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Motherhood as Narrative: Sheila Heti's Wrestling with the Burden of Choice

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ABSTRACT

Burdened with the choice whether to become a mother or not, the protagonist of Sheila Heti's autofictional work *Motherhood* develops a thoroughgoing critique of the notion of having to make that choice in the first place, encompassing philosophical musings on the impossibility of controlling one's existence by making decisions and astute commentary on social pressures on women to fulfill expected roles. It identifies pro-natalism as a culturally pervasive narrative, which is subtle but rigid in its exclusionary binarism and consequent pressure and divisiveness it imposes upon women. Heti dismantles the narratives that make up the concept of motherhood and redefines it as an inclusive, non-divisive, non-coercive concept. Maintaining its relational basis, she reverses its temporal trajectory and suggests the relationship with the mother as its central concern. Mobilizing the creative potential of writing, she rewrites the narrative of motherhood as the reconstruction of ancestral bonds between women through literature. Via this reversal, she undermines the one-directional conception of motherhood and allows for the term's inclusiveness of all women. In this way, she deflates the notion of decisional compulsion and so creates a spirit of egalitarianism and tolerance from which all mothers, non-mothers, and non-non-mothers can benefit.

KEYWORDS

Sheila Heti, *Motherhood*, autofiction, cultural narrative, decisional autonomy

In Sheila Heti's autofictional novel *Motherhood* (2018), the unnamed protagonist wrestles with the decision of whether or not to have a child and in the process encounters various personal, social, biological, and cultural pressures which affect her decision-making process. Understanding herself as a relational person, she does not simply dismiss these influences, but interrogates them as narratives, which have an undeniable effect on her. She perceives motherhood as an accumulation of narratives and by deciding to write a book about it, i.e. by crafting her own narrative, broadens the very meaning of the term beyond the singular meaning of having a child in order to overcome its coercive and divisional effects on identity. By addressing these coercive and divisional effects of motherhood discourses, this autofictional novel has a timely significance in the context of recent developments. The overturning of *Roe* in the US also reinvigorated the debate in Canada, a country in which unrestricted access to abortion has enjoyed a strong institutional support since the 1980s (BBC)[1]. Despite Canada's support of decisional autonomy and full health care coverage of abortion, the debate has highlighted the ubiquity of underlying pro-natalist discourses in both countries. Even though the National Abortion Federation (NAF), a professional association of abortion providers in both countries, proclaims in its ethics statement that "[n]o woman or person capable of pregnancy should ever be coerced, manipulated, or intimidated into unwanted childbearing" (4), one could argue that (complete) decisional freedom is a myth, because every decision is made within a discursive context. The issue of abortion is indivisibly tied up with the cultural narrative of motherhood as (female) obligation. So the very emphasis on decisional freedom highlights that, in order to come close to it, it is not enough to establish the legal basis for its existence, it is furthermore necessary to understand and deconstruct the narratives within which these decisions are made.

Julia Moore and Patricia Geist-Martin argue that "pronatalism permeates cultures across the globe, perpetuating the belief that all people should procreate" (233). In a North American context, despite a greater tolerance towards childless women in the wake of second-wave feminism (242–46), the cultural framing of childless women as "irresponsible" (236), "imperfect" (238), and "immature" (238–39) has lingered on until today (244). Gill Rye et al. understand motherhood as "shifting, constructed, and in process," which "explains how discourse is regulatory, but also points to ways in which identity and subjectivity can be opened up and transformed" (4). They point

[1] The abortion debates in the US and Canada are strongly intertwined. Both had seminal court cases in the second half of the twentieth century seemingly securing the right to choose but without guaranteeing the unalterable protection of this right and without stopping a continuous debate of and challenge to it. The Canadian equivalent to *Roe v. Wade* (1973) is *R. v. Morgentaler* (1988), a Supreme Court decision which ruled that abortion no longer requires the approval by a committee of doctors (Gollom).

to Adrienne Rich's influential understanding of motherhood as split between "experience" and "institution," "highlight[ing] the gap between, on the one hand, ideologically informed understandings of what mothers should be and do, as determined by dominant discourses, and, on the other, individual experiences of being mothers" (7–8). In this split understanding, "such experiences can subvert the hegemony of the institution, by which they are nonetheless influenced" (8). Rich was among the first feminist scholars who pointed out how women's control over their own bodies is essential for the establishment of social equality and how the persistence of pro-natalist discourses inevitably cause anger and guilt among those women who fail to live up to the ideals of motherhood as institutionalized by social expectations (27–40). Following Rich's lead, successive scholars have corroborated and refined several aspects of her argumentation. Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Chinmay Murali argue that pro-natalism is a coercive, crushing ideology which "not only deprives individuals of their freedom to make reproductive choices but also constructs a rigid social value system centred around procreation" (109). In the useful parlance of many scholars, pro-natalism is a "script" (Venkatesan and Murali 110) dictating the performance of womanhood. Yet, it is precisely this concept of the script which also suggests the possibility of rewriting the narrative. Venkatesan and Murali (110) as well as Julie Rodgers (92) call for the advocacy of childlessness as a counter-narrative of female identity, because only the egalitarian existence of this narrative alongside the pro-natalist norm allows for a culture in which decisional autonomy in procreational matters can be achieved. And it is in this spirit that Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* constitutes a valuable and productive contribution to the debate.

