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## **“The One True Thing in My Life”**

### ***Mother-Son Relations in the Art and Life of Emily Coleman***

*In 1925, following the birth of her only child, Johnny, aspiring writer Emily Holmes Coleman developed toxic exhaustive psychosis, which led to her being institutionalized in the Rochester State Hospital for two months. Upon recovery, she translated the trauma of labor into her autobiographical novel *The Shutter of Snow* (1930). After moving to Paris in 1926, Coleman hired the Russian émigré Madame Donn, who was married with two children, to be her son’s governess, and within a year had struck a deal that would shatter familial expectation and design: in exchange for financial assistance, the Donns agreed to have Johnny live with them full-time. Emily’s marriage to Deak Coleman was basically over (they divorced in 1932). Deak had no interest in raising his son, and Emily most wanted to pursue a life of art and self-expression on a wholly self-absorbed plane. To this end she became a some-time single mother who visited with her son occasionally while she was in Paris, or had him shipped over for holidays when she moved to London. I will explore the relationship between Coleman and her son through modernist and feminist perspectives. I will also examine how *The Shutter of Snow* gives us insight into her experiences with, and attitudes towards, mothering. In addition, I will analyze in detail the many entries in her diary devoted to her son which reveal the plethora of ways in which their relationship was sustained over the years.*

In 1921, the aspiring American writer Emily Holmes Coleman married advertising manager Deacon (Deak) Coleman—she was 22, he 23—and on January 6, 1924, she gave birth to their only child, John Milton Holmes Coleman. The delivery did not go well. She told her father: “I love him!” but added: “from now on I favor the stork method of acquiring a family.”<sup>1</sup> This flippant comment, clearly for her father’s benefit, belies the fact that she developed toxic exhaustive psychosis, which led to her being institutionalized

in the Rochester State Hospital, an asylum, for two months. Years later she recalled in her diary that she experienced immediate post-partum "insanity" which "came from excessive pain (not taking gas oxygen), and an infection." She explained: "I didn't take gas oxygen to save Deak money, neither of us dreaming that it would be such a horror to give birth."<sup>2</sup> Nearing the end of her treatment, she wrote her father: "Some day maybe you'll know what I've been through these two long months. (But just thank God that it is over now!)"<sup>3</sup> Coleman's experiences as a mother, however, were just beginning.

Recovering in Rochester, Coleman confessed in another letter to her father: "You know, I've been terribly depressed since I've been home . . . I fight it all the time, but it's been very hard." In this same letter, she called her son "a perfect angel" but one who "gets cunninger [sic] every day—he's a peppy little rascal."<sup>4</sup> Coleman here established two key points that would profoundly inform the way she viewed herself and her child over the next several years: motherhood was to be equated with "depression"—though in her diary she frequently used the more powerful terms "insanity" and "insane"; and her child possessed the dual nature of "angel" and "rascal" (soon to become "demon") which she would become increasingly unable to reconcile, fuelling the tension within her that she couldn't live without him but she couldn't live with him. Consequently, when John was two-and-a-half years old, she sent him to live more or less permanently with his nanny.<sup>5</sup>

While Coleman's actions might easily inspire us to condemn her as a "bad" mother,<sup>6</sup> I believe a careful consideration of her situation allows us to appreciate her as the modernist figure she was: a woman who was brave enough, even selfish enough, to challenge what was expected of her as an intellectual and artistic female who was also a mother in the early twentieth century, a woman who refused to define herself according to her child and yet who loved him deeply. She wrote endlessly about him in her diary, and kept in constant touch through letters and periodic visits so that a mother-son bond developed in alternate modes of expectation. She takes her place beside other modernist mothers of her day and beside the mothers and scholars of our day who struggle to define and redefine what it means to mother, to be a mother, in ways that challenge long-held assumptions, taboos, abilities, and desires.

In the fall of 1925 the Colemans moved to New York where Emily began to pour her mental energies into poetry. Desperate to join the exodus of Americans to Europe, where she was sure her talent as well as her health would bloom, Emily set sail for Paris in October, 1926, taking her son but leaving her husband to wave them off at the pier—Deak encouraged her to pursue her literary dreams, but because her post-partum illness had exacted such a tremendous price on their finances he had to remain in the United States to work (he would join them a year later). Her creative spirit flourished in Paris: she took courses at the Sorbonne; published short stories and poems in the innovative journal *transition*; completed and secured a publisher for her novel *The Shutter of Snow*; and landed a job writing society articles for the Paris edition

of the *Chicago Tribune*.

These accomplishments were made possible by Coleman's reliance on child-care for John. After settling into a pension on the trendy Boulevard du Montparnasse, she hired a French "nurse" for him: "We are getting along very well with the new nurse, but I don't dare hope too much. I only pray it goes well enough for me to go to my classes this week."<sup>7</sup> Coleman's tone suggests that she was feeling anxious about her freedom, and she grew increasingly aware of how being a mother and a single parent cut into her time for personal fulfillment. A letter written to her father two weeks later reveals that her fears were justified. She explains how she had to "dismiss" the nurse because "John was a demon with her," and that although she would be taking courses she was not trying to earn a degree from the Sorbonne because "it's too nerve-making, with the responsibility of John with me all the time."<sup>8</sup> In this same letter, though, she happily announced that she had hired a new governess, Madame Donn, the woman who would within a short time become John's second mother.<sup>9</sup>

