

# Endangered Species

# Madonna and Child in Seven Veils

*Earth, isn't this what you want? To arise in us, invisible?*

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Ninth Duino Elegy*

## **THIS IS YOUR MADONNA?**

One early spring morning not long ago, I drove with Izhar Patkin to Sèvres, the Parisian suburb renowned for its porcelain manufactory, where he was about to cast his *Madonna and Child*.

“So, this is your Madonna?” asked Bruno, the master mold-maker.

“Her?” (pointing at me) asked his pale apprentice, who showed me into an atelier filled with winged, fragile, hard-paste gods, where I was asked to undress. Pollen whirled in a pool of light. Fir trees shimmered outside as daylight waned, while Bruno and his apprentice draped strips of cloth soaked in white plaster over me, onto me. Lithe flesh, crude plaster, soft cloth, brittle porcelain. Matter coming together to make a matrix—a negative of a missing body.

Which second skin would tell the story of the absent body? Of its second coming?

## **THIS IS YOUR MADONNA!**

Here she is (I am) your Madonna, Izhar. Neck stretched forth, crown tilted toward the light, back taut as an unplucked string about to resonate the most exquisite of sounds, harrowingly suspended between the “about to” and the “no longer” of its promise. Indefinitely calm between two terrors, her gaze is turned inward. Her thighs are heavy, sturdy as the Himalayan rock that gave birth to Kali, goddess of time, change, and paramount reality. Something of Kali’s terrifying dance atop the inert body of her consort, Lord Shiva, is evoked by this Madonna’s silent dance over the body of her vanquished Cupid. Frail as a girl, impregnable as the wheels of time, she holds out a firm arm to cradle an empty blanket. A natural evolution, perhaps, of a gesture made by the Theotokos of Vladimir, the twelfth-century birth-giver of God, the Byzantine icon who with one hand supported her puppyish infant and with the other pointed to her baby, Jesus, as the incarnation of the logos. Word turns to flesh, image to icon.

Reflective and stalwart, the Madonna cradles a void, *presents* an absence. In her lap the sturdy porcelain softens, caves in, and yields to the diaphanous swaddling cloth that swaddles nothing. Her gaze traces the missing infant.

The blanket is not the only empty space. Her porcelain body is itself a void, the negative of my body. A hollow where I once was. And yet her *being-in-the-world* is indisputable. Her body grounds itself in place, as a body must if it is to stand in for a being that is, as yet, placeless. She is stable in space, but subtly moves in time to where she is her own lack, her own mother, *Mater*, matter, the fullness of an empty moon. She is silent. So is her child, of whom for a moment, we lost sight—but there he is beneath her! Vanquished, perhaps sacrificed. She

gazes inward and sees time spiraling forth, solid as a mountain. Placid as a mirror lake. Only her right toe frolics in a secret dance, allowing itself to unhinge into one final tremor, a memento of love. No wonder her newborn, brought quite unnaturally into life beneath her, is named *Amour Menaçant* (menacing love). She must crush him to ensure his silence, must keep his finger against his lips, lest he let a word slip about her act of love with God.

### **ABILITY AND THE ABILITY NOT-TO-BE**

In his essay “On Potentiality,” Giorgio Agamben examines Anna Akhmatova’s account of what gave birth to her poems. It was late in 1930 and for months she had been standing with dozens of other mothers outside the Leningrad prison where her son, and their sons, were being held. One day one of the mothers recognized Akhmatova as the famous poet and asked her, “Can you speak of this?” Akhmatova was silent for a moment and then, without knowing how or why, found an answer to the question. “Yes, I can,”<sup>1</sup> she said. Not because, being a great poet, she possessed the gift to skillfully describe atrocities, Agamben explains, but, rather, because she fell into what is “for most of us perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the moment of potentiality.”<sup>2</sup>

In Agamben’s chilling reading of Aristotle, potentiality isn’t only the ability to do something, but the ability *not* to do it: it is not a moment of mere lack of action or lack of being, but, rather, it is the pregnant, present lack of action or of being that presents the potentiality, precisely, for nonbeing. The empty cloth in the Madonna’s lap carries the burden of this potentiality.

Man, says Agamben, has forgotten how *not to be able*. For Agamben, to “be able not to” would shatter the binary of potentiality/actuality and enable the moment of potentiality to subside within the actuality. This Madonna had achieved something like this: she is pregnant with the potentiality not to have a child. And yet she searches for him with Akhmatova, wandering from one room to the next, peering into the empty cradle, until she accepts that the angels have taken him:

*Where is your gypsy boy, tall one,  
That over black kerchief did weep,  
Where is your small first child  
What memory of him do you keep?*<sup>3</sup>

### **ICON AND ECONOMY**

On another sunny day, in another spring, Izhar and I went for a walk through Venice, from the Bridge of Sighs (where long ago the condemned would glimpse their city for the last

time), through San Marco, to the late Peggy Guggenheim's palace. I was under the spell of Mrs. Guggenheim's list of deceased pups when Izhar handed me a book: *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* by Marie-José Mondzain. "It's all in here," he said. "Our entire economic system of images started with the Byzantine solution to the prohibition on idolatry!"

Throughout his career, Patkin has been searching for some iconophilic expression of Jewish aniconism—some juncture where the visible, shocked by its own obscenity, might take cover and find form at the same time.

During the Byzantine iconoclastic crises of the eighth and ninth centuries, icon became to image what symbol would (as of the seventeenth century) become to sign in semantic systems. When the church fathers decreed that the image should henceforth remain hidden while the icon remained visible, they redeemed the image from the charge of idolatry and wove the mysterious affinity between icon and *oikonomia*. In translations, the word *economy* is "rendered by different terms such as *incarnation, plan, design, administration, providence, responsibility, duties, compromise, lie or guile . . .*"<sup>4</sup> These inform early discussions of divine representations in icons as a primarily economical question.

From that point onward, and in fact to this day, a magical furnace of divine economy aimed at redeeming humanity has been at work within us. Like the Freudian object of desire that is forever missing or partial, the icon is structured around layers of absence and is negotiated through a series of disappearances that culminate in Jesus's incarnation in flesh.

In a series of economic transactions, God has need of a son, the son of a church, the church of power, and so on. Thus, a face-to-face encounter between God and man in the manner of the Old Testament is no longer possible. From here on, the economy, which Mondzain identifies as an "empty concept" or a "negative image," will be the vehicle through which the plurality of God's names will be made visible by substitution.

Trying on a commedia dell'arte mask in a tourist stall, I hazarded, "So the Madonna's missing baby is something like the departure of God from his icon?" "Even better," Izhar said, "if her womb is an icon factory, why give birth to any baby at all?" I later found this in Mondzain's book: "The Icon contemplates us. In its turn, it becomes God's gaze at the contemplator's flesh, which gets caught in an informational and transformational circuit of relationships . . . it is the effective and efficient form of the lack that the divine model of each and every economy assumed in the 'kenosis' of its annihilation."<sup>5</sup>

The emerald waters below us grew deep, palazzos reflected in their murk. We'd reached Santa-Maria Della Salute, the Baroque church whose every ornament references the Black Death. Too bad for the iconoclasts who lost the war with the iconophiles, I thought. The bastards lost twice; smashing and getting smashed. Very little of them, other than parodies and lies, remain. When I got back home, I lost the book, but managed to buy another.

## SALOME

That femininity had been since time immemorial thought of in terms of absence has famously given rise to the Eves, Medusas, Medeas, and Sophias of the world. But Izhar's Madonna's affair with absence is not quite the same as your average castratrix's role as a stand-in for death, or a meeting point of womb and tomb. She is in the business of revealing the invisible and of being laid bare by it. In this way she is perhaps closest to Kali: dark daughter of the Himalayas and consort of Shiva, who, with her skull necklace, stands for both doom and salvation, destruction and ultimate truth.

But as I sat encased in plaster-soaked cloth at the porcelain factory, another daughter—this one a Jewish princess—came to mind: my namesake, Salome. I was named after Shlomzion: Salome Alexandra, Queen of Judea, who lived in Jerusalem a mere hundred years before the infamous daughter of Herodias. But it was the hysterical, lusty princess who was truer to the Hebrew root from which the name is derived: *shalem*, which denotes both peace and wholeness. For Flaubert and Mallarmé she was the virgin-whore; for Wilde and Strauss, she was a femme fatale. But for all of them, she was the fin-de-siècle decadent fantasy, and as Wilde put it, “Decadence is the subordination of the whole to the parts.”

In Oscar Wilde's *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act*, the main trope for arguing virgin/whore, object/subject, seeing/being-seen, empty/whole relations is the moon. Every character in Wilde's play, down to the last slave, likens Salome to the moon. And for Salome, the moon is a virgin: “She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses.”

But for Herodias, the moon is a mad whore:

“The moon has a strange look to-night. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman . . . I am sure she is looking for lovers. Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is like a mad woman, is she not?”<sup>6</sup>

Two classical points of view are about to converge here on moon and sun, spectator and object of desire, castrated woman and decapitated prophet, but also the very dualism out of which they are forged. In the circus of desire Herod looks at Salome, Salome looks at Iokanaan, all look at the moon which in turn reflects light—and, true to the decadent tradition, the moon is replaced with artifice, with the mirror, the silver charger, as light-reflecting and light-deflecting devices multiply until a myriad of viewpoints and seen objects erupt and we're in a crazy hall of mirrors, where virgin and whore are no longer antinomies, no longer just two. And as Salome vanquishes the gaze, traditional moon metaphors are exchanged for

sun metaphors; the absent, the obscure, and the gazed-upon are once again presented—made present—and revealed. The reflection is an optical illusion because the reflector is (herself) transparent, infinite, absent. The moonlight, the desire of the flesh for the holy man, the virgin's yearning for the divine—these are all fluid tropes, forever shifting in a symbolic economy, balanced against primordial nothingness. Like Salome, the Madonna asks for plurality instead of duality. No longer is she reduced to being either a mother or a child, barren or pregnant, looking or being looked at. She has become a faint crescent at dawn, with only a fickle contour encircling her like “the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver.”

### THE VIRGIN CANVAS

First there was a body, then a mold that negated it, then body again, hollow, over another hollow body, an angel this time, then an empty cloth. How many layers of negation are required to rule out solitude? Her gaze is turned inward. Made of supple but solid material, she is full although she contains nothing. So much for the emptiness that Modern art has been so keen to attain. That piece of fabric that was born as Venus's washcloth and reaches its apotheosis as Jesus's empty swaddling cloth.

This is the blank page the writer yearns to write. Barthes's author, who demands to die, Blanchot's writer, who asks to be erased, in order to lose literature to the night, to reach *the vacuum* which opens the work “altogether to itself, rendering it absolutely present . . . the work's very coming to be is revealed by the flash of its disappearance.”<sup>7</sup> And in the words of Avital Ronell, it “all comes down to the way literature dresses up the wound of its non-being when it goes out into the world.”<sup>8</sup> What with? A diaper. A blanket. A piece of cloth. A canvas. “All great art is kenotic,” Mondzain says. “The line, the void, and the Virgin's body.”<sup>9</sup>

### THE SMILE

I am the one who has been subtracted from the sculpture. The memory of my shadow doubles and deepens in the folds of the empty cloth of Izhar's *Madonna and Child*. Still, I rejoice in her trinity of absences: body, child, a divine lover. They give this Madonna her grandeur gained by loss. Out of her silence—which in turn silences Cupid's pressed lips—comes a steady vertigo, the kind you might feel upon jumping off a cliff and discovering that you're buoyant and gliding. That you've given in to the *suchness* of things, the frailty of rock, the solitude of the cypress tree, the fullness of the moon. These are the sorts of things that put a faint smile on the Madonna's face. Only from certain angles can it be discerned, through the milky mist of her porcelain face, behind her inward gaze.

Shlomzion Kenan

## NOTES

1

Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality," in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Selected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), 177.

2

Ibid., 178.

3

From Anna Akhmatova, "Where is your gypsy boy, tall one," trans. Ilya Shambat, "Anna Andreevna Akhmatova," accessed April 19, 2012, <http://ahmatova.niv.ru/ahmatova/text/stihi/english/english-54.htm>.

4

Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005), 13.

5

"What links the economy of the natural and consubstantial image to the artificial icon and prevents them from being confused with each other is the question of *absence* or *emptiness*, which is also the mark of the historical economy" (ibid., 81). Ibid., 90–91.

6

All quotes from *Salome* are taken from Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, in "The Literature Network," accessed April 17, 2012, <http://www.online-literature.com/wilde/salome/1/>.

7

Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1989), 203.

8

Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 57.

9

Mondzain, 92.









To me, intimacy is freedom. It's important for me to emphasize the intimacy of the human touch and evidence of the creative process, which bring an emotional intelligence.

























I have always believed that even the most abstract thought needs an object to exist. One of the things I always ask myself is how much body does a work of art really need to exist and to convey its plot. An extinct bird as an empty eggcup.