In an interview, Heti stated about the word "mother" that

> I just never felt it was a fair word. I thought, How can the world get this word so wrong? The category has felt off to me my whole life. . . . The whole category just has never had any stability for me. I could never trust it. When people would tell me they wanted to be mothers, I would think, What are you even talking about? What is it you want to be? How do you even know what that is, a mother? I've just always hated the word. I felt so much resentment around it. (qtd. in Dey)

Her dissatisfaction with the word points to her dissatisfaction with the encompassing categorization which dismisses the individuality of experience. Instead of accepting the word and its implications as a given, Heti aims to deconstruct and destabilize its meaning and the coercive narratives it has spawned in order to reconfigure it as something broader:

> [I]t doesn't reflect the scope of what I feel the word 'motherhood' could encompass, which is an existential relationship to life, to yourself, to other people. Or a relationship to one's own mother, one's own grandmother. Ideas about nurturing and bringing things into being more generally. (qtd. in Reese)

The novel combines an awareness of the language and the discourses that affect one's individual performance of identity with a deep skepticism of these discourses and their thorough interrogation. Its very title suggests that motherhood is a narrative and that she, as its author, has assumed control over its meaning. The novel is both the tool for the redefinition of motherhood and the signifier of this redefinition. Motherhood becomes *Motherhood*. For Heti and her protagonist, this reconfiguration of the concept entails a shift from biological *pro*creation to a reconnection with her own mother, which is achieved by narrative *re*creation of ancestral ties. This contribution seeks to trace the way in which the book deconstructs normative understandings of motherhood as coercive narratives and redefines the concept to encompass a broader and less divisive understanding of the term. In this way, the book provides a beneficial contribution to the debates over decisional autonomy in procreation by advocating a more egalitarian, tolerant, and liberal understanding of motherhood.

The Role of Narratives in Autofiction

Even if Heti is not overly enamored with the often applied categorization of her writing as "autofiction" (Miller and Bailar 157), the implications of the category provide a helpful frame for describing general features of her work and more specific features of *Motherhood*. The term was first used by French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 in reference to his own life writing as a philosophical reflection about the impossibility of avoiding the fictitious in autobiographical texts, which "construct" a life story (Gronemann 243). It has since become a designated term to refer to texts which feature a "purposeful elision between the author and the author-character" (Worthington 2) as the author "project[s] himself or herself into a text without an autobiographical pact" (Schmitt 96) so that the text "signal[s] a deliberate, often ironic, interplay between the two modes [of fiction and autobiography]" (Smith and Watson 261). Heti says about her own work:

> Writing, for me, when I'm writing in the first-person, is like a form of acting. So as I'm writing, the character or self I'm writing about and my whole self – when I began the book – become entwined. It's soon hard to tell them apart. The voice I'm trying to explore directs my own perceptions and thoughts. But that voice or character comes out of a part of me that exists already. But writing about it emphasizes those parts, while certain other, balancing parts lie dormant – and the ones I'm exploring become bigger, like in caricature. (qtd. in Dey)

This "entwining" of real and fictional self draws attention to the ambivalence with which the text positions itself to "the real," both in terms of what and how much is reflected about the author and in terms of how much the text has an impact on what the author explores, finds out, and calls into being about herself. This sense of (fictional) text creating reality points to the way autofiction blurs the lines between fact

and fiction in both directions, the way in which autofiction signals an impact that texts have on the real world and real people (Wagner-Egelhaaf 23, 30–32). The implication of autofiction's deliberate two-way blurring of the lines between reality and fiction is that narrative is inescapable, that the conceptions of our selves, whether written down or not, cannot avoid a sense of deliberate construction and imagination. Autofiction playfully exposes what is an otherwise covert feature of non-fictional life-writing, namely that

> there is no coherent 'self' that predates stories about identity, about 'who' one is. Nor is there a unified, stable, immutable self that can remember everything that has happened in the past . . . which leads to an approach of looking into autobiographical telling as a performative act. (Smith and Watson 22)

The self, the notion of identity, is "an effect of language" (Smith and Watson 215) and hence involves a creative act, a narrative ordering of experience, and therefore an element of fictionality, as Martin Löschnigg explains:

> [F]ictionality is seen as an integrative element of the creation of a sense of identity, since identity conceived as a narrative construct involves the projection of possible selves which are open to revision. Through the narrative medium, the autobiographer explores alternative versions of "self" and "other", constructing and revising concepts of self and identity in the same way as characters/agents are construed in fiction. (108)

Hanna Meretoja points out that autofiction's awareness of the inescapability of narrative in identity creation arrays it with an inbuilt "metanarrative" dimension (121–22), which again points in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, this metanarrative awareness makes autofiction an ideal explorer of and commentator on the ubiquity of narratives/scripts, which impose themselves on the individual via the social discourses they are enmeshed in. On the other hand, this reflectiveness in combination with the deliberate infusion of fictional elements signals an assumption of control over one's own narrative in oppositional challenge to the implied passivity of being a discursive subject. Meretoja refers to this effect of autofiction as "narrative agency":

> The concept of narrative agency signals that culturally mediated narrative interpretations play an important role in constituting us as subjects capable of action, while simultaneously alerting us to how narrative agency is socially conditioned. Our narrative agency means our ability to navigate our narrative environments: use and engage with narratives that are culturally available to us, to analyze and challenge them, and to practice agential choice over which narratives we use and how we narratively interpret our lives and the world around us. (123)

By assuming awareness and control over one's narrative, pointing out and challenging cultural scripts, and inventing a self creatively, autofiction allows authors to discover and create themselves in the process of writing.

Motherhood

The opening paragraphs already make the pressure of narrative a topic. The nameless protagonist introduces herself as an unformed, not yet begun character, out of touch with the world and its demands of having a direction or at least a perspective on it. "I lived only in the greyish, insensate world of my mind, where I tried to reason everything out and came to no conclusions" (Heti 1). She is, to use an accusation often leveraged at childless women, "aimless" and "infantile," ignorant of supposed social obligations and responsibilities as a person, let alone a woman (Moore and Geist-Martin 238–39). At almost 40 she realizes after an encounter with a 12-year-old and after mistakenly calling a hot dog a banana that she is too old to be so out of touch with the world and decides "to transform the greyish and muddy landscape of [her] mind into a solid and concrete thing, utterly apart from [her], indeed not [her] at all, . . . to create a powerful monster" (Heti 1). The formulations suggest that the protagonist struggles with a belated pressure to enter a, in the Lacanian sense, Symbolic Order in which a definite and separate relation between the self and the world is established via language, and identity is manifested as a narrative of stable views and choices made. In this way she questions the very concept of identity by stylizing it as something intrusive and artificial, something "apart," a "monster" even. Her self resists the intrusive imposition of a narrative order, as much as the book does, it seems, even though both mutually attempt to approach a provisional structure, but one that allows for ambivalence, contingency, and openness.

The structure of the book is meandering, hinting at some formal principles only to discard them and trying out others. The "chapters" consist of fragmented episodes often using encounters between the protagonist and other characters as a springboard for her personal reflections of a philosophical, social, cultural, or very personal nature. The first 44 pages self-reflexively question whether to write a book at all, defeating the very idea of narrative progression by the paradox of a meta-literary dead end. Larger sections are divided into smaller segments, often headed by a tilde. The tilde suggests an absence or ellipsis of sorts, alternatively also an approximation, as if to highlight the fragmented, disordered, and non-definite nature of the writing. Their very form (~) simultaneously suggests a singular spermatozoon as if the individual sections collectively constitute a contingent but also egalitarian fertilizing process at the end of which stands the book as the creative (but messy) result. Later, the chapters have actual titles, at first designating places as a sort of geographical anchor: "New York," "Home," "Book Tour," "Home," then discarding these in favor of stages of the menstrual cycle: "PMS," "Bleeding," "Follicular," "Ovulating," which are then repeated. Not only is this structural element reflective of the topic of childbearing and provides a biological template for the protagonist's reflections on urges and

resistance, it also resists the teleologically oriented conventions of (male) narratives in favor of a more open-ended cyclicity. As Heti says:

> The narrator is not a hero and there is no journey, but also the traditional hero's journey structure feels like a fundamentally masculine form. . . . It's frustrating to return, but there's also beauty in the exhaustion, in the eternal return or the return of the same. I visualized this kind of spiral where you end up back in the same place but not quite. . . . There's progress and not progress at the same time, which I think is life. (qtd. in Millar and Bailar 172–73)[2]

The cycle integrates two seemingly exclusive binaries by suggesting the simultaneity of "progress and not progress," thus undermining the (male) insistence on an either/or dictum of decision-making. In fact, the final three chapters return to the tilde as a heading, suggesting the absence of decisional definiteness in favor of a more vague, inclusive openness, a "muddiness," as it were, to evoke Heti's formulation from the beginning of the book.

The resistance against a forced decision-making and its implications of directedness and binary exclusivity is also evoked by one of the main formal features of the book. Especially in the first half, long passages depict the protagonist asking questions about her life, about what to do (having a baby, writing a book, fixing her relationship, etc.), when to do it, where to do it, why to do it, how to feel about it, what the effects could be, etc., and then tossing three coins: "Two or three heads – yes. Two or three tails – no" (Heti 5). With this, she follows a highly simplified version of the Chinese I Ching technique, a sophisticated "divination system" here broken down into simple yes or no answers. Consider the opening of the book:

> Is this book a good idea?
> *yes*
> Is the time to start it now?
> *yes*
> Here in Toronto?
> *yes*
> So then there's nothing to be worried about?
> *yes*
> Yes, there's nothing to be worried about?
> *no*
> Should I be worried?
> *yes* (5)

This device, on the one hand, illustrates the deep insecurity of the protagonist as she struggles to gain some decisional direction. On the other hand, the device can also be seen to resist the very idea of decisional direction by presenting the epitome of

[2] See also Stanford Friedman (76–77) for suggesting the inclination towards cyclicity in female life writing.

contingency as a veritable narrative, a philosophy even, though simultaneously parodying the systemization of the accidental by the reductive bastardization of the I Ching. Heti makes clear in a preliminary note that "[i]n this book, all results from the flipping of coins result from the flipping of actual coins." In an interview she confirmed that the questions she asked and the coin results she got in response were real: "The book doesn't work if you think they are [made up]. At least, I don't think it works" (qtd. in Wolf). Taking this at face value, Heti, as Mark Currie points out, "incorporate[s] unpredictable variability into the writing process itself, and consequently, . . . ensure[s] that contingency is part of the experience of a reader" (118). This "aleatory writing . . . break[s] the connections that link writing to completed action, necessity and fate" (118). Thus it undermines narrative certainty, elevating the contingent and degrading the necessary (Currie 129, Shirm 310). The insecurity of the protagonist, which is seemingly expressed by this device, is only superficial though. In fact, the coin tosses do not simply provide directions for her to follow, they always spawn more questions in a productive cycle of self-reflection, forcing her to consider differing perspectives on and explanations for her actions and feelings at the same time as they lead her away from making any definite decisions. Consider the continuation of the opening:

> What should I be worried about? My soul?
> *yes*
> Will reading help my soul?
> *yes*
> Will being quiet help my soul?
> *yes*
> Will this book help my soul?
> *yes*
> So then I'm doing everything right?
> *no* (Heti 5–6)

It is not the answers that are the point, it is the questions that are spawned by the accidental response. As the protagonist recognizes later in the book:

> I feel like my brain is becoming more flexible as I use these coins. When I get an answer I didn't expect, I have to push myself to find another answer – hopefully a better one. It's an interruption of my complacency – or at least that's what it feels like, to have to dig a little deeper, to be thrown off. My thoughts don't just end where they normally would. (Heti 77)

So the incorporation of the contingent is a spark for more reflectivity and creativity without taking away agency. In this way the coin toss also signifies the nature of fiction as a way to explore "possible realities" (Heti qtd. in Miller and Bailar 169). Fiction is by definition something provisional, something unimplemented, unreal-

ized, and therefore undecided. It retains a sense of optionality in which several versions of potential realities are in play. In this manner the protagonist retains a control over the coin tosses, by being aware of their "randomness, without meaning" (Heti 131) except for what she is "projecting onto [the coins]" (77) and eventually discarding them when they lose their purpose (191). They are a helpful vehicle to explore herself and a humbling reminder of the contingency which frames our existence and undermines the authority of prescribed narratives. In this way they challenge not only the existence of social scripts but also their implications of judging people by following them or not: "We are judged by what happens to us as though our deciding made it happen" (30), especially when it comes to having children, because "a woman will always be made to feel like a criminal, whatever choice she makes, however hard she tries. Mothers feel like criminals. Non-mothers do, too" (44). By drawing attention to the contingency which not only frames the decision-making process but also the realization of decisions, the book challenges the forced necessity and division that decision-making entails, suggesting that "if something can be debated endlessly and without resolution, it *cannot* matter" (177). In this spirit, the book sets out to dissect and undo the pressures of decision-making forced upon women regarding motherhood.

The protagonist is introduced as struggling with the pressures of decision-making in general. In her effort to strive for existential adequacy she tries to balance various life areas: the relationship to her boyfriend Miles, which suffers from her insecurities (Heti 19), the relationship to her mother, whom she feels she has caused pain, which she wants to remedy by turning her "sadness into gold" (16), the pressures of having a child about which she has always felt ambivalent ("a secret I keep from myself," 21), and her desire to create art by writing, which to her seems the more appealing way to "pass on one's genes" (25). The question of having a child emerges as a central concern, tying all the others together, and the pressure manifests itself in recurrent dreams about potential children and other pregnancy-related issues. With the decision in the air, the protagonist provokes and becomes sensitive to an array of narratives surrounding the pressure of decision-making. On the one end of the spectrum is society, manifested in the doctor who performed an abortion on her when she was 21 but only after "advis[ing] [her] to keep the baby" (31) and letting her wait so that she might "change [her] mind" (32). The doctor's pro-natalism is supplemented by the efforts of what she calls "dangerous and beautiful sirens," a number of female friends and acquaintances, with whom the protagonist interacts in individual episodes throughout the book. The majority of them represent various incarnations of a persuasive pro-natalist ideology, advertising the joys of having a child. The protagonist calls them sirens because they make "appeal[s] that [are] hard to resist, but that,

if heeded, will bring one who heeds [them] to a very bad end" (34). On the other end of the spectrum is Miles, who has a child from an earlier relationship and, though loving the child, bemoans the challenges it has created. While emphasizing her decisional autonomy, he regards the desire to have children as culturally constructed and reminds her continually of her love for art and says that "one can either be a great artist and a mediocre parent, or the reverse, but not great at both, because both art and parenthood take all of one's time and attention" (35). With this kind of rhetoric he assumes the voice of cushioned patriarchal presumption. Nadine Bieker and Kirsten Schindler bemoan exactly this sort of either/or discourse surrounding being a mother vs. being an artist as crushingly restrictive and ask the question why a woman is so rarely allowed to be both (260). Heti's novel critically addresses this issue by assigning the divisional rhetoric to the character of Miles. Rephrasing the question "why not be both?" as "why be one or the other?," the book strives to embrace inclusivity. The protagonist confronts both narratives, the sirens' and Miles's, skeptically. She regards childbearing as a "once-necessary, now sentimental gesture" (42), a convention which has outlived its biological necessity but lingers on as an inauthentic desire needlessly propagated by social tradition. At the same time she is also wary of Miles's advice, pointing out how the male artist enjoys privileges of childlessness the female artist is not granted, that the man is allowed to be selfish when he creates while the woman is admonished for it. She wonders whether Miles is pushing her into the identity of "pale, brittle women writers . . . who never leave the house" (38) when he suggests to her to "write a book about motherhood" (43) thereby delaying or avoiding it altogether. By positioning the sirens and Miles as either socially sanctioned or enlightened, "rational" narratives alongside those of dreams, fortune tellers the protagonists consults, and tossed coins, the book essentially empties all of these narratives of authority at the same time as it highlights their (undue) influence on the individual (Currie 118). The multiplicity and equivalence of these narratives, which urge a decision one way or another, once again challenge the very notion of being forced into an identity-defining decision at all. In an effort to render and to dodge the pressure of having to make a decision, the protagonist compares her extended deliberation with the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with an angel, in which Jacob, despite being injured in the struggle, continues forth until he is blessed by the creature. The protagonist interprets the point of this story as "not to strengthen oneself from the struggle, or to win, but to overcome" (Heti 59). Just as with the coin-tossing, the point is not the making of a fixed decision but the spiritual growth in the process of deliberation, which is both "humbling" and formative (68). The wrestling with the angel makes Jacob see God, and the place of his struggle he names Israel, the promised land. Hence, the promised land is the place of

optionality and pondering. In order to undermine the decisional coercion surrounding motherhood, the book sets out to undermine the narrative of child-bearing as defining a woman's identity.

The "sirens" she encounters in the course of the book embody the various incarnations of this narrative and constitute both ideas of motherhood as experience and institution, in Rich's influential delineation. Where, as a collective, the sirens exert subtle or not so subtle pressure on the protagonist to have a child in line with a coercive, normative ideology, it is precisely the multiplicity of these coercive promptings, which expose the individuality of their experiences, as they are reflected and deconstructed by the protagonist, and thus undermine the uniformity of motherhood as institution (Rye et al. 8). In the way the protagonist positions herself towards these sirens, the book also presents a modification of the concept of relationality. Smith and Watson's understanding of relationality as an awareness of how "the narrator's story is often refracted through the lives of others" (217) is certainly applicable here, but where Stanford Friedman's notion of "fluid ego boundaries" (79) suggests a cherished interdependence in women's life writing[3], the protagonist is keen on differentiating herself from the sirens' narratives. It can be described as a dynamic of separation through contact, deflating the assumption of universality of their narratives, thus approaching a Bakhtinian "heteroglossic dialogism" (Smith and Watson 219) in which different narratives exist side by side, "wrestling" with each other, but without one assuming dominance over another. The protagonist encapsulates her relational resistance when she says: "The feeling of not wanting children is the feeling of not wanting to be someone's idea of me" (Heti 22). Having children is so loaded with discursive imposition, with sirens' scripts, that it annihilates a sense of self which feels authentic.

At first, there is Erica, who is a friend about to have her first child. She sends the protagonist a painting by Berthe Morisot, a French impressionist painter, showing a woman leaning on a crib and looking at the baby sleeping in it. Erica interprets the woman's gaze as "interested" (Heti 27) and imagines this is what her friend would "look like if you had a child" (27). The protagonist, on the other hand, interprets the woman as looking "a little bored," possibly "careless" (27). This fairly innocuous passage points to an important insight. Via a work of art, the scene illustrates how views of how the world is or should be are essentially interpretations, projections of own convictions that are imposed upon others. Erica's projection of a universal joy of motherhood emanating from the painting and enveloping her friend is undercut by

[3] Drawing on Chodorow, Stanford Friedman writes that where male life writing tends towards establishing an identity of separation and exceptionality, female autobiographies show a "consciousness of self in which 'the individual does not oppose herself to all others,' nor 'feel herself to exist outside of others,' 'but very much with others in an interdependent existence'" (77).

the protagonist's wry deflation correcting the narrative imposed upon her. In this way the passage encapsulates the protagonist's approach to the grand narratives circulating around motherhood in culture and personified by the sirens as well as highlighting how the vehicle of art and its interpretation illustrates the provisionality and tenuousness of meaning that characterizes all cultural narratives.

Theresa brings in the cultural narrative of biology, which is of course crucial to pro-natalism, by advocating "being sensitive to the life that wants to be lived through you" (Heti 28). The protagonist acknowledges the biological basis of certain urges "pulling on the strings of your life" (104). After all, the menstrual cycle, as one manifestation of what the protagonist calls the body's "ancient song" (104), is a prominent structuring device of the book, confronting protagonist and reader alike with the constant reminder of the female body's capacity and function to bear children, which she interprets as her "body . . . demanding a child of [her]" (103). But the protagonist also reinterprets this demand, wondering if longing for a pregnancy, "something lodged inside me" (102), is really just a craving for sex, "wanting [Miles's] cock" (101). Currie sees the conflict between will and bodily necessity as central in the book, and indeed the resistance to biology becomes an important factor in the protagonist's rewriting of the pro-natalist narrative. She associates the submission to a desire for children with "deceitfulness," because it requires the subordination of "morality" to the "breed[ing] and rais[ing] of children" (111). Yet, for her, it is the childless woman whose honest disregard of biological urges is stylized as "bad" by society. She writes: "What if I pursue being a bad woman and don't breed – pursue failing biologically? . . . Only in the pursuit of failure can a person really be free. Losers are the avant-garde of the modern age" (113). Not only does this insight reframe the resistance to biological urges as a resistance to social demands, it also transforms the notion of failure into a triumph. To fail biologically and socially means to attain a freedom from encaging narratives.

Along the lines of adherence to social norms Sylvia believes that a child has a positive character-forming influence on a woman, making her less "narcissistic" by "bring[ing] the man closer": "*[I]t's more relational*, she said, and it makes you into a better person, *because you are not necessarily good the way you are*" (Heti 82). The argument of humbling an innate narcissism suggests that having children is less about the children per se, but more about controlling and regulating the personality of women while men are allowed a free reign of their overflowing egos. The protagonist identifies society's conception of women as "not an end in herself. She is a means to a man, who will grow up to be an end in himself, and do something in the world. While a woman is a passageway through which a man might come" (158). In other words, pro-natalism reduces women's value to the ability to produce someone else

who passes through her. She is not enough in herself. Hence, "[t]o not be a mother is the most difficult thing at all. There is always someone ready to step into the path of a woman's freedom, sensing that she is not yet a mother, so tries to make her into one" (168–69). In this way she connects a history of patriarchal attempts to control women's bodies with anti-abortion legislation to the sirens' superficially benevolent encouragement to have children.

> *Men want to control women's bodies by forbidding them from abortions, while women try to control other women's bodies by pressuring them to have kids.* It seemed so strange and true, and I realized they were both working towards the same end: children. One side spoke from the point of view of the imagined desire of the fetus to live, while the other spoke from the point of view of the imagined joy and fulfillment of the woman, but they both reached the same end. (95)

By drawing this connection the book points to the prevalence of pro-natalism despite the superficial condemnation of radical anti-abortion rhetoric in liberal Canada (and most other Western cultures) and identifies the more subtle ways in which pro-natalist positions continue a culturally deeply lodged tradition of encumbering female autonomy and freedom. The protagonist arrives at the insight that "[i]t suddenly seemed like a huge conspiracy to keep women in their thirties – when you finally have some brains and some skills and experience – from doing anything useful with them at all" (Heti 90). She addresses the value and potential that a life without children can have for a woman, to develop as a person unencumbered with the burden of living for someone else: "In a life in which there is no child, no one knows anything about your life's meaning. . . . Your life's value is invisible . . . How wonderful to tread an invisible path, where what matters most can hardly be seen" (96). This reference to invisibility evokes notions of a provisionality of identity, a freedom from set narratives, which makes life to oneself as much as to others surprising and productive in ways closed off by a pro-natalist ideology.

By understanding pro-natalist narratives as a way to limit female autonomy, the protagonist plays up the subversive potential of resisting these narratives: "There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. There is something at-lose-ends feeling about such a woman. What is she going to do instead? What sort of trouble will she make?" (Heti 32). One the one hand, these questions are satirical reminders of the quasi-criminalization of the childless woman. On the other hand, these questions are taken to be an inspiration for a resistance against the pressure "to be virtuously miserly towards oneself": "Having children is *nice*. What a great victory to be *not-nice*. The nicest thing to give the world is a child. Do I ever want to be that nice?" (170). To be not-nice is to be non-conform, and in the spirit of non-conformity, she inverts the benevolence of conformity by presenting the niceness of

having children in unflattering, even destructive terms. If Sylvia proclaims that children are the cure for narcissism, then the protagonist turns it around by pointing out that

> the egoism of childbearing is like the egoism of colonizing a country – both carry the wish of imprinting yourself on the world, and making it over with your values, and in your image. . . . It feels greedy, overbearing and rude – an arrogant spreading of those selves. (84–85)

She rewrites the narrative of child-bearing by reinterpreting its implications. This rewriting is particularly pronounced in the context of her Jewish identity. With the historical trauma of the Holocaust, the argument goes: "*If you don't have children, the Nazis will have won*" (162). So the threat of genocide has been turned into its opposite: the compulsion to reproduce. Both extremes the protagonist identifies as coercive, so she suggests a counter-narrative: "Rather than repopulating the world, might it not be better to say, . . . *We will make no more aggressors, and no more victims, and in this way, do a good thing with our wombs*" (162). Having children is identified as the problem, not the solution.

The egoism of motherhood also finds an expression in a story from the protagonist's Swedish editor, whose circle of friends includes one woman who is childless and whose very childlessness becomes a focus of discussion whenever she is absent from the group. The protagonist observes that she is "the one they can feel sorry for, and feel sort of superior to . . . They need someone who they feel their lives are better than. She serves an important role" (Heti 89). Motherhood is depicted as fostering arrogance, while childlessness, sarcastically so, is presented as serving an important social purpose: making others feel better about themselves. This arrogance of motherhood has other incarnations in the book. As friends around her keep getting pregnant and having children, sometimes happily like Nicola (133–34), sometimes feeling trapped and impeded like Libby (163, 174) and Marissa (114–15), the protagonist feels that having children is a "turning away from the living – an insufficient love for the rest of us" (164). So rather than stylizing motherhood as the epitome of selfless altruism, the protagonist recognizes it as a sometimes mutually frustrating abandonment of already existing social bonds and emotional connections. But this arrogance even extends to the child itself. The sensibility towards the life that wants to be lived through you is undercut by the experiences of Libby and Marissa. Life is a gift no one has asked for, so giving birth is not an act of generosity but rather has a coercive quality, not just for the woman giving birth, but also for the child. In reference to Libby, the protagonist compares her baby with a fish having been pulled out of water or a fly having been caught in a spider's web: "[T]his web has caught another soul in it, to trap it here for so many years, then finally let it go again" (237). This metaphor

describes giving life paradoxically in terms of lifting you out of the life-giving environment, snatching you away from where you belong, and the protagonist wonders: "What could ever persuade me to do such a hopeful thing – pull a glittering fish out of the deepest sea, to trap it in this beautiful life, a shimmering fish in a silvery net?" (237). The use of paradox undermines the value of giving birth by framing it in images that suggest a deadly trap that is life.

So the protagonist's resistance to pro-natalist narratives is expressed by, on the one hand, defending the integrity of the childless woman and, on the other hand, challenging the institution of motherhood. This approach is essentially geared towards correcting the imbalance which she recognizes in society's regard for the mother as opposed to the non-mother, to do away with the opposition that society has erected between these two, which allows for a skewed valuation of women (Miller and Bailar 167–68). In reference to Nicola, whose happiness with the children she envies, she comes to the insight that "[l]iving one way is not a criticism of every other way of living. . . . One person's life is not a political or general statement about how lives should be" (Heti 134). The protagonist thus recognizes the impasse of taking other lives as a model for one's own life. She believes "that having a child reflexively or not having one doubtfully are equal lives" (239) and that "to battle nature and to submit to nature, both feel very worthy" (182). But she feels that language in relation to motherhood is not adequately equipped to express this egalitarianism of existences. Rather than discriminating between "mother" and "not mother" she strives for a unifying rather than excluding term that everyone, regardless of whether they have children or not, can share, because "in this way, we can be the same" (158). It is this sense of being "the negative of someone else's positive identity" (157), which she resists. To be "not *not* a mother" (157) is her inclusive suggestion, which only illustrates the problem. She grapples with how childlessness is equated with absence and lack, with inaction and incompletion (Currie 125).

