MATERNAL THINKING

WITH A NEW PREFACE

TOWARD A POLITICS OF PEACE

SARA RUDDICK

BEACON PRESS
BOSTON

BEACON PRESS
25 Beacon Street
Boston, Massachsetts 02108

Beacon Press books
are published under the auspices of
the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Portions of Parts I and II originally appeared in "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1980). Portions of Chapter 7 originally appeared as "Remarks on the Sexual Politics of Reason" in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Kittay and Diana Meyers (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987).

The following material has been reprinted by permission: Randall Jarrell, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner, " in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 144; Randall Jarrell, "Losses," in *The Complete Poems*, p. 145; Adrienne Rich, "Natural Resources," in *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New, 1950-1984* (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 264; Chinua Achebe, "Refugee Mother and Child," in *Beware, Soul Brother* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 12; Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est," in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 55.

99 98 97 96 95 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Text Design by Linda Koegel

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ruddick, Sara, 1935–
Maternal thinking: toward a politics of peace / Sara Ruddick.
p. cm.
Originally published: 1989. With a new pref.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-8070-1409-5 (pbk.)
1. Peace (Philosophy) 2. Women in peace. I. Title.
B105.P4R83 1995
172'.42—dc20 94-28148
CIP

TO WILLIAM RUDDICK

Love's Reason

MY LIFE HAS been shaped by a love affair with Reason. When I felt awkward or left out as a child or beset by lustful and envious fantasies, I clung to Reason in the most obsessive manner, determined to be faithful despite my "wild," unpleasant feelings. And Reason rewarded me, promising that if I took refuge in books and held fast to the Rational, I would someday control "irrational," unruly desires or at least, from Reason's perch, belittle them. Somewhat later, as I battled with my devoted and intimidating lawyer father, Reason gave me arguments. My voice might be tense, I might even cry, but with Reason on my side I could manage my love and my fear. Soon I went to a women's college where I was encouraged to adopt Reason's values and imitate His style.

In college I realized that not only did Reason protect me from social and emotional imbroglios, He — or it, as I was learning to say — offered me worldly possibilities. In the service of Reason, I could avoid the humdrum world of wives and mothers, instruct

people in Reason's ways, and get paid for it. Perhaps I could conceive Reason's children: my roommate and I made lists of the books we would someday write. Meanwhile, however impersonally imagined, the romance continued. Sitting in a narrow aisle of the Gothic college library reading Bertrand Russell's lectures on logical atomism in aging volumes of *The Monist,* I was in thrall to the aroma of the books, the feel of the pages, the philosophy itself, so utterly transcendent of particular meaning, so very English, so far from the fantasies and fights I'd left behind in Ohio. I read *Gaudy Night,* fell in love with Harriet Vane's desire for *pure* intellectual work and with Reason's emissary Peter Wimsey. I took down my prints of van Gogh and El Greco and copied passages from Spinoza to paste on my wall — determined to persevere in my own being, to grasp my life *sub specie aeternitatis.* In 1957 I set out for graduate school to study philosophy.

Ten years later, Ph.D. in hand, I hovered anxiously on the margins of academic life. "Trying to write" was a preoccupying activity, although I rarely put words to paper and I finished virtually nothing. After college, I never participated easily in philosophical discussion and had come to avoid professional meetings altogether. Yet I still depended on Reason's arguments and its promise to control irrational desires. And occasionally, teaching young people Plato, Spinoza, or Wittgenstein, I would feel the old romance stirring. If I could not live happily with Reason, I could not quite live without Him/it either. How had such a passionate affair gone so wrong?

Although I didn't know it then, my personal alienation was in large part caused by the sexual politics in which Reason was enmeshed. In my generation, women's attempts to reason were typically met with contempt, still wounding even when too subtle to name. Those women who managed to hold on to their intellectual ambitions often suffered from outrageous discrimination and almost always from self-doubt. It is not surprising that I lost heart amidst the late sixties emissaries of Reason — masculine, professional, and usually arrogant, if also often kind. But the failure of my passion was also partly the responsibility of Reason Himself and of the grounds of my love. Reason, at least as Western

philosophers had imagined Him, was infected by — and contributed to — the pervasive disrespect for women's minds and lives from which I suffered. For a woman to love Reason was to risk both self-contempt and a self-alienating misogyny.

In my childhood, indeed straight through high school, Reason had brought me facts, histories, and stories — Shakespeare's plays all jumbled up with the causes of the first world war and the nervous system of frogs. It did not occur to me that it was less rational or more "womanly" to love Shakespeare best. But in college I became aware of the division between hard reason (philosophy) and something softer (literature) and something harder still (science). And, in that context, I learned that literature was thought to be effeminate and that both men and women worried about toughening it up, that the philosophy teacher who taught existentialism (the only woman in the department) was as soft as existentialism itself but that hard philosophy provided a ticket to a masculine world.

