

Delivering Mary

Mel Gibson's
The Passion of the Christ

IN *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*, Mel Gibson invents the character and behavior of Mary, the mother of Jesus. His imaginal depiction develops a “new” physiognomy for Christ’s birth mother; she becomes a fusion of myth and a new realism—a wondrous heartbreakingly human mother. I use the word “imaginal” not as “fancy, a fantastic invention created by the mind,” but more as an image we are born with, an archetype of the possible human capacity to reach incalculable limits.

It is through the figure of Mary (Maia Sternberg) that the audience is able to realize the poignancy of the human Christ, a figure who is generally perceived of as a divine being. She becomes the eyes and heart of the audience, so that through her, we see Jesus as child, young man, and most importantly, her son. He is no longer “simply” a personification of God; he is a man, who has a history with the woman who raised him, loved him, and struggled to make sense of her relationship with him. She knew, I think, he was meant for an “awakened” life, a life in search of metaphysical truths. As his mother, in Gibson’s vision, she is the audience’s gateway to see Jesus in his wholeness (holiness).

THIS ESSAY BEGAN AS A REFLECTION. I was looking for some meaning to my experience of the film. I realized that I can look deeply for meaning, invent it because I need to, or simply ignore the call to look. When cartographers mapped the known world, they would insert the words “*terra incognita*,” the unknown world, for what they hadn’t dis-

Opposite:
Käthe Kollwitz
(German, 1867–1945).
*Self-portrait with Hand
to Forehead*.
Etching, 1910. Harvard
Art Museum, Fogg Art
Museum. George R.
Nutter Fund, M10077.
Photography © Imaging
Department, President
and Fellows of Harvard
College.

covered, for the formidable, the mystery of the nameless: beyond anything they could name! That's how I have felt writing this piece—identifying the *terra incognita*.

There is a *terra incognita* of our being—what calls our lonely hearts to discover our source. When we begin the journey through that land of stone and blood, we have to trust both our belief and our terrorizing disbelief, or all we have been will be lost.

When I watched *The Passion*, that's what I realized about my relationships with my daughters—they are the latitude and longitude of my heart. When I look into their eyes, I see through them—through their love—to the wellspring of an immense, inarticulate Source—one that binds us in and beyond the love I “see.”

When I watched Mary in her relationship to Jesus, I “saw” my own uncertainty and disbelief, and the terrible price of that knowledge—one I didn't know if I could pay. With Jesus, I was able to recognize that someone consciously “knew” and willed himself to pay, and that knowledge shook me with shame. With Mary, I saw more personally a woman's devotion to her son and the instinct to protect and defend “the flesh of her flesh” dissolve as her knowledge of her God and her son's relationship to some higher order made her submit to his will, to his destiny. She could do nothing—in some ways, more hopeless and despairing than the victim's trials. She must live out her life reliving the tortures.

She was the one who had me sobbing uncontrollably as I considered my own relations to my children and how they remain “children” into adulthood. Their parallel lives, the child within the adult, inflict a double pain on me. Although I can sense the call—the “twinning” (more accurately, intuit because they don't always know exactly what it is they need and they don't know what to ask in the way of help), I know that they feel defenseless and vulnerable and in pain. I cannot answer the call to respond because I know there is nothing I can do (or as Samuel Beckett says in *Waiting for Godot*, “nothing to be done”). Only they can act on their own behalf, in their own sense of what is necessary. I must watch.

All the women I have spoken to about this painful situation have reiterated the same collective response: uncontrollable sobbing—*terra incognita*. I began to write this.

MARY, BY AND LARGE GIBSON'S CREATION, is intuitive, compassionate, fearless, and invariably silent. He characterized her as a woman with a distinct, devoted character, signaled by her eyes, gestures, intentions, and her silence.

Sternberg, as Mary, holds an indefatigable motherliness sustained superhumanly over the span of the film. Her astonishing si-

lence reveals an innate spiritual stoicism thinly disguising the tenderness and scarcely graspable depth of compassion that flashes across her face and in her gestures; but it is in her eyes that her two natures interpenetrate so thoroughly that she is the conduit to the divine for the audience. Sternberg's mastery of her body unveils a language no film director ever imagined for Mary's character before Gibson for her anguish and the accompanying impotence that is a mother's. She becomes the audience's access to Christ's suffering, to the violence and violations he is subjected to. Through her eyes, the audience perceives Jesus both as a babe and a man, a child and an adult, an innocent and guiltless, fated and choosing.