Nina Donn was a Russian exile, as was her husband who had been in the Russian cavalry and who now worked in a factory; their two young children were Olga and Rostislaw (Rostik).<sup>10</sup> Coleman described Nina accordingly: "The new governess took hold with a practised hand, and from the first day there has not been the slightest difficulty. She has been governess for two other American children, has two of her own besides, and understands the child mind perfectly. She is scientific, modern, sensible, intelligent and devoted. I have not the slightest fault to find with her. John is mad about her and can hardly wait for one-thirty to come" (she worked from 1:30-6:30 Monday through Friday). Coleman added: "Directly lunch is over the governess arrives and I give him thankfully into her hands and make for the great outdoors."<sup>11</sup> Coleman's evocation of "the great outdoors" perfectly conveys her vast sense of release, of escape, from mothering. She was in fact finding it harder and harder to tolerate John's behaviour. She had previously told her father that the residents at her house "like us well enough now to put up with John's idiosyncrasies,"<sup>12</sup> and she later wrote: "I doubt if there is another place in Paris where they would put up with him. He threw his horse through the window Saturday." As a result of his actions she had to pay emotionally as well as financially "every week for this Terror."<sup>13</sup>

If John was a "Terror" and "demon," though, Coleman must have been an equally frightening spectre to her son, for she frequently hit him. In a 1936 diary entry, she recorded: "I got very mad with Johnny because he not only wouldn't obey me but was saucy besides, and peevish, and I walloped him hard, after taking him upstairs—I got so mad I lost control of myself." Recognizing that "[v]iolence is wrong for me, come what may, because it is my terrible weakness," she registered the impact of her actions: "Utterly ruined our relation for a couple of days. I explained it to him, and he saw my reasons, but kept away from me (inside) and made me feel sick." She further recalled: "When he was little and used to drive me frantic I resorted to hitting him—it never worked and it made

me ill and him callous. Madame Donn has changed all that."<sup>14</sup> Given Coleman's nature, we can understand more fully her relief upon hiring Donn: "what a MARVELLOUS governess I have for him. She is worth her weight in gold seven times over. She has just my ideas on how to handle John—only she has the patience [and] endurance to carry them out!"<sup>15</sup> As Emily grew increasingly familiar with the Donns, she came to view them, especially Madame Donn, as a safeguard against her violent nature which she feared would drive her son away—"God, how can I risk hurting his love for me, or his trust in me?"<sup>16</sup>

As the relationship with the Donns strengthened, Deak joined his family in Paris in September, 1927. The family would not be reunited for long: he was unemployed and they remained in economic trouble, so when he was offered a coveted job in advertising with the J. Walter Thompson Company in London in March, 1928, he had no choice but to accept it. Emily was at the time involved in a law suit she had filed against her employer, the *Tribune*, which had fired her "for insisting upon extra money for double work," but she hoped to join him as soon as it was settled.<sup>17</sup> Their son, however, was not included in these plans. Some time between Deak arriving in Paris and departing for London, a deal had been struck that would shatter familial expectation and design: in exchange for much-needed financial assistance, the Donns agreed to have John live with them full-time in their crowded flat in Ivry, a suburb of Paris. Emily gained from the arrangement her freedom to pursue her burgeoning literary career, as well as the conviction that her son was happier, safer, and thus better off with Madame Donn. For this Coleman deserves the credit of recognizing that her abusive tendencies placed her son in potential physical and psychological danger, and she forsook him to protect him. Indeed, one of the reasons Emily was so eager for Deak to take the London job was that the money would allow them to "keep John with his governess"—"We shall not consider for a moment taking him away from Madame Donn." Emily was not embarrassed to confront her limitations where her son was concerned, as she acknowledged that the Donns "are such delightful, fine people—I can never get used to believing in the luck I had when I found her. John is a changed human being. I see a great deal of him, now that I don't have a job, and get along beautifully with him. My trouble is that I can't keep it up—we are too much alike and I am not fit for the job anyway—and after a day or so I am pretty well exhausted, even if he has been good."<sup>18</sup>

Unable to find work in London with Deak, and concerned that her health was suffering from European winters, Coleman jumped at the chance to move to St. Tropez that June where she served as secretary to Russian revolutionary Emma Goldman.<sup>19</sup> Though Coleman was reluctant to move away from John, she reiterated to her father that it was for her son's sake that she was leaving him with the Donns: "John would have lost all that he has gained this last year. (For he is so different since he has been with her)."<sup>20</sup> John and the Donn family vacationed with his mother in St. Tropez that summer, and he went alone to see her the following spring—Coleman had a friend bring him from Paris on

the train. It was this visit that would crystallize for Coleman her lack of ability and desire to be a traditional mother, as she analyzed with profound self-awareness to her husband: “this will be a rush note because your son is horrible he is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen and the most original but honestly dearest I cannot go through with it. I always thought that if only I could get him alone and he behaved and I had the patience all would be well with our relationship, but all these things are so now, and we get along swell [. . .] and yet I never felt so absolutely unfitted for anything in my life, and I am wondering how long it can go on.” She had no choice but to conclude: “No use, these last months have finished me for motherhood—I might as well let the sentimental and rosy dreams go by the board and face the fact that the deeper my writing goes the farther behind I leave what is behind.” She continued: “I have still clung to the idea that sooner or later I was going to take him away from Madame Donn, that I could not be without him, etc. These things are not true. I can’t be WITH him. I love the idea of him—I cannot even look at that face without kissing it—but when it comes to giving stretches of time to him I just CANNOT keep my mind on it.” In a dashing blow to feminine stereotypes she affirmed: “i [sic] have been throwing things overboard in my usual ruthless fashion. now [sic] it is the maternal instinct.” Coleman feared the consequences that such “instinct” might wreak on her quest for autonomy: “I can’t put myself in a mood to even think of poetry or considering the causes and effects of life, because the minute I do John begins to get on my nerves again. I cannot be poet and mother at the same time.”<sup>21</sup> She would repeat this sentiment in her diary with the lament, “there has not been a good woman poet who had had a child.”<sup>22</sup>

Coleman may have felt “unfitted for” and “finished” with mothering, but in this she was responding to traditional notions of parenting. She did not abandon her son, but rather went on to prove that there is more than one way to raise a child. In *Redefining Motherhood*, Sharon Abbey and Andrea O’Reilly (1998) feature authors who “move beyond the myths and stereotypes of mothering to explore differences among women and within individual women in order to challenge the existence of a universal meaning of motherhood and the notion of a fixed and stable maternal identity” (1998: 14), and we can comfortably place Coleman within such a community of revisionists. Just as Abbey and O’Reilly state that “Mothers are never only mothers” (1998: 14), Coleman refused to privilege her identity as mother over her other identities as writer, lover, friend, and so on. Further, a brief look at representations of and expectations for mothers throughout western history allows us to appreciate that however unconventional or controversial Coleman’s mothering may have seemed to her early twentieth-century culture—as well as to ours today—it had much in common with practices widely promoted and accepted centuries before.

In particular, Coleman’s acknowledgement that she had thrown “maternal instinct” “overboard” leads us to feminist scholar Elisabeth Badinter, who provocatively shows that such an instinct is a misnomer. In the Foreword to

Badinter's *The Myth of Motherhood*, Francine du Plessix Gray summarizes how Badinter "has set out to prove that maternal love is not linked to any immutable female nature; that its manifestations have been too varied throughout history to merit the term 'instinct'; that it is, instead, a socially conditioned 'sentiment' that varies widely with the mores of different epochs; and that, like all human sentiments, it can prove to be frail, fluctuating, and aberrant" (1981: x). Perhaps the most "aberrant" sign of Coleman's maternal (mis)behaviour is her giving her son to the Donns, but Badinter provides a startlingly useful context for understanding both Coleman's and the Donns' actions. Focussing on mothering in France—Susan C. Greenfield and Carol Barash (1999) make similar claims for practices in Great Britain and the United States in *Inventing Maternity*—Badinter shows that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, children from the bourgeois and aristocratic classes experienced "three acts of abandonment": as babies they were cared for by wet nurses; as toddlers they were brought home but cared for by governesses or tutors; and as teens they were sent to convents or boarding schools (1981: 91). She contends that these "phases of child rearing" were predicated on "finding a way 'to get rid of the children and still hold one's head high'" (1981: 108), asserting that "there was no doubt a complicity between father and mother, husband and wife, to adopt the forms of behavior that prevailed" (1981: 110). Just as it was Emily and not Deak who worried whether she was "fit" for the job of parenting, so Badinter contends: "we are less shocked by the male's behavior because no one has ever, even up to the present day, claimed that a father's love constitutes a universal law of nature." For this reason, then, the "wisest and most necessary course would be to resign ourselves to the varying qualities of mother love as well, recognizing that the so-called laws of nature defy easy categorization" (1981: 110), and it is in this light that we must illuminate Coleman's own mothering practices.

If parenting customs held to the course established in the past as we have seen, then we would have little reason for examining Emily Coleman as a mother who radically challenged convention. Her desire for intellectual and creative freedom, her needs as a social and sexual being, and her admissions that mothering could bore her all reflect the norms rather than the deviations of a culture.<sup>23</sup> However, by the end of the eighteenth century, the "image of the mother, of her role, and of her significance changed radically," such that mother love was elevated "to a natural and social good, favorable to the species and to society." A dramatic cultural shift took place in which "women were told to be mothers first and foremost, engendering a myth that is still tenaciously supported two hundred years later: maternal instinct, or the spontaneous love of all mothers for their children" (Badinter, 1981: 117). It was thus during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that this "new mother"—mainly middle-class<sup>24</sup>—gathered her family around her "interior" universe of hearth and home, becoming the "domestic monarch" (Badinter, 1981: 189) or "angel in the house."<sup>25</sup> As Badinter concludes, "Trapped in the role of mother, women

would no longer be able to escape it without inviting moral condemnation” (1981: 206-7). From the nineteenth century on, “anathemas were hurled at bad mothers” (1981: 237). Among the wicked women identified by Badinter, the “selfish mother” and the “working mother” are the two categories most directly applicable to Coleman. The former “loves her child a little, but not to the point of sacrificing herself for him” (Badinter, 1981: 242) while the latter, who either had to work out of economic necessity or who chose employment and or “higher education” for its own sake, was to be feared for the damage she wrought to marriage and children (Badinter, 1981: 244-45).

If the early twentieth century perpetuated a prison of conformity, subservience, and guilt in which women were forced to live out their terms of motherhood, it simultaneously provided a release as women threw off these shackles and embraced the spirit of modernism and its attendant mandate to “make it new”—not only in artistic ways but also in social and cultural practices, including mothering. Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers rightly argue that “Modernism, for its women, was not just a question of style; it was a way of life” (1987: 11); “What is most striking, both in itself and in relation to their writing, is the shared anti-conventionality of the personal lives of these women at a time when the overwhelming social expectation was that a woman should marry, bear children, and remain both married and monogamous” (1987: 12). Though not included in their study, Coleman was just such a modernist.

Literary modernism welcomed challenges to traditional narrative theme or content. Tess Cosslett shows us that within literature the subject of childbirth “as seen from the mother’s perspective” dates back only to the 1930s (1994: 1). In a related sense, Coleman’s novel *The Shutter of Snow*, published in 1930, was groundbreaking as it shattered taboos with its depiction of post-partum depression.<sup>26</sup> This autobiographical work features Coleman’s persona, Marthe Gail, struggling to regain her identity following the birth of her child. Convinced that she is none other than Jesus Christ—“This time its [sic] a woman” (Coleman, 1997: 10)—Marthe is deemed crazy and unfit to mother. The novel suggests that the woman who revels in the glories of her reproductive body threatens the traditional, patriarchal order and must be removed from society. Her husband tells her that she will be released only when she rids herself of her “delusional” power and behaves like a “Dear little girl” (1997: 27). In this provocative text, Coleman takes us on a very graphic tour of a mental institution, where women are routinely locked up and tied down, to show that the agonies of birthing are real and can have a lasting, debilitating impact on a woman’s body and mind; and she offers a dramatic reworking and subverting of the Judeo-Christian religions in order to recoup for women their own unacknowledged creative, maternal powers. Refusing to let the trauma she suffered during parturition control her, she invests that trauma with social, political, and even religious meaning as she translates the agony into art. Lois Rubin notes: “Traditionally, motherhood has been considered an impediment to artistic creation, the two roles thought to be incompatible” (1997: 19), a point

Coleman understood perfectly, hence her complaint, noted earlier: "I cannot be poet and mother at the same time." And yet, in and through *The Shutter of Snow* she was able to harness the emotions attendant on mothering and thus found motherhood not an "impediment to" but rather a stimulus for artistic creation.<sup>27</sup>

Coleman lived as well as wrote her modernism. Like so many women of her day, she revelled in the social and sexual freedoms permitted to expatriates within the salons, cafes, coteries, and bohemian sub-cultures which flourished within and around the cities of Europe. Though her father complained about his daughter and son-in-law's separate living arrangements, she penned a response that drives home her radical perspective: "I do not agree with you that any two people *ought* to live together"; and she warned, "You will just have to get used to one idea, darling, and that is that our life will never run along the lines of the conventional married folk..."<sup>28</sup> Not only did Emily and Deak spend much of their married life apart, but also they engaged in extra-marital affairs which they seemed to take as a matter of course.<sup>29</sup> When Deak finally fell in love with another woman Emily was relieved, and they divorced officially, on friendly terms, on 17 May 1932.<sup>30</sup> It is important to emphasize that there was never any question of Deak raising his son, and even after Deak remarried John's relations with him were relegated, as they were with his mother, to periodic visits. But because we are, as Badinter states, "less shocked by the male's behavior" (110), it was left to Emily alone to don the cap of the "bad" parent who walked away from her son. She followed in the infamous footsteps of her fictional counterparts Nora Helmer (in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* [1980]) and Edna Pontellier (in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* [2003]) who turned their backs on their respective husbands and children,<sup>31</sup> and she fell in stride beside a group of women we might call the "bad" mothers of modernism such as Rebecca West, Hilda Doolittle, Mina Loy, Mary Butts, and Antonia White, who oftentimes privileged themselves over their offspring.<sup>32</sup>

In her study of Australian women circa the 1950s who leave their children, Petra Büskens asserts that when women leave their husbands they rarely also leave their children behind, because the "stigmatisation is simply too great" (2002: 34), and she goes on to pose the controlling questions of her research: "what happens to motherhood when it occurs outside the conventional nuclear or single-parent family? What happens to a mother who has left home?" (2002: 34). Büskens suggests that such women offer a "potent and challenging instance" of "subversion and reinvention" of traditional mothering (2002: 34). She studied 15 such women, but focussed on the story of one, Lilith, whose actions lead her to conclude that Lilith "*did not leave her children, rather she left the hegemonic institution of mothering* which dictates that women relinquish their autonomy for the sake of familial others" (2002: 43, emphasis in original). She further notes that of the women studied, "every woman has returned to mothering some or all of her children" in different ways, which "suggests that 'leaving' is, rather, a *strategic process of withdrawal on the mother's behalf geared to disrupt and reorganize the terms on which conventional parenting is organized*"



(2002: 43, emphasis in original).<sup>33</sup> Emily certainly “withdrew” physically and even psychologically from her son’s life for stretches of time, but she also “reorganized” the traditional family by providing her son with an additional or alternate set of parents, the Donns (as well as an instant set of “siblings”—Olga and Rostik), who would fill in for her during her absences. Moreover, she parented from a distance via an extensive correspondence with Madame Donn, with Deak, and with John himself, underscoring how she “subverted” and “reinvented” traditional concepts of mothering.<sup>34</sup>

Büskens’s (2002) study is of further relevance for its discussion of sexuality and mothering. In exploring the issue of extra-marital relations enjoyed by her subject Lilith, Büskens confronts the notion that “heterosexual monogamy” is culturally inscribed “in the term mother,” as is our “intuitive, albeit ideological, sense that a good mother doesn’t ‘fuck around’”: “In western societies, we are structured by a dominant belief system promulgating an equation between maternity and selfless (or is that sexless?), devotion” (2002: 35). Shari Benstock defines women’s modernist challenges in sexual terms as well. Of the many Americans who fled the conservatism of their homeland for France, she asserts: “For these women the flight to freedom often meant a flight from the implicit expectation of marriage and motherhood,” and in this liberated spirit “[h]eterosexual and homosexual expatriates ... discovered sexualized writing identities in expatriation—and in doing so they changed the history of modern women’s writing, charting the terrain of female sexuality from female perspectives” (1989: 28). Coleman certainly resisted the “implicit expectation” that because she was married with a child she had to remain married and monogamous. Embarking on a series of love-affairs both during and after her marriage, she refused to deny her sexual desires; instead, she wrote about them openly and often passionately on a near-daily basis in her diary, thus living as well as writing through her sense of self as a “sexualized being.” Like many of her modernist colleagues, she did not draw a line between her sexual and maternal selves.

Coleman recorded in her diary that if her “American Puritan” father knew she was having sexual relations out of wedlock, “He would kill himself.” Her diary reveals how he influenced her as a young woman to view sex repressively: “I remember how I went to him, when I had first known Deak, and said, ‘What’s this? What you’ve taught me about life isn’t true,’ and he was furiously angry and said, ‘Any young man that talks to a woman about sex before he marries her is a cad,’ and got so excited that I could tell him nothing more. I half believed him then, I was afraid it was so, and I could not resist him, as I could now, with consciousness of right behind me.”<sup>35</sup> As a “daughter” she played the conventional roles expected of or prescribed for her. In contrast, as a mother she freely, unabashedly immersed her son in her unconventional world, taking him around town with her when she went out with her various lovers, and being as open and honest with him about herself and life as possible.

This modernist stance is further evidenced in the playful way she approached the subject of sexuality in her relationship with John. On vacation

with her then 12-year-old son, she recorded: "We have the same room (necessity) and are extremely modest, but he screams and shouts if I open the door and shrieks—"Go 'way, or I'll kick you in the cock!" Coleman retaliated: "I went to bed the same time he did the other night, and he undressed in the bathroom. When he came in I was in bed but I screamed, 'Go 'way! Go 'way! Or I'll kick you in the cock.'" This brought him to tears of mirth.<sup>36</sup> Coleman refused to apply the puritanical restraints of her own upbringing to her son, allowing him to appreciate that sex and sexuality are inevitable and healthy components of life and self. As a mother who challenged conventional mothering, she did not want her son to be "afraid" of sexuality, as she had been with her father; and she determined that the "consciousness of right" regarding sexual knowledge and practice, which took her so long to acquire, would be instilled in him from an early age.

Coleman wanted to show respect for her son as an independent, intelligent being, and to this end she more often than not regarded him as a potential equal. It is especially important to note that even within her circle of largely unconventional friends and lovers, Coleman was criticized for being *too* extreme in her rejection of convention, as was the case with her good friend Peggy Guggenheim: "Peggy said it was dreadful because I told Johnny to behave one way in front of people and another when we were alone. But he understands this. I said living in England I had to make some (outward) concessions to what English people think about children, which I don't believe in. I have this understanding with Johnny. I don't care if he insults me when alone, if it's not insolent. Peggy thinks this is shocking."<sup>37</sup> Coleman often asked for friendly rather than filial devotion from her son, a point illuminated in her statements: "He's very companionable," and "he and I are so happy together, so lovable in comradeship."<sup>38</sup> More profoundly, her dismantling of a traditional mother-son hierarchy is made manifest in her report, "He is delighted with me when I drop the mother."<sup>39</sup> For his part, he seems never to have picked up the "mother," for he called her by her nickname Mimi.

Coleman often positioned herself as a mentor rather than as a parent to her son, and in this capacity she strove to develop his intellect and instil in him an appreciation for and talent in the arts. For instance, believing he was gifted she encouraged him to draw and paint;<sup>40</sup> and she frequently took him to the ballet and to the art galleries and concert halls when they were together in London or Paris. Because the life of the mind was more important to her than anything—or anyone—she was not able to be a good mother to her infant son: "I did not love him when he was aged 2-7 years, that awful period." But she felt certain: "we shall get more and more intimate as we get older."<sup>41</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the tension that informed her earlier response to him—"i cannot bear to be away from him yet i cannot live with him, yet i miss him so strongly [sic]" intensified as he grew older and became increasingly interesting to her.<sup>42</sup>

When John was eight years old—just past "that awful period"—not only did Coleman come to want him more and more but she became jealous of

Madame Donn.<sup>43</sup> During a visit with him in Paris in December, 1932, she registered a desire to lay a stronger claim on him: “I almost decided to take him to school in England.” However, Guggenheim’s lover, John Holms, “talked me out of it because I haven’t a proper place to keep him in, said I would communicate my tense state of mind, etc., and he wd. not be in normal conditions.”<sup>44</sup> This reference to her “tense state of mind” suggests the long-term impact of her post-partum illness, as well as her penchant to lose control and hit him when he got on her nerves, all of which accounted for her believing John to be better off with the Donns. Four years after this trip to Paris, she recalled in April, 1936, the conversation with Holms referred to above. Inspired by a letter she had just received from her son, she penned a lengthy diary entry about her confused feelings:

When I got the letter I put it away quickly, not thinking about it, as I do whenever he seems extraordinary, a letter or a painting. I feel he can’t belong to me—that I can’t have him. I wish he lived with me, so that I saw him every day—just to see him for an hour or two—I don’t like to think about it—his being away from me these years—I don’t know him—and can’t know him, like this—if he lived with me and went to school I could do all the writing I wanted—I want him with me. When he’s not with me I get used to it, and fill my life, which is so full; but I would rather it were filled more with him—it is a question of money and of his being happy—as John [Holms] said years ago when I tried to bring him to England, he should not be alone with me when he is this age—he’s queer enough and I would make him queerer. He is used to France, and Madame Donn, and she is wonderful for him—a normal home atmosphere.... It would be like taking the pins from under him to put him here in a school. Even if I had the money I might hesitate. Will wait and see what he is like when he is older ... I don’t want to give him any new problems; but let him grow. He’s adjusted to life beyond his years already.<sup>45</sup>

Coleman articulated her conviction that the arrangement with the Donns was predicated on her desire to do what she felt was in her son’s best interests. Though she frequently confessed throughout her diary that “I don’t really care about anything but myself,”<sup>46</sup> she equally emphasized how much she loved her child and how torn and miserable she was about her decision to live apart from him. We can perhaps better understand this dichotomy by recalling what Büskens concluded of her subject Lilith: she “*did not leave her children, rather she left the hegemonic institution of mothering*” (2002: 43). It is precisely because she did not leave him in heart that she asserted: “he remains here, the one true thing in my life.”<sup>47</sup>

Coleman also wrote of herself and her son, “[w]e’ll touch, like spirits,” reinforcing how she revised the notion that parenting takes place only on a

physical plane.<sup>48</sup> In this, she seemed remarkably prescient, for within less than a decade she would return to the United States and quite literally renounce her worldly ways by dramatically converting to Catholicism. Even more astonishing is the fact that John would follow her not only back to his native country but into her new faith as well.

Coleman had sailed to Connecticut to visit her father in October, 1937; reluctant to return to Europe because of threats of war, she stayed on, eventually settling in Arizona with her new lover, ranch-hand Jake Scarborough. Her relations with her son continued in their usual pattern: he made trips from Europe for several weeks and even months at a time between 1938-1940 to visit with her.<sup>49</sup> In the fall of 1940, John decided to take up residence in New York after enrolling at Columbia, though he quit before earning a degree. He was rejected for the military because he was "unfit nervously for the strain of battle,"<sup>50</sup> and supported himself through a series of odd jobs—i.e., news agent, journalist, secretary, book editor.<sup>51</sup> When his mother renounced her affair with Scarborough and entered the Catholic Church in 1943, John was all too eager to embrace her faith (and his mother) in a new life together. In 1944, for instance, Coleman spent several months in New York, writing to her friend Antonia White: "I go to communion daily, with Johnny"; and "I see Johnny all the time. I live opposite him."<sup>52</sup> The following year she updated White about her involvement with her son: "You have no idea what Church has done for our relationship—At one time we could hardly get on at all—he picked on me and I was tactless with him. We have always been quite mad about each other, but now we are beginning to be able truly to enjoy each other."<sup>53</sup>

In 1945, John wrote a lengthy letter to Guggenheim, in response to her concerns about his mother's extraordinary change in behaviour. His language and tone underscore the degree to which he and Coleman had by his early adulthood achieved a strikingly intense intellectual and spiritual union.<sup>54</sup> He wanted to tell Guggenheim "a little about the change that's come over Mimi and myself": "It's simple: a little less than two years ago Mimi and I became Christians. This means we've formally *given up* and have ever since been trying to give up, our allegiance to the world, and to shift it to God." He qualified: "though Mimi's and my spiritual development have followed widely different roads, it's possible to a considerable degree for me to speak in the name of us both." Throughout the letter he consistently referred to himself and his mother as "we," and summarized: "I am recapitulating what Mimi and I believe," thus writing as if their two selves had become one.

Of particular note is his sense of having "received the grace of conversion" at the moment when he "was beginning to do what *so many moderns do*, which is spend a life in adoring and giving honor to" oneself (emphasis mine). This statement could be a criticism of his mother; however, his widow, Marie-Claire Coleman, informed me that John maintained that although he felt emotional pain at the time, he believed that Emily had been right to have left him with the Donns, and that he came to respect her for doing so because he recognized

that she needed artistic freedom.<sup>55</sup> John clearly came to respect his mother's spiritual choices as well, for he adopted them as his own. In the letter to Guggenheim he went on to credit Coleman for her strength of character: "And now she is straining every fiber in her body (and I who know can tell you this is not an exaggeration) to living as good a life as she possibly can—not, as you probably understand, by being good-goody and thrumming a harp in the mystically inspiring dimness of churches, but by heroic acts of self-sacrifice and love...." Büskens, we should remember, affirmed that of the subjects she interviewed, "every woman has returned to mothering some or all of her children" in different ways (2002: 43). We can read Coleman's conversion in this still unconventional spirit: ironically invoking and reworking traditional images of Madonna and Child, she "returned" to the role of the "self-sacrificing" mother not as the Virgin Mary cradling an infant but as Mary Magdalene walking side by side with her grown up son; she became, moreover, an "angel in the house" but it was not a husband but God whom she served within, and only because she chose to.

Corresponding with White, Coleman explained that she was inspired to convert after reading the Bible, for "terrible conflicts were shedding from me.... The conflict between artist and the good life, between artist and woman, has nearly killed me."<sup>56</sup> To this we might add the conflict between artist, woman, and *mother*. In embracing the Catholic Church, Coleman found new ways to repair her fractured selfhoods. Self-love and son-love fused as mother and child achieved a new level of equality within the context of their shared religion. They spent the rest of their lives working for God together, experiencing yet another radical mother-son dynamic. John had affirmed to Guggenheim not only that his mother was engaging in "heroic acts of self-sacrifice" but also that "God loves a man who tries"; Coleman was a woman who tried to do her best as a mother, and in the process she has helped us to appreciate that trying to redesign the institution of mothering is in itself an "heroic act."

<sup>1</sup>Letter from Emily Holmes Coleman to John Milton Holmes, Box 134, F. 1595, January 8, 1924. The Emily Holmes Coleman Papers are housed at the University of Delaware Library, Special Collections. All quotations from letters and diaries are from this collection, and will be cited according to Box and File number (F.), date, and page number(s) where given. I have preserved Coleman's grammatical and spelling errors (indicated with [sic]) except in the case of contractions: she almost always wrote these without the apostrophes and to insert [sic] at every point would make reading the quotations arduous. I am most grateful to Joseph Geraci, Executor of Coleman's Estate, for his ongoing support of my research and for giving me permission to quote from the archive.

<sup>2</sup>Box 77, F. 630, October 9, 1932, 48.

<sup>3</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, March 20, 1924.

<sup>4</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, April, 1924.

<sup>5</sup>Coleman's mother, Lucy Adams Coaney, was sent when Coleman was a child to a nursing home to be treated for what Coleman referred to as "insanity"; she spent the rest of her life there, dying when her daughter was 19. Coleman and her two brothers were cared for by a "nurse" in their early years, and were eventually sent to various boarding schools (Coleman, "The Story of My Childhood," Box 119, F. 1075). Her father, John Milton Holmes, sold insurance and was often away from the family home in Wyoming, New Jersey, on business. Throughout her childhood, Coleman had almost no contact with her mother, and her father, who received a promotion and was sent to Hartford, Connecticut, chose to parent her from a distance. I believe it was Coleman's fear that she had inherited her mother's temperament, coupled with the precedent of absence set by her father, that would inform Coleman's decision to live apart from her own child.

<sup>6</sup>I use the term in the ironic sense suggested by Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky in their aptly titled *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*. They contend, for instance, that the group of mothers to whom the pejorative label is most frequently applied is "those who did not live in a 'traditional' nuclear family" (1998: 3).

<sup>7</sup>Letter from Emily Coleman to John Holmes, Box 134, F. 1595, November 29, 1926.

<sup>8</sup>Coleman had graduated from Wellesley College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1920.

<sup>9</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, December 14, 1926. While my focus here is on Coleman as a woman who challenged assumptions about mothering, it is crucial to emphasize that there are two modernist mothers in this feminist story, Madame Donn being the other one. In taking on the responsibility of caring for, raising, and loving another woman's son, she also asks us to rethink what it means to mother. I cannot, however, in this limited space do justice to her equally compelling biography.

<sup>10</sup>Rostik was born in 1919; Olga in 1917.

<sup>11</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, January 3, 1927.

<sup>12</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, December 14, 1926.

<sup>13</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, February 14, 1927.

<sup>14</sup>Box 78, F. 636, April 13, 1936, 208-210.

<sup>15</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, February 14, 1927.

<sup>16</sup>Box 78, F. 636, April 15, 1936, 211. Note that Coleman spoke French with the Donns, who knew no English; they would raise John to be fluent in both French and Russian.

<sup>17</sup>Coleman won the suit, but did not want to continue working at the paper. Emily Coleman to John Holmes, Box 134, F. 1595, May 11, 1928.

<sup>18</sup>Emily Coleman to John Holmes, Box 134, F. 1595, March 3, 1928.

<sup>19</sup>In exchange for room and board, Coleman would help Goldman edit her dense autobiography, eventually published as *My Life*.

<sup>20</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, May 28, 1928.

<sup>21</sup>Emily Coleman to Deak Coleman, Box 10, F. 100, April 20, 1929.

<sup>22</sup>Box 77, F. 626, January 27, 1930, 315.

<sup>23</sup>Madame Donn can be viewed as performing the various roles of wet nurse, governess/tutor, and convent/boarding school matron.

<sup>24</sup>The middle-class women “saw in this new role the opportunity for an increase in social status and an emancipation that the aristocratic woman was not seeking”; while the lower class women continued to send their children away because they needed to work to survive (Badinter, 1981: 189-90).

<sup>25</sup>Coventry Patmore established the term as ideology for Victorian culture in his poem “The Angel in the House,” leaving feminists and modernists alike a debilitating legacy. As Virginia Woolf profoundly articulated, “I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her.... I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily” (2003: 1987). Woolf concludes: “Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (2003: 1988).

<sup>26</sup>Coleman’s work contains many echoes and allusions to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s even earlier story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), also about a woman’s post-partum breakdown and confinement. For example, Coleman’s protagonist Marthe is described as “saying things with a pencil on a small piece of *yellow paper*” (emphasis mine) (Gilman, 1985: 12).

<sup>27</sup>Though lack of time here precludes analysis, it is important to note that in 1930 Coleman wrote a series of sonnets to her son, earnestly trying to overturn her conviction, “there has not been a good woman poet who had had a child” (Box 77, F. 626, January 27, 1930, 315). Consider these lines, for example, from # 38, “To My Son”:

“The hour I felt you leap in my cold womb—  
Life I had made, now active, now alert  
To push its pattern through, to do me hurt  
Even to the end, when passing from the gloom  
Within my walls it burst into the light—  
That hour was sacred in my almanac.” (F. 1465)

<sup>28</sup>Box 134, F. 1595, May 28, 1928.

<sup>29</sup>Coleman recorded in her diary that Deak told her not to worry about the fact that she didn’t desire him sexually: “He said, ‘But you are so interesting.... I can get sex other places’” (Box 77, F. 626, December 24, 1929).

<sup>30</sup>Emily officially left her husband at the start of 1931. He had been transferred from London to Antwerp in 1929, and although she had visited him frequently she had never moved there.

<sup>31</sup>Note the remarkable echo in the women's attitude towards themselves as mothers: Nora tells her husband, "I'm not fitted to educate [the children]" (99); Edna feels the role of mother is something "for which Fate had not fitted her" (25); and Coleman, as we have heard, affirmed, "I never felt so absolutely unfitted for anything in my life" (Box 10, F. 100, April 20, 1929).

<sup>32</sup>See Anthony West's autobiographical novel *Heritage* (1984a) or his *H.G. Wells: Aspects of a Life* (1984b), for hostile accounts of his mother, Rebecca West; Antonia White was implicated by her daughter Susan Chitty, whose memoir *Now to my Mother* (185) takes for its epigraph Hamlet's famous lines: "Soft! Now to my mother. I will speak daggers to her, but use none." See Hanscombe and Smyers (1987) for brief accounts of Mina Loy, H.D., and others.

<sup>33</sup>Büskens (2002) states that the women's strategies were aimed at involving their husbands more directly in parenting. While Coleman cannot be said to have given John to the Donns in order to engage Deak, she certainly aimed to "disrupt and reorganize the terms on which conventional parenting is organized."

<sup>34</sup>Coleman wrote in her diary: "I had a card from Deak, about Johnny. It seems so absolutely wrong, writing back and forth about a child. We should be together, with the child. I know this, but two wrongs (marrying Deak, and staying with him) do not make one right" (Box 78, F. 632, June 21, 1934). Deak was eventually transferred to Australia, where he and new wife Louise lived for many years. They had no interest in having children.

<sup>35</sup>Box 77, F. 629, August 30, 93-94.

<sup>36</sup>Coleman Diary, Box 79, F 639, Saturday [September 18], 1937, 45.

<sup>37</sup>Coleman Diary, Box 78, F. 633, July 29, 1934, 76-77. Guggenheim's comments are ironic given that she too epitomized anti-conventionality: divorced from her husband Laurence Vail, she maintained custody of their daughter Pegeen while he took their son, Sindbad. Guggenheim lived for years with her lover John Holms out of wedlock.

<sup>38</sup>Coleman Diary, Box 78, F. 633, July 10, 1934, 21; Box 78, F. 636, April 13, 1936, 210.

<sup>39</sup>Coleman Diary, Box 79, F. 639, September 26, 1937.

<sup>40</sup>Coleman was so proud of John's work that she made it the subject of discussion among her adult friends like John Holms (Guggenheim's lover, not to be confused with Coleman's father, John Holmes), who is recorded thus: "he came and took the drawing and really spoke. He said there is not a doubt that if this talent continues he will be a painter. He said, 'Look at the life in that lion tamer—three lines.' There was a view through a tent where there were some acrobats. John said it was astonishing the way he got the acrobats, in so few lines, and the audience-tiers. He said, 'That child is very much aware of the life around him.' I said, 'Suppose his mother was'" (Box 77, F. 631, Dec. 1, 1930, 205). Here, as elsewhere in the diary, Coleman does not distinguish between her son as a child and artist but gives respect to his talent in and of itself.



<sup>41</sup>Coleman Diary, Box 78, F. 637, July 16, 1936.

<sup>42</sup>Coleman Diary, Box 77, F. 628, March 6, 1930.

<sup>43</sup>In conversation with friend Sonia Himmel she admitted: "We talked about our children, and I said how I am jealous of Madame Donn" (Box 77, F. 629, August 12, 1932, 22). Two months later, she wrote about her decision not to travel to Paris in October, 1932, to see her son: "I wrote Peggy honestly about my child, I never got it out before. The truth is, I don't want to see him now, because to see him I should have to be with Madame Donn, and I can't bear it. I want him entirely to myself, and in the best conditions. I prefer to wait until Christmas to see him. Even if his face comes before me fifty times a day, and his hair, I'll wait" (Box 77, F. 630, October 29, 1932, 102).

<sup>44</sup>Coleman Diary, Box 77, F. 631, December 17, 1932, 240. As noted earlier, Guggenheim's lover, John Holms, is not to be confused with Coleman's father, John Holmes.

<sup>45</sup>Box 78, F. 636, April 24, 1936, 241-42.

<sup>46</sup>Box 77, F. 629, September 6, 1932, 134-35.

<sup>47</sup>Coleman Diary, Box 78, F. 635, March 8, 1936, 129.

<sup>48</sup>Box 78, F. 635, January 16, 1936, 2.

<sup>49</sup>Coleman had written to her friend Antonia White on September 20, 1938, that she wanted John to stay on with her in Hartford and not return to Europe due to threats of war, but in writing to White on April 22, 1939, Coleman made reference to John, then 15, having returned to Paris because that is where he wanted to be. This and subsequent letters to White are in the private collection of White's daughter and son-in-law, Susan and Thomas Chitty. I am very grateful for their generous permission to view the archive at their home in Sussex, England, and to use the material in my research.

<sup>50</sup>Letter from Coleman to Antonia White, September 7, 1945.

<sup>51</sup>John would eventually make his living as a conference interpreter, translating to and from English, French, Russian, and Spanish.

<sup>52</sup>Coleman to White, May 20, 1944.

<sup>53</sup>Coleman to White, January 2, 1945.

<sup>54</sup>The letter to Guggenheim, dated March 4, 1945, was shown to me by John Coleman's widow, Marie-Claire Coleman, during an interview at her home in France on May 30, 1999. John Coleman died on April 25, 1990; his mother on June 13, 1974. I remain most grateful to Marie-Claire for opening up her home and her life with John to me during my visit.

<sup>55</sup>See note above; I have had only the one interview with Marie-Claire Coleman.

<sup>56</sup>Coleman to White, August 21, 1942.

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