It was philosophy's Reason that abetted my desire to free myself from the fate of wife-and-mother with its messy, fleshly children and dull duties. I remember memorizing that part of the *Symposium* where Plato suggests that the right use of sexual desire leads away from any particular desired body and toward love for abstract Beauty. I would have sympathized with his remark that it is "vulgar" men who "turn to women as the object of their love, and raise a family."[1] Plato believed that the worst possible model for a young man was "a woman, young or old or wrangling with her husband, defying heaven, loudly boasting, fortunate in her own conceit, or involved in misfortune or possessed by grief and lamentation — still less a woman that is sick, in love, or in labor"[2] While I was certainly not about to take a woman for a model, there was always a danger that in an emotional, uncontrolled moment I might turn "womanly." I took it as a warning that in order to talk with (male) philosophers before he died, Socrates had to send the women away.

When we went inside we found Socrates just released from his chains, and Xantippe — you know her! — sitting by him with the little boy

[their son] on her knees. As soon as Xantippe saw us she broke out into the sort of remark you would expect from a woman: "Oh Socrates, this is the last time you and your friends will be able to talk together!" Socrates looked at Crito. "Crito," he said, "Someone had better take her home."[3]

To cast one's lot with reason meant staying with the men, on the right side of power. Philosophers have often suggested that people of superior rationality are justified in excluding and dominating others. Aristotle[4] puts the matter plainly: free men and women are superior to slaves because the former are reasonable while the latter have only enough rationality to hear and obey orders. Similarly, free women are rightfully subordinate to free men. Although the free woman, unlike the slave woman or man, has some deliberative capacity, in her this capacity is weakly developed; she cannot govern herself but must submit to the deliberative capacity of men. In a similar vein, Aquinas justified the rule of men over their kinswomen:

> Good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is *naturally* subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates. [Emphasis added.][5]

I was sufficiently alienated from anything womanly that I didn't yet realize that Reason would justify someone's subordinating *me;* on the contrary, I delighted in the social status Reason conferred. The arguments that made it possible for me to hold my own with my father helped me to win prizes. Like many philosophers, I learned to argue people down and to use the charge of irrationality to dismiss or intimidate. Moreover, I lived in a country where allegedly superior "rationality" was explicitly used to justify the class and racial privileges from which I profited. The injustice — and the irrationality — of these uses of rationality were conveniently obscured in the long shadow cast by the mythically impersonal, "transcendant" Man of Reason.

The ticket to staying with men on the right side of power was objectivity, self-control, and detachment. As the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo remarks, speaking specifically of Descartes: "The key term [that defines reason] is detachment: from emotional

life, from the particularities of time and place, from personal quirks and prejudices, and, most centrally, from the object itself" — from whatever and whomever Reason knows.[6] Descartes's vision of a Reason defined in terms of "correct method" and founded on certainty reassured me largely because it circumvented both social privilege and personal conflict. The better I reasoned, the farther I would move from myself, from social responsibility, and from any particular — and therefore subjective and confusing — loves.

Reason seemed to serve me well so long as I was protected from the patriarchal mores of professional and domestic life. In a women's college I could stay with the men — at least as a daughterly student and reader. Reason never really controlled fantasy or passion. On the other hand, He was not threatened by the politics, friendships with women, and confused family feelings from which I had successfully detached Him. But in graduate school I was confronted simultaneously with the masculinity of professional life and with my own love for a flesh-and-blood man. Because my lover, soon to be my husband, was a philosopher and therefore Reason's emissary, I tried to serve Reason through him, shaping my life to his ambitions. But my lover also provoked feelings that Reason labeled "feminine," and that I no longer wanted Him to judge, even if feeling and femininity disqualified me from Reason's pursuits. I had so long associated Reason with both masculinity and detachment that it sometimes seemed necessary to dissociate my *self* from Him entirely. Then I had children and another "irrational" passion, a grittier, more troubling one but equally consuming. Although I was the wife-and-mother I had feared becoming, I still often tried to stay with the men. But increasingly I felt a fraud and also disloyal to the other mere women-and-mothers with whom I spent much of my time.