But Gibson's use of Mary as mother taps an unexpected resonance in the audience to Jesus, the historical man. She mirrors him, revealing a doubled suffering—as he is tortured, she suffers the dread and horror of the crimes committed against him; he greets his persecution and torment with the same silence she draws on. His silent anguish at the uprushes of violence one might call “adversaries of the soul.” She knows his responses; they are hers.

This is mother-love, this “twinning” of emotions, this the most moving and unforgettable experiences of our lives, the mysterious root of all human growth. As mother, she is creator and steward, one who maintains and sustains the life of her creation through love. Carl Jung says it as well as anyone when he says the mother-image “carries that inborn image of the *mater natura* and *mater spiritualis* of the totality of life of which we are a small and helpless part.”

Because of that role and the circumstances that evolve, Mary is the only reliable witness to the crucifixion—she is the bridge between knowing and unknowing, the known and the unknown, the loving and the unloving.

Mary, in Gibson's version, receives and remains actively receptive to the numinous, consciously enduring her son's agony and her own, as well as the savagery perpetrated against him. Simultaneously, she intuits the outcome and the dark abyss of power and destruction he must endure.

Through her moral and spiritual concentration on her son's visible destiny she is led to another world—one she recognizes to be an older, truer source—a divine destiny, inexplicable and unthinkable—one she is powerless to stop or even to ease.

She becomes an observer, heartbreakingly watching her son, the rabbi, subjected to the brutality and savagery of man's indissoluble hate, its blinding power, and mass delirium. As a woman and mother, she is powerless except as she can accompany him, be there, and accept, as he does, what his life needs, and what he perceives God re-

quires. Besides Jesus, she is alone in accepting Jesus' adversaries, his betrayers, his pain, and his journey toward death as necessary.

The disciples, the men, who had vowed to stay with him, protect him, if necessary with their lives, had scattered; fearful and terror-stricken, they had abandoned the very one who had given new meaning to their lives. His trial and its terrible injustice reached their core, "and they were sore afraid." Afraid for him, for their own lives, and for the lives of their families, they ran as "good" men often do when a single event has the capacity to freeze the marrow and crack open the mind—choking on its injustice and burning fear into their eyes.

MARY IS INTRODUCED when one of the disciples breaks through the door to her house and says, "They have seized him."

"It has begun," she responds more to herself than to him.

Her reaction indicates her knowledge of the future, that which has been ordained, his birth and his death, the beginning of the end. As a mother who knows her child and his history, his inclinations, she understands intuitively the events that will close the distance between being and meaning, between his life and his freely accepting his death, between fear and trust, between his destiny and his free will, and between his will and her acceptance of his will. And although she loves him deeper than her own life, she is also aware of his "other" life, one she cannot grasp wholly and one that lays beyond the realm of sense. Although helpless to alter events, she can identify the onset.

The phrase, "it has begun," is not in the Bible; in fact, the words she speaks are almost entirely fictionalized. But they are apt, according to what little is attributed to her in the Bible. More pointedly, Gibson depicts what a mother of such a man might experience and express at such a time. Again, Gibson gives voice to a woman who has been silent for two thousand years. Mary's role as mother becomes her voice in the film and invests that silence with meaning.

When Jesus is condemned by Caiaphus and taken to the dungeon beneath the temple floor, in a stroke of genius, Gibson has Mary enter the now-emptied room in the temple where Jesus had been tried. She seems to be searching for something, and even the audience is at a loss as to what she is doing. When she finally drops to the floor, fingering the stone tiles with her hands, she finds a place near the pillar where she freezes—she has found what she was looking for.

The camera takes us through the rough floor to the ceiling beneath where Jesus is chained and staring up, sensing his mother's presence as she senses his.

Their visions of the other give form and meaning to the word "Spirit." With acuity for the elusive frequencies of the human heart, Gibson gives these two characters "ears to hear, eyes to see," and souls

to sense the insensible. They feel the other's love—the spirit more sensible to them than the chains and stone that separate them, and as inescapable.

Gibson's Mary gives "voice" to the eons of accumulated memory and intelligible emotions of the archetypal mother when he inserts the following two scenes. The first is Jesus' flashback during the trial reseeing himself sanding a table he has constructed in the courtyard of his mother's house, and, as she assesses it, he humorously cajoles and hugs her and makes her laugh, she the beloved of her son.

In this scene, we are given a personal moment of a mother and son's intimacy and loving joy in one another's company. The penetration into a private world of the mythic Jesus is one that gives his humanness a relational history, albeit a fictional one, but one that would fit a pattern of a man who had been loved and loved well.

The second scene culminates the first as Mary, following the mob, attempts to get closer to Jesus as he carries the cross through the streets of Jerusalem. From an intersecting alley, she waits, watching for him until he drags the cross into view, then, as if fated, he stumbles and falls at that juncture, dropping the cross, and sprawling across the cobbled street. In that fall, Mary recalls in her flashback another time she saw Jesus fall.

Suddenly, the child Jesus, playing in that same open courtyard, falls, and she, frightened, turns, running to him to protect, soothe, and finally, kiss his injured hand.

In that flashback, both child and man fall. Then her grown son pits her memory of the child falling against the futility of this fall. She recognizes that she can do nothing for him this time. That he must suffer both a divine and a human fate, so interpenetrated are his two natures that to separate them would be to mutilate both. Her lot too so interwoven with the human and the mystical that what stands out clearly is her love for him, her recognition of his love for humankind, and a larger force at work they both recognize.

In this moment, she sees as Christ sees—what she sees is that "very darkness from which God split himself off when he became man." She sees with Christ "the spirit of God itself, which blows through the weak mortal frame and again demands man's fear of the unfathomable Godhead" (Jung) and something else. Both his destiny and hers are locked in this moment of revelation as they look at each other and resign themselves separately and as one to grasping the ungraspable.

Both figures recognize in that moment the fear of God and the love of God, in tandem, as the burden of oppositeness that is mankind's destiny—to suffer irreconcilable, insoluble conflicts until they "know" that "all opposites are of God." Both Mary and Jesus

must bend to this burden consciously, and by doing so, both are re-incarnated.

In this version, Mary is Christ's only human companion—the only one who shares his life, his joy, his spiritual call, and his pain.

FINALLY AT THE CROSS, Mary remains a witness—witness in its original sense, one who has the intuitive comprehension to give a first-hand account of the truth, a sign for all the ages to remember. She stays, watches what was unwatchable, she endures his unbearable suffering and brutalizing death for him, for herself, and for something else.

Jesus recognizes her vision, her farsightedness, her spirit, when he commends her to his disciple. He makes her the mother of those who believe but who couldn't stay, witness, and "see" his reasons for this sacrifice and its necessity. She does.

WHAT MEL GIBSON DOES with the figure and character of Mary is to reconfigure the possible woman—to give her a similar mystery of spirit, strength, a sense of her own destiny, knowing even in her unknowing. Gibson acknowledges her mythical history (as in sacred historical context), then proceeds to actualize her humanness in the familiar: her persistence, faithfulness, the blood-of-my-blood anguish and joy, and the necessity to accompany her fear with her need to remain by her son's side, using her heart as a shield to all her fears.

Whatever arguments critics have about Gibson's *The Passion*, the film, the one aspect no one has critiqued thoroughly is the role of Mary, or for that matter, any of the women in the film: Mary Magdalene, Claudia, Pontius Pilate's wife, and Veronica.

His grasp of women in this film is astounding. His ability to show the idea and the woman's depiction of that idea, the abstraction of love and its expression, as each woman is different in her capacity and each represents the complexity of what is possible for each. Mary, as well as the others, is transformed, and her role unstated in the Bible is articulated, as a compassionate witness of the unbearable suffering of the evil mankind is capable of on the guiltless. Her love imitates divine love in its steadfastness, awareness, and acceptance without judgment.

In the film, Mary transforms the blindness of the violence by her unfaltering love, on the one hand, simultaneously transforming the blindness of others into knowledge.

When they take him from the cross and place him in her arms, she holds her son the way she held him at his birth, in her arms, un-

yielding. She again delivers him. One could argue that Gibson, in fact, depicts her as Christ-as-Woman.

The movie ends with a new order: a cosmic reconciliation of the opposites, woman and man, man and God, God and Man, God and woman—the woman who in the last two thousand years has been the West’s only image of a woman acceptable to God and his son—Mother.

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