transcends the essentializing categories of patriarchal language and encourages self-authorship. Despite her usage of gender terms to describe the kinds of writing that she desires, Cixous sees *écriture féminine* as deconstructing a gender binary that frees up other modes of relating to the body and to one another. Cixous recommends that marginalized writers draw from bodily experiences to recuperate the part of the self othered throughout literature by the glorification of the white male experience. The collapse of distinctions in Sauvage's poems between her body, the fetus, and the natural world during pregnancy forces an experience of alienation from experiences of autonomy, comfort, and love following childbirth.

Sauvage's celebration of the eroticism of her reproductive body and her (ultimately thwarted) desire for fulfillment in creating a child speak to the taboo topics of maternal sexuality and identification with one's child tackled by Maggie Nelson in her 2015 memoir *The Argonauts*. Interweaving a narrative of her personal experience with queer and feminist discourse surrounding motherhood, Nelson examines her own conflicting responses to becoming a mother and developing attachments to her child. Importantly, her work highlights the danger of Sauvage's conception of the fetus as the means to achieving Cixous' goal of recovering the othered part of oneself through writing. At stake is Sauvage's very sense of aliveness and connection with the world. Motivated by the impulse of "no wave" feminism,[1] this paper explores how reading more recent personal writing, feminist discourse, and century-year-old poems together can generate nuanced understandings of motherhoods past, present, and future.

Sauvage's Embodied Writing as *Écriture Féminine*

Sauvage finds a joyous sense of fulfilment by inscribing her body onto the natural world and embracing the erotic sensations of pregnancy. Sauvage anticipates Cixous' vision for the inscription of the body as a source of non-patriarchal expression. Both writers also draw on the inextricable connections between artistic production and procreation. Regarding the metaphorical function of motherhood, however, the two vastly differ. Cixous draws on maternal imagery to describe the act of writing about one's own bodily experiences as a source of self-care and artistic creativity in a patriarchal world. For Sauvage, writing serves as a practice that renders legible the grave consequences of motherhood. While pregnancy lends itself to the dream of intimate connection with oneself and the world, childbirth and her entrance into motherhood leaves her othered from herself. In order to draw out the strengths and limitations of Sauvage's conceptions of motherhood, it is first necessary to summarise the most essential points of Cixous' essay on recuperating the female body.

Cixous begins, "I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self" (Cixous 875). She bemoans the dearth of published women and incites women to use their bodies as a source for a new language that is necessary for the expression of their experiences. As the following polemical line makes clear, "Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (876), Cixous perceives a direct relationship between

claiming the act of writing for herself and claiming her body and therefore attempts to counter the Freudian and Lacanian "psychoanalytic closure" that theorizes woman as the lack in relation to the phallus and as the signifier that refers back to the signified respectively (892). Cixous incites women to write a language that does not rest on binary differentiation in which woman is defined in relation to (and as a subtraction of) man. Cixous asserts that *écriture féminine* confounds the strictures of "definition" and that it exists nonetheless (883).

Sauvage's exuberant embodiment of her life-giving powers and her connection to the growth of the natural world dispels the shadowy notion of the feminine as lack. To open the collection, she invokes the muse of Nature which "Lends to [her] its airy gesture of the skies"[2] so that by the end of the poem she embodies an Ops-like goddess-of-the-harvest tending to the world and her son who "Laughs like Jupiter beneath the nourishing teats."[3] Sauvage lays claim to her body by collapsing it with the external natural realm. The motifs of nature and reproduction as entwined with Sauvage's body are threaded through the entirety of the collection: her lifeblood is tree sap or "sève"; her womb is a honeycomb cell or "alvéole"; her flanks bear seedlings; the two of them are flowers, buds, bees, lambs, sheep, and the sublime sunset described in *L'Agneau* ("The Lamb"). She draws on late-nineteenth-century French Symbolist poets' love of wordplay, as well as the animals of Biblical allegory, to construct her own language with varied resonances. In depicting herself as nourishing and being nourished by the world, Sauvage exceeds the human body's limits and positions herself in an interstitial space between human, animal, and plant. Her act of creation rejuvenates her own sense of vitality; this energy springs from the natural world and in turn generates a space for her within it.