It was not only "womanly" passion that threatened Reason's calm; dispassionate transcendence was failing in the streets as well as in the living room. Shortly after I arrived at graduate school, I picketed Woolworth's in support of sit-ins in the South; pregnant with my son, I took part in my first antiwar protest. For the most part I stayed busy with domestic and teaching duties, taking part

in demonstrations that others planned. But neither I nor my students and friends could ignore the violences that men of reason rationally justified, nor could we transcendentally apprehend oppression, or in my case privilege, "under the aspect of eternity".[7] While teaching or studying alone, I might still be at home with Reason. But even the remnants of my attachment were undermined in virtually every seminar and professional meeting; too many philosophers, cashing in on Reason's promise, "rose above" the social divisions from which they profited. In the worst case, a few of them coolly justified violence with Reason's arguments.

Reason was failing me — as a lover, mother, and citizen. As Western philosophers had idealized it, Reason was meant to be detached and impersonal, at best irrelevant to particular affections and loyalties. I needed to act on passion and be responsible to love. Ideally, Reason both justified domination and transcended the political uses to which it was put; I needed to confront the sexual and social politics of Reason, if only to speak self-respectfully to my children. I still treasured Spinoza's identification — which was also an injunction — of the individual as one who perseveres in its own being. But now my being was not my "own," nor did I want it to be. An argument that didn't draw on love and sustain it in action was worse than no argument at all.

I might, in my disappointment, have turned against Reason. Whenever I reasoned actively or was successful in Reason's world, I felt detached from the passions in which my life was rooted. Since setting out to work meant leaving love behind, I wanted to slay the Man of Reason I depended on. Still intimidated and internally silenced by philosophical ideals of rationality, I was like the scientists whom Evelyn Fox Keller imagines, walking "a path bounded on one side by inauthenticity and the other by subversion".[8] Yet however rebellious I felt, I did not doubt, and I do not now, that as destructive as Western ideals of Reason may be, the capacity to reason is a human good. I know what a pleasure it is to learn, experiment, imagine, discover, design, and invent. There is real strength in steady judgment, self-reflectiveness, clear speech, and attentive listening. These are activities of reason and they are human blessings. I have never been persuaded that there

is anything precious, or specifically bourgeois, or merely Western, or exclusively masculine about the human needs and pleasures of reason.

If I could not reject Reason, could I honor Reason differently? If I could no longer serve the Reason I had known, was it possible to reconceive a reason that strengthened passion rather than opposing it, that refused to separate love from knowledge? In the past, women who have criticized prevailing ideals of reason or failed to measure up to them have been called irrational. Would it be possible to reverse this judgment, finding fault not in women but in the ideals? Or, more daringly, were there alternative ideals of reason that might derive from women's work and experiences, ideals more appropriate to responsibility and love? Virginia Woolf claimed that alternative ideals might arise from the very differences between women and men that Reason meant to transcend:

> "We" — meaning by "we" a whole made up of body, brain and spirit, influenced by memory and tradition — must still differ in some respects from "you," whose body, brain and spirit have been so differently trained and are so differently influenced by memory and tradition. Though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes.[9]

Suppose, as Margaret Anderson suggests, that culture as men have created it "is assumed to present the entire and only truth. . . . [Then] women's culture . . . is invisible, silenced, trivialized, and wholly ignored."[10] Could it be that "women are *even now* thinking in ways which traditional intellection denies, decries or is unable to grasp,"[11] as Adrienne Rich asked in 1976?

Faced with these new and disturbing questions, I did not give up the ideals of Reason in which I'd been trained. I proceeded in an abstract, detached manner, asking first: What is the relation of thinking to life? Here I turned to the men I had studied, particularly Wittgenstein, Winch, and Habermas. All thinking, they had seemed to teach me, arises from and is shaped by the practices in which people engage. What then, I asked, is a woman's practice? Of the many activities assigned to women, I chose one: the work of mothering is central to many women's lives and indirectly affects the thinking of countless others who as daughters, sisters,

or friends identify with mothers. If women were now thinking in ways we had yet to grasp, then these ways would be at least partly reflected in the thinking to which mothering gives rise — maternal thinking.

I began my first essay on maternal thinking by quoting a Victorian rendition of maternal love, written, like so many sentimental tributes, by a son:

> There was a young man loved a maid
> Who taunted him. "Are you afraid,"
> She asked, "to bring me today
> Your mother's head upon a tray?"
>
> He went and slew his mother dead,
> Tore from her breast her heart so red,
> Then toward his lady love he raced,
> But tripped and fell in all his haste.
>
> As the heart rolled on the ground
> It gave forth a plaintive sound.
> And it spoke in accents mild:
> "Did you hurt yourself, my child?"[12]

Many of the wishes and fears in this poem were familiar. Women are cast as rivals for the men they love. For the sake of masculinity and "normality," "good" mothers allow their sons to express contempt for their mother's feelings, if not for their lives. Moreover, mothers are said to be masochistic and bored. No wonder that they sacrifice their minds and hearts. It is only damage to *children* that counts: "Did you hurt *yourself*, my child?"