> My lack of the experience of motherhood is not an experience of motherhood. Or is it? Can I call it a motherhood too? . . . How can I express the absence of this experience, without making central the lack? . . . Maybe if I could somehow figure out what *not having a child* is an experience of – make it into an active action, rather than the lack of an action. (Heti 159–60)

She proposes to think of one's relation to motherhood as a sexual orientation in order to be able to "come out" actively with an affirmation of identity rather than the confession of a lack. Yet all these reflections only highlight how deeply embedded the framing of not having children as an inadequacy is in our social and linguistic conceptions of motherhood and it is this imbalance of framing having children as active presence and not having children as inactive lack, which pits women against each

other in needless competition in a destructive pro-natalist frame, which is "deeply divisive, placing women into opposing camps" (Rodgers 88).

The protagonist's reaction to these insights is to redefine motherhood in more inclusive terms and to rewrite absence as presence and inaction as action, and writing is precisely the tool and the manifestation of achieving this. At the gateway to this rewriting are a dream, a recognition, and a callback. In the dream she follows a character called Tou Charin, who, similar to Charon, the ferryman to Hades, bears her away "farther from my mother friends" (Heti 250) after the protagonist has paid with three coins for her passage, thus rejecting both the sirens and the deliberative phase of contingency. She has made her decision: "*I don't want a child!*" (265), but this does not mean that she rejects motherhood. The recognition concerns Miles, with whom she has numerous fights and conflicts in the course of the book, but she recognizes that he values her "as a full and final person" (271), not as a passageway. His support of not having a child was not a selfish presumption of teaching her about herself, but "revealed a deeper respect for [her] and for women than even [she] had" (271). Turning around the agentive implications of their relationship, she realizes that she "wanted to be with a man who would not make it easy for [her] to have [her] own baby" (271). In the callback, the protagonist is on vacation with Miles, his daughter, and the daughter's mother, and she goes out for a swim with the latter, which the child watches from the shore (259). In this moment, mother and not-mother are united in the sea from which the child has been lifted, echoing and reversing the metaphor she used to describe giving birth in reference to Libby's baby. The protagonist returns to the sea in a symbolic rejection of the exclusionary, encaging narratives that the life on the shore stipulates. This image also captures what the writing process is to her. A metaphor she uses to describe the state she is in when she writes is the cocoon. The cocoon is simultaneously a barrier from the outside world, signifying a retreat from the social discourses and siren narratives which surround her, as much as it allows her to turn into "mush," to disintegrate within and become a "self without form, unimprisoned" (228). The isolation from the world creates freedom, an interior freedom to explore the self unencumbered from encaging narratives. These two images of fluidity, her floating in the sea and turning into mush in a cocoon, suggest a dissolution of personality constraints, a rebirth of sorts, so that motherhood is reimagined as a self-transformation. The protagonist writes herself into (a new) existence after returning to a quasi-pre-birth state and thus becomes both mother and daughter to herself.

The relationship between mother and daughter is seen as essential by the protagonist to the experience of motherhood. Just as the writing redefines motherhood as a turning inward as opposed to an outward expansion, the protagonist turns towards

reconfiguring the nature of the mother-daughter relationship from forward to reverse. If being a mother means living your life for someone else, then "[w]hat is wrong with living your life for a mother, instead of a son or daughter?" (Heti 120). "Art is eternity backwards. Art is written for one's ancestors, even if those ancestors are elected, like our literary mother and fathers are. We write for them. Children are eternity forwards. My sense of eternity is backwards through time" (120). Art thus becomes the inverse image of having children. Both are "creative" actions, but one is projected into the past, the other into the future. Rather than projecting her creative capabilities into the future with the creation of a child, the protagonist seeks to project it into the past with a reconnection and recreation of the relationship to her ancestors, particularly her mother and grandmother, a "reparation of the matrilineal bond" (Shirm 316). To cultivate and, as it turns out, complete this relationship is the circular redefinition of motherhood's traditional teleology.

The protagonist's relationship to her mother is initially strained, even distanced. Akin to the raising of a child, she seeks to understand where her mother is coming from and how to establish a mutually fulfilling relationship between them. In fact, the very unearthing and explication of ancestral dynamics becomes the way in which this relationship is mended and forged into a mutual motherhood. To this end, the protagonist explores the life stories of her grandmother and her mother and their own complicated relationship. The grandmother, Magda, was an Auschwitz survivor, married to the son of an older woman she comforted in the camp and hampered in her aspirations to become a lawyer in Communist Hungary when her husband's misdemeanors spelled an end to her career. To compensate for this life of privations, she wanted her daughter to make use of the professional opportunities that became available to her. So the protagonist's mother was born with a sense of obligation of living the life that was kept from her mother. Wanting to be a good daughter she became a medical professional, but in order to do so she had to abandon her mother and go to Canada. The sense of abandonment, despite Magda's support, grew further after Magda died of cancer: "[M]y mother felt so guilty, as though by abandoning her mother, she was the murderer" (Heti 73). This feeling of guilt makes her focus her entire life on her career, which means that her involvement in the raising of her own daughter is limited to trying to instill a sense of "achievement and work" (75) in her along the lines of her own sense of duty to her mother. The protagonist, however, fails to meet her mother's demands, valuing a sense of "wonder and play" (75) instilled by her father, who takes over most of the child raising obligations. As a consequence, the protagonist is filled with a feeling of inadequacy, of not meeting the expectations of her mother. "That is the way I have always felt: helplessly wrong, and so desperate to live as a person beyond criticism, whatever that might mean; to prove

that I was better than any of the ways she saw me, to do one thing she might admire" (80). So this genealogy is a chain of guilt and inadequacy over trying but failing to live the life the mother has envisioned for the daughter. If motherhood is understood as a projection into the future, then this sort of projection appears to be merely a prolongation and amplification of said guilt and inadequacy, a constant transfer of the inability to meet an impossible ideal, trying to please the mother by becoming her imperfect copy. How can this chain be broken? The protagonist articulates the problem and a consequent solution:

> I think I don't want our flesh – my mother's flesh, my grandmother's flesh – to just be divided and replicated. I want their life to be counted. I want to make a child that will not die – a body that will speak and keep on speaking, which can't be shot or burned up. You can't burn every copy of a single book. . . . A book lives in every person who reads it. . . . I want my grandmother to live in everybody, not just in one body from between my legs. (Heti 199)

Instead of producing another imperfect copy of her grandmother in the form of a child, the protagonist envisions the reconstruction of her grandmother in the form of writing. In this way, she completes what her mother and herself were striving for, to give their own mothers' lives meaning:

> Maybe motherhood means honoring one's mother. Many people do that by becoming mothers. They do it by having children. They do it by imitating what their mother has done. By imitating and honoring what their mother has done, this makes them a mother.
>
> I am also imitating what my mother has done. I am also honoring my mother, no less than the person whose mother feels honored by an infant grandchild. I am honoring my mother no less. I do as my mother did, and for the same reasons; we work to give our mother's life meaning.
>
> What's the difference between being a good mother and being a good daughter? Practically a lot, but symbolically nothing at all. (Heti 200)

This is the core of Heti's reinterpretation of motherhood, a motherhood backwards, honoring one's mother through one's work, not by having a child but by writing the ancestral maternal line back into existence. Gretchen Shirm points out that with this redefinition of motherhood the protagonist affirms an identity which is "deeply relational . . . without repeating the pattern of also bringing children into the world" (319), thus avoiding a crippling imitation in favor of a measured relationality. In this way, her writing reshapes the narrative of motherhood and expresses a redefined motherhood at the same time. The very life story of mother and grandmother that we read about constitutes the protagonist's claim to motherhood, as it takes the place of the imagined child as an alternative way to create maternal meaning. By fulfilling her role as daughter in "validat[ing] [her] mother" (Heti 276) she simultaneously becomes a mother. This backwards conception of motherhood is anticipated in the book

in several ways. The fortune teller's prophecy about her life turns out not to be applicable to her but to her grandmother's life. So it looks backwards instead of forwards, a reverse narrative (48, 275). In a dream, the protagonist envisions her menstrual blood flowing upwards into her brain, reversing its direction and there figuratively creating the literary child which will make her a mother. As Currie points out, these reversals surrounding the book's reconfiguration of motherhood blur the lines between mother and not-mother and so undermine social binaries: "[F]or Heti it is childbirth that is the realm of infinite repetition of what was, and writing that restores possibility to the future" (133). So from a different point of view, having children is backwards, repetitive motherhood, and writing to honor one's mother is forward, "future-proof" motherhood.

The book closes with the mother's validation of the daughter's work, sealing the circularity of motherhood. In a letter she writes:

> You never knew [your grandmother], and you are the one who will make her alive forever.
> It is magical! And yes, the universe is back to perfect.
> Thank you, Sweetheart. I love you very much. (Heti 283)

This reference to perfection and the acknowledgment of the mother's love for her daughter suggest a level of closure by which the alternative narrative of motherhood trumps the frustrating divisiveness of traditional motherhood narratives. Echoing the story of Jacob wrestling the angel, the protagonist names her own "wrestling place" "Motherhood" (Heti 284), the promised land in which she struggled with a decision and found fulfillment in the struggle itself, not by making a decision for or against motherhood, but by redefining motherhood as an inclusive concept.

This redefinition makes the book an important contribution to the discourse of decisional autonomy in matters of pregnancy and maternity, because it identifies pronatalism as a culturally pervasive narrative, which is subtle but rigid in its exclusionary binarism and consequent pressure and divisiveness it imposes upon women. Heti dismantles the narratives that make up the concept of motherhood and redefines it as an inclusive, non-divisive, non-coercive concept. Maintaining its relational basis, she reverses its temporal trajectory and suggests the relationship with the mother as its central concern. Mobilizing the creative potential of writing she rewrites the narrative of motherhood as the reconstruction and "eternalization" of ancestral bonds between women through literature. Via this reversal, she undermines the one-directional conception of motherhood and by introducing the concept of "non-non-motherhood" allows for the term's inclusiveness of all women. In this way, she deflates the notion of decisional compulsion and so creates a spirit of egalitarianism and tolerance from which all mothers, non-mothers, and non-non-mothers can benefit. The

book's contribution to the debate over decisional autonomy in matters of reproduction is to advocate women's self-determination in their understanding of motherhood, whereby it opens up pro-choice arguments towards not just giving women the right to choose but also towards controlling the discursive and narrative frames and implications of their choice: a freedom to invest their choice with their own meaning. In other words, it is not just "her body, her choice," but "her body, her choice, her narrative."

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