Likewise, Cixous highlights the restorative act of writing later on in her essay by expanding her notion of *écriture féminine* using the companion term "encre blanche" ("white ink"), an allusion to the nourishment of breast milk as well as a transparent form of communication. In a section called "*Woman for women*," she describes women as mothers to themselves and "mother" as a metaphor for the healing act of writing. She narrates the fractured condition of a woman who is produced by the "other" within her. Yet "[t]he locus of the other" is identified as a "source" for change that can be harnessed: "[e]verything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman" (Cixous 881). Cixous identifies writing as the act of mothering the "other" within oneself, going as far as to describe the mother as a literary device: "[t]he mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was "born" to her (Ibid.). Mothering, when directed toward the self, recuperates the othered self.

One part of the othered self that Sauvage recovers is the erogenous nature of her body: in fact, the poet perceives sexual sensation as integral to her maternal body. Her body's sensual capacity is intrinsic to her maternal "lifeblood" flowing within her son and the natural world. One such example can be found in *Nature, laisse-moi…* ("Nature, leave me to…") when she asks of nature to "Let [her] while looking at the plum of the bushes / Sense that it is blue between the blonde leaves / From having sucked the life of [her] deep vein."[4] In addressing her yet-unborn son, she acknowledges the intimate sharing of her emotions through her blood: "You know what fervour, what burning fevers / Unleash in my vein a fierce torrent."[5] Once her son is born, she encourages him to "Weigh between your hands the breast of the climbing vines"[6] and see the natural world as an extension of his mother. Alongside the aforementioned use of puns, these lines express the expansiveness of her feelings in a way that corresponds to Cixous' own interest in female eroticism as an infinite realm of sensations. In feeling that she is a part of everything and that everything is a part of her, Sauvage casts what Cixous describes as the "miniscule-immense" areas of her body onto the delicate particulars and sweeping scenery of nature (885). For Sauvage, her erotic and pregnant body together act to expand the scale of bodily sensations. The erotics of motherhood therefore plays a key part in her mystical belief in the mutual immanence of her body and nature.[7]

If pregnancy encapsulates her creative and erotic energies, then her empty postpartum body, both silent and sexless, constitutes her death. In the allegorical poem *L'Abeille* ("The Bee"), she grieves "[h]er downy belly where life beats no more."[8] The image carries the dual significations of the bee's death and the emptiness inside Sauvage after childbirth. The bee sting in its "its soft indecency"[9] which "[l]ets loose the doleful spurt of her sting"[10] represents a parallel loss of sexuality styled as the loss of male virility (73). The suggestions or invocations in these lines of phallic and uterine imagery underscores the total impotence of the creature – bee and mother alike. As eroticism and reproduction are entwined, the evacuation of sexuality suggests that the end of pregnancy heralds absence of life and loss of pleasure. Prenatal maternal and sexual energies are, for Sauvage, forms of "her beautiful desire that made of her a soul"[11] and it is the absence of desire that now renders her mute and lonely: "[h]erself, without a voice, surrenders to silence."[12] Sauvage's simultaneously erotic, maternal, and natural articulation of pregnancy answers Cixous' own call for a "mother tongue" which "will be set reverberating by more than one language" and by the writing of the woman's body (885). Yet this quote points to how the lived dream of unity and creation during pregnancy is transitory. Sauvage's contemplations of childbirth can be read as a warning in identifying so fully with the state of pregnancy. While Cixous invokes mothering as a means of healing, for Sauvage, childbirth metaphorically functions as an othering process, since Sauvage finds herself distanced from complete autonomy.

Sauvage ruminates on the flawed notion of finding fulfilment in maternal destiny in a way that dovetails with Cixous' prioritisation of desire over destiny. Cixous insists to those who write that it is "not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive" (885). And yet Sauvage's desire for the intense emotional, physical, and mystical intimacy of pregnancy will remain unfulfilled in the emotional abjection that follows birth. With reference to pregnancy, she writes in *Enfant, pâle embryon*, "[w]hat other embrace will seem to me as strong?"[13] This line belies how believing her fetus to fulfil her desire for emotional intimacy and understanding frames childbirth and motherhood as othering experiences. In the conclusion of *On te mit à côté de moi* ("You were laid beside me…"), Sauvage contends with feeling frigid toward her newborn son, who is sensitive to such cold ("frileux"), and preemptively mournful of his mortality (he is described as being born elderly) (Sauvage 67). She self-protectively distances herself from the vulnerable child of her creative work so as not to suffer additionally from his pain while confronting the futility of her reproductive labor. In explicit reference to a loss of agency over her own destiny, she feels that her son curves "the arc of [her] sky toward [his] little sphere."[14] To Sauvage, childbirth signifies a reckoning with the conflicting impulse to protect her son and devote her life to him as well as to numb herself to the pain of his loss. She questions the emotional double bind of maternal love – the love of possession and protection – and the necessity of letting go, for her son has "dawned for the world."[15] As a mother, Sauvage no longer has a destiny unto herself but faces a destiny that is inextricably bound up with the life she has created. Tragically, the maternal role of protection is impossible to fulfill since his birth requires severance from her protective body. Thus, Sauvage is not only confronted with the inability to uphold her responsibilities toward her son, but she is also left unfulfilled by their separation. The fatalistic destiny of maternity precludes Sauvage's desire for lifelong intimacy. She is left othered by the child who briefly fulfilled her and with whose pain she is bound to identify.

To briefly summarise, her fetus acts as the locus of self-recognition for her solitude and as an empathetic companion. Due to her overidentification with her unborn son, childbirth presents itself as the death of intimacy. Sauvage envisions being reduced to living for and in support of a child she much loves but can do little to protect. Ultimately, she becomes disillusioned from the natural world for which she once felt such unity and resigns to her fate of suffering and solitude as mother. The process of mothering Cixous advocates for is only healing when applied to the self; mothering her son leaves Sauvage disconnected from her body, desires, and the world.

"Helix of Hope and Fear": The Dangers of Self-Identification with the Child[16]

Maggie Nelson writes from the radically different perspective of a queer mother in *The Argonauts* about facing similar struggles as Sauvage during pregnancy and childbirth. Both writers consider the maintenance of a sense of separate identity as a mother and this separation as related to death. Nelson's frank tone and attention to the cordoned off topics of physical trauma due to pregnancy and childbirth as well as death make plain the issues of self-identity and mortality presented in *L'Âme en bourgeon*. Nelson's response to these issues acts as a foil to Sauvage's overwhelming sense of loss in giving birth, the mystical implications of separation, and the latter's inability to improvise a motherhood that accounts for her feelings and rights. Paradoxically, it is in *not* identifying with her son that Nelson finds self-contentment, while Sauvage's sense of self fragments due to investing so much symbolism and emotion into her temporary physical intimacy with her fetus.

Nelson writes in explicit terms about the dangers to which Sauvage yields: those of totalizing identification with and emotional dependence upon a child. While Nelson somewhat ruefully admits that her baby Iggy "holds her" (45), Sauvage is less abashed in describing her emotional dependence on her unborn son. In *Enfant, pâle embryon*, Sauvage directly addresses her embryo regarding the concomitant joy in and fears for their connection: "O my little mirror who sees my solitude / Leaning anxiously beside your crystal."[17] (52). Sauvage identifies the embryo not as an exact reflection of herself but rather as the object that enables her to see herself. In noting that the embryo is also conscious of the solitude it reflects (53), Sauvage subsumes her own downcast feelings out of empathy for her fetus. Sauvage seems at once concerned for the emotional response of her fetus to her anxiety and grateful for its companionship. She is less hesitant than Nelson to commit to what the latter describes as "the mistake of needing [the child] as much as or more than [it] needs me" knowing that the "affair will likely become unrequited" (Nelson 44-5). Rather, Sauvage attaches herself to her unborn son while recognizing the inevitability of letting go and having to bear the pain of separation:

> Fallait-il que je sois la plante
> Qui voit le vent ravir son grain
> Et qui reste sèche et craquante,
> Les pieds enchaînés au terrain?
>
> Did I have to be the plant
> Who sees the wind steal her seed
> And who retires dry and crisp,
> With feet chained to the earth?
>
> (Sauvage 66)

By comparison, Nelson's more guarded approach to moments in which she falls helplessly in love with her newborn clarifies the nature of Sauvage's love: far from blind to the inevitability of separation, she nevertheless surrenders to predetermined maternal sorrow. The fetus is the locus of self-recognition for Sauvage and her desire to escape loneliness and connect with her environment. In anticipation of childbirth, she utterly disconnects from a world she now perceives as soulless due to the loss of intimacy with her son upon giving birth and the preemptive mourning of his eventual death:

> Mais de l'ordre apparent bientôt tu comprendras
> Le triste agencement, les vernis, les plâtras.
> En son lustre la fleur te paraîtra moins nette,
> Tu connaîtras que l'être est pris par la tempête
> Comme un grain dans le vent.
>
> Alors tu me diras: - Qu'avez-vous fait, ma mère?
> J'inclinais au repos, l'obscurité légère
> Recueillait sans savoir mon germe inconscient
> Et pour moi vous avez éclairé le néant. . .
> - Qu' ai-je fait, mon enfant?
>
> But of the apparent order soon you will comprehend
> The sad arrangement, the varnish, the flakes of plaster.
> In its luster the flower will appear to you less clear,
> You will know that being is snatched by the tempest
> Like a seed in the wind.
>
> So you will say to me: —What have you done, mother?
> I wished to rest, the light obscurity
> Reaped without knowing my unknowing sapling
> And for me you have illuminated the void…
> — What have I done, my child?
>
> (Sauvage 51)

Sauvage's jubilant view of the world is transformed by the loss of maternal intimacy and by a confrontation with mortality into a crushingly fatalistic outlook. In response to her foreboding wisdom, the fetus voices its mother's guilty conscience for initiating the creation of a new life which she cannot protect. Tragically, the former mother-goddess of Nature only realizes her status as a mortal subject stuck in an indifferent and deathly world when close to giving birth. While she feels disempowered to change her predicament, she nevertheless gains awareness of the true hostility of nature toward creation through dialogue with her fetus, who also acts here as her conscience.

L'Âme en bourgeon draws attention to a perception of pregnancy shared by Nelson and Sauvage alike as situated within a matrix of violence, death, and separation. While Nelson is fearful of her own mortality during childbirth, she frames the separation of birth as a hopeful lesson for her son on independence and the ability to outlive the mother who gave him life. Sauvage, however, fears childbirth as a metaphor for death of an intimate relationship with herself, her son, and by extension, the world. Nelson sees death as related to the maternal body which Sauvage similarly allegorizes in the aforementioned poem *L'Abeille*. Dedicating space to descriptions of the grueling and grisly emotional and physical challenges undergone by her pregnant body, Nelson relates the proximity of childbirth to death. She manifests the connection between the two in a dramatic interleaving of her own experience of labor with her partner's experience of watching his mother pass away. Nelson focuses on how childbirth substantiates the boundary between herself and her son as a healthy and freeing detachment. She sees both mother and death as sharing the role of instructor on the subject of "maternal finitude": the mother, in giving birth to the child, teaches it the same lesson as death — this is where you end and others begin (Nelson 95-6). However, Sauvage wrestles with accepting "maternal finitude" and instead describes childbirth in mournful images of letting go. In the conclusion of *On te mit à côté de moi…* (Sauvage 67), she first describes her womb embracing her child, then her arms, "[t]hen these arms slowly fall back down / Sensing a moment ago that [her child] dawned for the world." Her imagery here implies a new dichotomy between herself and the world due to her loss of a reproductive role and possession of her son. The reflections of her pregnant body in nature and her indulgent fantasies as creator of the world cannot overcome "the sober truth," the words with which she concludes the collection (76). The truth is that of the unavoidable separation between creator and creation. This separation at birth is the death of an ideal intimacy and signals a return to solitude for Sauvage.

Conclusion

In *L'Âme en bourgeon*, pregnancy represents an ultimate sense of unity with the self and the world to which motherhood is the cruel antithesis. To borrow a phrase from Cixous, Sauvage's body "knows unheard of songs" of eroticism, euphoria, and self-recognition in pregnancy as well as disunion and death after childbirth (876). Her poems bind together the experiences of the maternal and erotic body from which Cixous encourages us to speak. They also trouble Nelson's notion that the mother can avoid the pitfall of identifying with her child to the point of subsuming her own identity. Is it possible to mother ourselves as well as mothering any children that we may have?

In speaking from her body, Sauvage is able to recognise how she is as much subject to Nature's pain and suffering as she is an agent of its reproductive powers. Her questioning of "natural" motherhood is all the more timely given ongoing efforts by a Xenofeminist collective to provoke a new radically inclusive and anti-naturalist movement. Their 2018 proclamation of "If nature is unjust, change nature" promotes resistance where Sauvage yields to the pain-ridden "natural" role of mother (Laboria Cuboniks 0x1A). The issues raised by Sauvage in *L'Âme en bourgeon* endure for consideration by poets and feminists today: How will Artificial Reproductive Technologies (e.g. new IVF techniques, ectogenesis, IVG) modulate physical and emotional connections between mother and child? What new metaphors inscribe these connections? Finally, how can we make the world a place worthy of women, mothers, as well as newborns? What is certain is that Sauvage's work elevates motherhood to a worthy subject of poetry and poetry to a worthy means of interrogating and redesigning motherhood.

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Notes

1 "No wave" feminism seeks to acknowledge and embrace the complexities of women's rights and feminism that are overlooked by the rubric of "First," "Second," and "Third Wave" feminism and its implication of linear progression (Hewitt).
2 "*Me prête sur l'azur son geste aérien*" (Sauvage 47).
3 "*Rit comme Jupiter sous les pis nourriciers*" (Sauvage 48).
4 "*Laisse qu'en regardent la prune des buissons / Je sente qu'elle est blue entre les feuilles blondes / D'avoir sucé la vie à ma veine profonde*" (Sauvage 47).

5 "*Tu sais quelles ferveurs, quelles brûlantes fièvres / Dechaînent dans ma veine un torrent acharné*" (Sauvage 53).

6 "*Soupèse entre tes mains la mamelle des treilles*" (Sauvage 55).

7 As Béatrice Marchal notes in her revelatory scholarship of Sauvage's later love poems and letters, the poet transcends the language of simile and metaphor to draw direct equivalence between eroticism and mysticism (44).

8 "*Son ventre duveteux où ne bat plus la vie*" (Sauvage 73).

9 "*sa molle indécence*" (Ibid.).

10 "*Laisse sortir le jet dolent de l'aiguillon*" (Ibid.).

11 "*...son beau désir qui lui faisait une âme*" (Ibid.).

12 "*Elle-même sans voix s'abandonne au silence*" (Ibid.).

13 "*Quel autre enlacement me paraîtra plus fort?*" (Sauvage 53).

14 "*...mon ciel sur [sa] petite sphère*" (Sauvage 67).

15 "*venais d'éclore pour la terre*" (Ibid.).

16 "Babies grow in a helix of hope and fear; gestating draws one but deeper into the spiral. It isn't cruel in there, but it's dark" (Nelson 92).

17 "*O mon petit miroir qui voit ma solitude / Se pencher anxieuse au bord de ton cristal*" (Sauvage 52).

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