This poem appealed to me, however, for its unfamiliar twist. In the version I had discovered (I've since learned that there are others) the lady asks for her lover's mother's head; evidently she fears and respects maternal thinking. The son follows the conventional wisdom, believing that it is maternal passion his lover needs to control. Most mothers, and certainly I myself, had shared the judgment of the son. The passions of maternity are so sudden, intense, and confusing that women themselves remain ignorant of the perspective, the thought, that develops from mothering. As a young mother, the only "maternal thinking" with which I was

familiar was thinking *about* mothers and children by "experts" who hoped to be heard by mothers rather than to hear what mothers had to say. However disenchanted I became with Reason, it did not occur to me that there was an intellectual life that had anything to do with mothering. I "thought" only when I had time to myself, put my children out of my mind, and did philosophy. Now, however, armed with my detached philosophical questions, I considered and interviewed the head of "the mother." But who was I, armed with questions posed by the Man of Reason? Could it be that it was my head there on the ground?

Certainly as a mother I had found myself thinking. For years I had engaged in spirited reflection about children's lives with other mothers — sometimes friends, often casual acquaintances. Now, nearing forty, I and a few close friends found ourselves preoccupied with our children's conflicts and changes and with the ways our own choices, disappointments, and pleasures affected our children. We were asking how we could become, during these hard times, "good enough" mothers. We were not reflecting for the sake of reflection; we needed answers — by bedtime, by teacher conference time, by the time we had to accept or reject a job offer in a distant city. Though we desperately needed to act, it was abundantly clear that our nighttime conclusions simply yielded the next afternoon's questions. We started again, with each other and in long internal dialogue.

Could this "chattering," so unlike the philosophy in which I was trained, be "thinking"? Did I, did we, through endless telephone calls and late night coffees, create themes of a "discourse"? Could what we thought and the way we thought be put to use?

I began to answer these questions by providing a respectable conceptual context in which the idea of maternal thinking made sense. My initial attempt to develop distinctions and a vocabulary for maternal thinking is represented, in amended form, in Chapter 1. In this chapter, I devise a very general description of maternal work in terms of the demands to which the worker responds. These demands shape, and are in turn shaped by, the metaphysical attitudes, cognitive capacities, and identification of virtues that make up maternal thinking. As I try to make sense of the idea of

maternal thinking, I am motivated by loyalty to mothers' experiences, including my own. But I reflect abstractly, alluding only to banal and largely uncontested facts — for example, that children need protection to survive.

Even the most abstract scheme has its particular social history and its political consequences. In Chapter 2 I take up three frequent objections to the way in which I talk about maternal work and thinking: that I idealize mothering, ignore both fathers and female birthgivers, and obscure the differences and oppressive divisions among mothers. In responding to these objections, my aim is to clarify the politics that motivate my project.

To say that mothering gives rise to a certain type of thinking says nothing about which attitudes, capacities, and values arise, or why. I address this vexing question in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. There the epistemological climate changes as I draw explicitly on my own experience of mothering and try to entice readers into reflecting on theirs.

I proceed stepwise from the general and abstract to the more concrete and particular with a detour for contentious argument about the project as a whole. Throughout, my aim is to articulate distinct ways of thinking about the world — for example, about control, vulnerability, "nature," storytelling, and attentive love. Although I speak often of maternal temptation and failure, I have engaged in my project because I believe the particular maternal ways of thinking that I have identified are valuable.

Throughout parts I and II, I consider maternal thinking, with its distinctive flaws and virtues, as one discipline among others. It is only in part III that I make more ambitious claims. There I take maternal thinking to be an engaged and visionary standpoint from which to criticize the destructiveness of war and begin to invent peace. Mothers are often militarist and usually support the war policies of their states. Nonetheless, I will argue, maternal thinking and practices are important resources for developing peace politics. But for the moment, I claim only that maternal thinking exists and that, whatever a reader's politics, is worthy of respectful consideration.

CHAPTER ONE

Maternal Thinking

IN RECENT DECADES several philosophers have elaborated a "practicalist" conception of "truth." They have argued negatively that there is no truth by which all truths can be judged nor any foundation of truths nor any total and inclusive narrative of all true statements. Positively they have claimed that distinctive ways of knowing and criteria of truth arise out of practices. I use this general philosophical view — which makes no mention of either women or mothers — to describe the relation between mothering and thinking. I therefore begin by outlining very briefly certain tenets of practicalism that I assume.[1]

Thinking and Practice

From the practicalist view, thinking arises from and is tested against practices. Practices are collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent