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Berry, Francesca

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‘Maman is my Muse’: The Maternal as  
Motif and Metaphor in Édouard  
Vuillard’s Intimisme

**Francesca Berry**



# ‘Maman is my Muse’: The Maternal as Motif and Metaphor in Édouard Vuillard’s Intimisme

Francesca Berry

1. Jacques Salomon, ‘Vuillard Remembered’ (1953), reprinted in John Russell (ed.), *Édouard Vuillard 1868–1940* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1971), p. 125.

2. The most recent comprehensive study of Vuillard’s work begins with the ultimate act of maternal self-effacement, the 1928 death of Madame Vuillard. Her death ‘was not only a turning point in his life, it was paradoxically an *Urszene*, a primal or “primitive” scene that had a lasting impact on the artist and triggered his retrospective search for the fragments of memory within his grasp’. Guy Cogeval, ‘Backward Glances’, in Guy Cogeval with Kimberly Jones et al., *Édouard Vuillard*, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and National Gallery of Art, Washington (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2003), pp. 2–4. Cogeval also quotes a 1938 description of Madame Vuillard by the author Pierre Veber who claimed that ‘she believed in his mission and devoted herself to it with exemplary confidence and self-denial. It is because of her that Édouard Vuillard became the perfect artist that he is’. Pierre Veber, ‘Mon Ami Vuillard’, *Les Nouvelles Littéraires, Artistiques et Scientifiques*, no. 811, 30 April 1938, p. 6, quoted in Cogeval, ‘Backward Glances’ (2003), p. 3. As these examples from 1938 and 2003 suggest, the theme of maternal self-effacement has consistently dominated the discursive formation of Vuillard’s practice. By questioning what it might mean for an artist to cite his mother as muse whilst also representing her as motif, this article constitutes a significant departure from the standard Vuillard narrative.

As the train came into the station he said, with a touching expression: ‘Maman is my muse’. I never forgot that confession: at our very first meeting Vuillard had revealed his secret. I think that in order to grasp the essential and deeply human quality of his work one must be aware of the tender adoration that Vuillard felt for his mother.<sup>1</sup>

In a 1953 posthumous study of Édouard Vuillard, his biographer Jacques Salomon recalled this brief statement made to him by the artist some thirty-three years previously. Salomon considered this statement to be a privileged admission as to the origins of the artist’s practice which, the writer recalls, was revealed to him during his initial meeting with Vuillard in June 1920. This declaration and its subsequent recollection, each important points of departure in the art-historical construction of the artist, are interesting for the significance both Vuillard and his biographer attribute to the artist’s mother, Madame Marie Michaud Vuillard. If the credibility of Salomon’s account is accepted, Vuillard’s citation of his mother as muse produces a dynamic conflation of the mythic discourses of creative origins and motherhood. In each incarnation, as artistic muse or artist’s mother, both Vuillard and Salomon ascribed to Madame Vuillard a significant originating role in the development of the artist’s work. It is a role that was and remains rooted in a shared fantasy of emotional and psychic indivisibility between a son and his mother. It is, moreover, a role that appears to locate Madame Vuillard at the origins of and prior to both the pictorial text and the art-historical text that is Édouard Vuillard, Intimiste artist. Idealised as both artistic muse and artist’s mother, Madame Vuillard was and continues to be inscribed in the self-effacing role of nurturer to, and guardian of, male artistic creativity.<sup>2</sup> But we might ask: what are the implications of this declaration for understanding Vuillard’s practice, particularly when considered in relation to images that make his mother their motif? And, in what ways might this declaration be symptomatic of a broader contemporary investment in the maternal muse?

Located prior to the pictorial text in her incarnation as *maman*-muse, Madame Vuillard also operated as its *maman*-motif. Indeed, few other painterly practices have so consistently featured the artist’s mother as a motif. The maternal figure is a particular feature of the work produced during the initial decade of Vuillard’s career, the 1890s, when he was a member of the Nabis and forging, artistically at least, an identity as part of Parisian avant-garde. The many paintings from this period representing the figure of Vuillard’s mother range between those few approximating to conventional portraiture, including the 1898 *Madame Vuillard Seen in Profile, Reading* (Private Collection, USA); those that represent her professional life as the owner of a small corsetry business in central Paris, such as the 1894 *The Two Tables* (Phillips Collection, Washington); and the numerous paintings of everyday domesticity that subsume the figure of Madame Vuillard into a

generically maternal role, including the Musée d'Orsay's *Le Placard à linge* or *The Linen Closet* (Fig. 1) of c. 1893.<sup>3</sup> Whilst it is important to consider the latter category according to the conditions of their original display as modern-life interiors, it is impossible to ignore their capacity to function as informal portrayals of the artist's mother in the various Parisian apartments they shared. It may be argued that when the figure of Madame Vuillard is not identified by a painting's title, as with *The Linen Closet*, this figure was and continues to be identifiable only to those familiar with the artist's work and biography. But the key to the figure's maternal role is located as much in the effacement of the female figure's identity enacted via the painting's self-consciously anodyne title as it is inscribed within the material and thematic properties of the painted object. I will argue that it is the figure's almost complete absorption into the domestic space and the self-absorption of its mundane activity that pertains most persuasively to discourses of feminine interiority and maternal domesticity of significance to late nineteenth-century audiences regardless of their familiarity with Vuillard and his personal domestic circumstances. Whatever personal meanings these paintings may be thought to articulate in relation to Vuillard's conceptualisation of his mother, they do so as part of a larger culture of filial dialogues with the maternal. However, it is my contention that Vuillard's take on the maternal is potentially more playful than that of his contemporaries. In pursuing these connections, this article will offer a broader historical treatment of Vuillard's practice, its ideological capacities and discursive possibilities, than is normally envisaged.<sup>4</sup>

In regarding psychoanalytical theory as a set of contested historical discourses developing out of a parallel moment to Vuillard's 1890s practice, I aim to resolve a psychoanalytically informed feminist conceptual framework to the demands of historical interpretation. The potential links between the specific concerns in the 1890s of Vuillard and Sigmund Freud are too compelling to ignore. They shared a parallel interest in metaphorical associations between the maternal body and domestic cupboards; a discursive affiliation between the maternal and the objects and spaces of domesticity that gathered momentum and significance with the subsequent development of object relations theory. In treating psychoanalysis and Vuillard's practice as historical equivalents rather than as analyst and analysand, this article looks to Carol Mavor's 2007 exploration of boyish pleasures in the work of writers Roland Barthes, J.M. Barrie, Marcel Proust, photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue, and object-relations psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott.<sup>5</sup> These sons, whose practices were broadly contemporaneous, are considered 'aesthetically productive' as a result of their longing for their mothers, not in spite of it, and by focusing upon the reparative motives for their 'feminine (maternal) acts' as informed by object-relations theory, Mavor represents a significant interpretative shift away from the negative critique that has dominated feminist conceptions of the mother-son relationship based upon the Lacanian interpretative model.<sup>6</sup> For me, the latter is exemplified by Susan R. Suleiman's 1990 dismissal, via Barthes, of the emblematic subject of male avant-garde practice as '... a transgressive son who may play with the body of his mother but who never imagines, let alone gives voice to, his mother playing'.<sup>7</sup> According to Mavor, the (feminist) refusal of boyish desire for the mother has limited a full engagement with the extent to which the son's practices construct historically and theoretically significant meanings for the maternal. However, Mavor has not resolved the problem that vexed Suleiman in 1990. She is willing to accept maternal subjectivity as the necessary casualty of boyish practices. Having

3. The 2003 Vuillard catalogue raisonné translates *Le Placard à linge* as *The Linen Closet*. This is not an entirely satisfactory translation and *The Linen Cupboard* is more appropriate. The North-American term 'closet' generically describes a storage unit, but inadequately reflects historical differences between the terms 'closet' and 'cupboard'. Historically, closets are the integrated wall spaces, invented in the USA during the 1840s and developed by Le Corbusier and others to usurp free-standing cupboards and, arguably, the metaphorical association with feminine domesticity attached to these voluminous objects. Antoine Salomon and Guy Cogeval, *Vuillard: Critical Catalogue of Paintings and Pastels*, 3 vols (Skira: Milan; Thames & Hudson: London, 2003), p. 305. Henry Urbach, 'Closets, Clothes, Disclosure', *Assemblage*, no. 30, August 1996, p. 64.

4. The exception here is the work of Susan Sidlauskas. For a thorough historical analysis of *Interior; The Artist's Mother and Sister* (1893) (Fig. 8), see S. Sidlauskas, 'Contesting Femininity: Vuillard's Family Pictures', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 78, no. 1, March 1997, pp. 85–111 and S. Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000). Whilst Sidlauskas' account of how the figures disrupt late nineteenth-century constructions of femininity is highly persuasive in specific reference to this unusual painting, I would argue that it does not account for the maman-motif paintings in general.

5. C. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly: Roland Barthes, J. M. Barrie, Jacques Henri Lartigue, Marcel Proust and D. W. Winnicott* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2007), p. 78.

6. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, p. 35.

7. S.R. Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 145. Suleiman references Barthes' metaphor of masculine creativity enacted across '... the body of his mother: in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or to dismember it ...' in Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Editions du Seuil: Paris, 1973), pp. 60–1.





Fig. 1. Édouard Vuillard, *The Linen Closet*, c. 1893, oil on cardboard, 25 × 20 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (Photo: RMN [Musée d'Orsay]/Hervé Lewandowski.)

identified Madame Vuillard's subjectivity as the first casualty of the *maman-muse*, the question is: can I allow Vuillard the same indulgence in respect of the *maman-motif*?

### The Linen Closet

It is with very small simply constructed paintings such as *The Linen Closet* that Vuillard dismantled the illusionistic facility of oil painting in accordance with the Nabis' early 1890s Synthetist aesthetic. The artist re-configured the most essential terminology of painterly practice, the indexical trace of brush, palette knife, or wooden tip, to produce a decorative surface tightly composed of four rectangular sections centripetally distributed around a similarly geometrical figurative core. *The Linen Closet* is a diminutive oil-on-cardboard painting measuring no more than twenty-five-by-twenty centimetres. To see the surface is to be close to it. Using a broad range of methods, the paint has been applied directly to the still visible un-primed cardboard support, itself a likely by-product of Madame Vuillard's corsetry business. Certain sections of the more soberly toned left side of the composition, including the beige, cream, and grey planar surfaces of the folding screen and the upper-left rectangle of brown and red wallpaper, are composed of discreet, short strokes of un-modulated pigment. For the opposing vertical, vibrant colours of white, yellow, blue, and red have been applied in longer actions of haphazard strokes to suggest a drying rack laden with sheets to the right, and the contents of the scarcely materialised structure of the white linen cupboard itself. We should pause here in order to absorb fully the extent to which the linen cupboard's materiality has not been realised, particularly when juxtaposed with the stridency of the folding screen and household linens. We might even take a few steps back and remark upon the extent to which the painted and framed object bearing the title *The Linen Closet* holds greater weight than the nominal motif as a containing space filled to the brim with contingently contiguous fabrics. Indeed, *The Linen Closet* is typical of Vuillard's 1890s output in representing domestic space as 'cupboard-like' by virtue of its perpendicular back wall, frontally orientated scenario located in a confined space, avoidance of sources of natural light, and the omission of spaces between things. Taking up a close scrutiny of the painted surface once again, we are able to note that the maternal figure is simply constituted of a brown-grey circle of ribboned hair and a flat triangle of pattern connoting shoulders and an arm. Physiognomy has acceded to the demands of decorative synthesis. Just a slim crescent of orange and a dry oval of whitish pink signal the maternal figure's cheek and fist, respectively. These are the barely fleshed-out margins of a drastically cropped body that is otherwise constituted as patterned fabric; which is not something one can often write of the maternal body in visual representation given its conventional association with fleshy abundance. But perhaps fabric is not that unexpected a metaphor for Vuillard's seamstress mother and certainly he was not alone in this period in identifying the maternal body with the material culture of domesticity. More of which later.

Vuillard's work of this period consistently presents the viewer with a choice between non-figurative and figurative representation; between the engaging materiality of the painted surface and the inconsistent materiality of the scene depicted. In respect of the latter, *The Linen Closet* and related *Intimiste* works, as the small paintings of domestic interiors have come to be labelled, tap into a familiar iconographic tradition of urban domestic life and recognisable social types.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, these

8. Despite early twentieth-century art-historical uses of the term to describe a specific lineage of French domestic genre painting linked to Chardin, *Intimisme* is now exclusively identified with Vuillard's and Bonnard's small paintings of domestic interiors. See Camille Mauclair, 'Les Intimistes', *Les États de la peinture française, de 1850 à 1920* (Payot & Cie: Paris, 1921), pp. 112–25 and Jacques-Emile Blanche, 'Les Intimistes', *Les Arts plastiques* (Les Éditions de France: Paris, 1931), pp. 116–24. The blanket labelling of Vuillard and Bonnard as *Intimistes* has overshadowed the complex variety of historically contingent labels applied to their work and exhibiting practices during the 1890s.





**Fig. 2.** Mary Cassatt, *Baby's First Caress*, 1891, pastel on paper, 30 in. × 43 in. New Britain Museum of American Art. Harriet Russell Stanley Fund, 1948.14. (Photo: New Britain Museum of American Art.)

9. Susan Sidlauskas has traced the substitution of gestural narrative for the compositional distortion of figure and ground in interiors paintings of this period, including Vuillard's. Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self*.

10. 'Raffaelli est un des seuls qui aient compris l'originale beauté de ces lieux si chers aux intimistes. Celui-là est le peintre des pauvres gens et des grands ciels! Son chiffonnier, seul, avec sa chienne, et prêt à picorer dans un monceau de détritiques, a grand allure. . . .' (Raffaelli is one of the few that have understood the original beauty of those places so dear to intimistes. Here is the painter of poor people and large skies! His ragpicker, alone, with his dog, and ready to peck about in a heap of rubbish, has great appeal . . .') Joris-Karl Huysmans, 'Le Salon de 1879', reprinted in *L'Art Moderne* (P. V. Stock: Paris,

images exchange the overt narratives of domestic genre painting for a representational mode of suggestive formal intonation. Articulation is dissembled, residing less in didactic gestures than in the formal tropes of tone and pattern and the compositional tropes of compressed space and distorted perspective that undermine customary hierarchies between figure and ground.<sup>9</sup> It is the latter property that Joris-Karl Huysmans identified as the preserve of 'intimistes' in his 1879 praise for an unidentified Jean-François Raffaelli watercolour of a ragpicker, *Le Chiffonnier*. The earliest known rhetorical deployment of the term, Huysmans used 'intimistes' to identify a pictorial mode of locating an identifiable figure type in their most appropriate and thereby emotive setting, regardless of whether that setting was, in the case of Raffaelli, a suburban waste ground or, in the later case of Vuillard, a domestic interior.<sup>10</sup> For Huysmans, Intimisme signalled the type of intimate relation between figure and ground that *The Linen Closet* capaciously provides. Additionally, and in accordance with the wider use of synaesthetic metaphor in the literary Symbolism of the period, *The Linen Closet* provokes a sensorial engagement on behalf of the viewer in excess to that conventionally privileged by the scopic regime of the painted





**Fig. 3.** Édouard Vuillard, *The Yellow Curtain*, c. 1893, oil on canvas, 34.7 × 38.7 cm. Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. (Photo: Courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.)

image.<sup>11</sup> Here the visual also operates as a metaphor for the haptic, with pattern playing a critical role in the signifiatory process.<sup>12</sup> The imaginative sense of what it feels like to be surrounded by, to brush against and to leave corporeal traces in, the fabrics and upholstered surfaces of cramped and modestly bourgeois domesticity, even the hyper-imaginative sense of what it might feel like to occupy a domestic linen cupboard, achieves an acute level of figural representation in the physiognomic dissolution and spatial containment of *The Linen Closet's* barely discernible maternal figure.<sup>13</sup>

### Archaic Dialogues

Vuillard's pursuit of the *maman*-motif may have been stimulated by the French state's 1891 purchase of James Whistler's 1871 portrait of his elderly mother, *Arrangement of Grey and Black, Number 1* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Initial comparison is provoked by their shared interest in the decorative effects of the mature maternal body located in a shallow domestic setting. But Whistler's unyielding conception of his mother is rather less soothing than Vuillard's. Besides, Whistler's mother appears too much her own person, too much a portrait subject in her own right, to offer useful comparison to Vuillard's *maman*-motif. Another, less immediately obvious, impetus (though in my opinion one that is rather more compelling given Vuillard's attention to the modern-life interior) may have been provided by Mary Cassatt's many images of young women and infants. A number of these were shown at Cassatt's first solo exhibition held in 1891 at Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris and her larger second show at the same location in 1893. Indeed, the 1891

1883, 2nd ed. 1903, p. 84.) Unless stated otherwise, all translations are mine.

11. For the link between the formal rhetoric of Nabis paintings and music, see Gloria Groom, 'Coming of Age: Patrons and Projects, 1890–99', in Gloria Gloom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis and Roussel, 1890–1930* (The Art Institute of Chicago: Chicago, 2001), p. 34.

12. For nostalgic associations of the maternal with the haptic encounter including eating and kissing, see Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, p. 12.

13. Walter Benjamin has famously written of the textural plenitude of the nineteenth-century domestic interior in the following terms: 'Living means leaving traces. In the interior, these were stressed. Coverings and antimacassars, boxes and casings, were devised in abundance, in which the traces of everyday objects were moulded. The resident's own traces were also moulded in the interior'. Walter Benjamin, 'Louis-Philippe or the Interior' (1955), in Walter Benjamin (ed.) and Harry Zohn (trans.), *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (Verso: London & New York, 1973), 1992, p. 169. It is a statement that finds an historical equivalent in Émile Cardon's claim that the worn hollows of a favourite armchair might function as an indexical referent for its absent owner: 'Avec un peu

d'habitude, à l'inspection même superficielle d'un intérieur, on peut de même préjuger ce que vaut l'habitant; le caractère déleint beaucoup plus qu'on le pense sur le milieu dans lequel on vit, le fauteuil sur lequel on s'assoie journellement se modèle sur vos formes et révèle quelque peu vos habitudes'. (With a little bit of practice, at even a superficial inspection of an interior, one can judge a person's worth; character impacts upon the environment in which one lives more than people think; the armchair in which one sits on a daily basis models itself to your forms and reveals something of your habits.) Émile Cardon, *L'Art au foyer domestique* (Librairie Renouard: Paris, 1884), p. 23.

14. Georges Lecomte, *L'art impressioniste d'après la collection privée de M. Durand-Ruel* (Chamerot et Renouard: Paris, 1892), p. 129; Adelyn Dohme Breeskin, *Mary Cassatt: a Catalogue Raisonné of the Oils, Pastels, Watercolours and Drawings* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington D.C., 1970), p. 98.

15. J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), trans. Margaret Waller (Columbia University Press: New York, 1984), pp. 29–30.

16. Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1998), p. 199. Also see Linda Nochlin, 'Mary Cassatt's Modernity', *Representing Women* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1999), pp. 201–2 and Jane Silverman Van Buren, *The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor* (Indiana University Press: Indiana, 1989), p. 138.

pastel *Baby's First Caress* (Fig. 2) was displayed at both and was also reproduced in Georges Lecomte's 1892 book promoting Durand-Ruel's private collection.<sup>14</sup> Though depicting a young maternal figure and infant, the decorative synthesis, spatial containment, and imaginative haptic plenitude of *Baby's First Caress* bear direct comparison with Vuillard's *The Linen Closet*. Note in particular how in *Baby's First Caress* the maternal figure's patterned dress appears abundantly textural and exclusively constitutes the containing environment or interior for the male child, as the yellow and grey backdrop against which the figures are located fails to achieve signification as a legible space. In psychoanalytic terms, the smudgy surface and self-contained dyadic absorption of the woman and child evoke a sensuality which, it could be argued, appeals to the viewer's most nostalgic fantasies of a blissful stage of pre-linguistic unity and communication between mother and infant, the audible dimension of which Julia Kristeva has labelled 'semiotic' and identified with the disruptive literary practice of Cassatt's and Vuillard's acquaintance, Stéphane Mallarmé.<sup>15</sup> In *Baby's First Caress*, overwhelming formal and thematic emphasis is placed upon the scopic and haptic modes of communication as the figures of mother and infant reach out to each other. The maternal figure gently clasps the child's pliant left foot in the palm of her hand, the point where the pictorial rendition of flesh touching flesh becomes most indistinct; most a matter of abstract mark making. Simultaneously, the female figure kisses the palm of the child's hand, which in turn caresses the soft skin of the maternal figure's face and chin. Griselda Pollock has stated that for all this indivisibility the relay of gesture and gaze constitutes 'the outward and visible sign of an unconscious process in which the Mother becomes an object, an Other'.<sup>16</sup> In the Cassatt pastel, of course, the intense physical and psychological dialogue between maternal figure and male child takes place within the representational parameters of the image. Though picturing a mature maternal body, it is my contention that Vuillard's *maman-motif* paintings articulate a similarly archaic, if less reciprocal and certainly more nostalgic, but also more playful, dialogue with the maternal that takes place within the signifiatory processes and across the apparatus of pictorial representation itself, between the artist and his sitter. If, indeed, it is appropriate to identify Madame Vuillard as Vuillard's sitter; she is unlikely to have modelled for individual paintings, even if she may have felt herself to be the perpetual object of her son's gaze, as numerous pencil sketches confirm. Most likely, *The Linen Closet* was produced behind closed doors in Vuillard's under-represented 'studio-bedroom' and is the 'remembered' composite of a lifelong immersion in a familiar person's everyday habits. In my opinion, the signs of this nostalgic dialogue are to be found in certain, not immediately obvious, representational features of the *maman-motif* paintings. These include the viewer's implied physical relation to the scene, the corporeal articulation of the maternal figure, and this figure's compositional and metaphorical relation to the spaces and objects of domesticity.

It is a particularly child-like scenario that the *maman-motif* paintings stage. The low viewing position implicated in relation to many of these paintings significantly contributes to the sense of a nostalgic dialogue. *The Linen Closet's* folding screen dwarfs the viewer's pretensions by frustrating access to a body fixed into place by the screen yet rendered almost out of sight and just beyond reach. Another painting of this period, *The Yellow Curtain* of c. 1893 (Fig. 3), evokes an equivalent sense of filial longing. Many of the visual and structural features of the *maman-motif* paintings, not least *The Linen Closet*,

are replicated here, including the intense tonal, textural, and decorative variations and the rear-view of a rather fuller, if no more fleshy, maternal figure absorbed in its activity and contained within a small area of the composition. As with *The Linen Closet*, the maternal figure's containment is enacted on all sides: by the curtain, the low ceiling, the orthogonal and perpendicular walls, and, finally, by the bed across which the viewer's gaze reaches, just skimming its surface and offering a child's height view. The privacy of the scene denoted by the bed, curtained washstand, and the informality of the figure's appearance only serves to enhance the sense of a mother seen through the eyes of a child seeking, in Lacanian terms, the lost object of desire: the gaze of the Other.<sup>17</sup> This sense of longing is only further enhanced by the pink tones applied to the surface of the mirror that otherwise fails to reflect the maternal figure's face.

Of course, Vuillard's contemporary and associate, Marcel Proust, devised a literary equivalent to the maman-muse and maman-motif. Located at the material origins of the 'Ouverture' to *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust's narrator attributes to his mother an originating significance as the nurturer of his creativity and as a guardian of the archaic past, in the present, via memory. Additionally, the maternal figure operates as the primary motif of the narrator's childhood. His most vivid childhood memories are of an anxious desire for close physical proximity with his mother and in one instance of particular significance, the narrator invokes the artistic *mise-en-scène* as the metaphorical equivalent to his maternal desire.<sup>18</sup> Mavor has claimed of Proust that he covets 'the mother's body as a home both lost and never lost' and that Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* 'is one nostalgic return to the womb, to the original home of mother'.<sup>19</sup> Of the young Lartigue's earliest photographs in which family and home, including a bedroom cupboard imposingly photographed at floor-level, are brought 'under Lartigue's magical control', Mavor claims that 'it was as if Lartigue knew Freud without knowing Freud'.<sup>20</sup> The same can be argued of Vuillard: it is as if in the early to mid-1890s he knew Freud without knowing, or even needing to know, Freud. But what did Freud know and when did he know it? Certainly, Freud claimed to know that the maternal body and the spaces and objects of domesticity harness association in the minds of nostalgic adults. In 1919 he described, in a rhetorical style evocative of a terrifying bedtime story, 'the female genital organs' as 'the entrance to the former home of all human beings, . . . the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning', making a direct link between uterine and domestic interiority.<sup>21</sup> And, of course, in 1920 Freud illustrated his theory of the infantile development of the compulsion to repeat with the fort-da game, whereby a young child repeatedly stages and utters the process of his mother's presence and absence using a cotton reel thrown into a cot. The links to Vuillard are, indeed, too compelling to ignore. For what is the early signifiatory process of the fort-da game if it is not a citation of the mother as muse via the enactment of an imaginative storage and retrieval of the maternal body? And what are the maman-motif and the imagined artistic *mise-en-scène* that it facilitates if they are not playful attempts to manage the absence and presence of the maternal body? Whilst the Surrealists found Freud's gynaecological account of the aetiology of the uncanny highly compelling, it was the fort-da game's re-imagining of the fleshiness of the maternal body as a domestic object that signalled the future direction of object-relations psychoanalysis.<sup>22</sup> In 1929 Melanie Klein claimed ' . . . things to sit and lie upon, as well as beds, occur regularly in children's analyses as

17. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1973), Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), trans. Alan Sheridan (Penguin Books: London, 1979), 1994, p. 38.

18. 'I never took my eyes off my mother. . . Mamma, for fear of annoying my father, would not allow me to kiss her several times in public . . . and as I felt the hour approach, I would put beforehand into the kiss, which was bound to be so brief and furtive, everything that my own efforts could muster, would carefully choose in advance the exact spot on her cheek where I would imprint it, and would so prepare my thoughts as to be able, thanks to these mental preliminaries, to consecrate the whole of the minute Mamma would grant me to the sensation of her cheek against my lips, as a painter who can have his subject for short sittings only prepares his palette, and from what he remembers and from rough notes does in advance everything which he possibly can do in the sitter's absence'. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, *Swann's Way* (1913), trans. Charles Kenneth Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (Vintage: London, 1996), p. 30.

19. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, pp. 18 and 112.

20. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, pp. 84 and 91.

21. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), trans. James Strachey, in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 14, *Art and Literature* (Penguin Books: London, 1985), 1990, p. 368.

22. Tristan Tzara, 'D'un certain automatisme du goût', *Minotaure*, vols 3–4 (December 1933), p. 84; Anthony Vidler, 'Homes for Cyborgs', in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1996), pp. 161–78.

23. Melanie Klein, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse' (1929), in Juliet Mitchell (ed.), *The Selected Melanie Klein* (Penguin Books: London, 1986), p. 85.

24. Donald W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' (1953), in Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Tavistock Publications: London, 1971), pp. 3–6

25. Karen M. Offen, 'Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France', *American Historical Review*, vol. 89, no. 3, June 1984, p. 654.

26. Elinor Accampo, 'The Gendered Nature of Contraception in France: Neo-Malthusianism 1900–1920', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2003, pp. 235–62.

27. Thomas Laqueur, 'Orgasm, Generation and the Politics of Reproductive Biology', *Representations*, no. 14, 1986, pp. 1–41.

28. 'In reality, fifteen or twenty days out of twenty-eight [one can say almost always] woman is not only sick, but wounded. She submits incessantly to the eternal wound of love'. ('en réalité, 15 ou 20 jours sur 28 [on peut dire presque toujours] la femme n'est pas seulement une malade, mais une blessée. Elle subit incessamment l'éternelle blessure d'amour.' Jules Michelet, 'L'Amour', (1858), *Oeuvres complètes XVIII, 1858–60* (Flammarion: Paris, 1985), p. 64.)

29. Dr Ludovic O'Followell, 'Bicyclette et organes génitaux' (1900), quoted in Eugen Weber, *France, Fin-de-Siècle* (Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, 1986), pp. 88–9.

30. 'L'homme produit seul le germe qui doit donner naissance à un nouvel être, tandis que la femme n'est qu'un réceptacle, une espèce de vase où ce germe trouve des conditions favorables à son développement.' Pierre-Joseph. Proudhon, *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église*, 3 vols (Garnier: Paris, 1858), quoted in Dr Louis Fiaux, *La Femme, le mariage et le divorce* (Librairie Germer Baillière et Cie.: Paris, 1880), p. 76.

symbols for the protecting and loving mother' whilst providing a parallel interpretation of the child's vicious attack on its home in Ravel's opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* as a sadistic fantasy of attacking the 'bad' mother's body.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Winnicott's transitional objects, 'symbolical of some part-object, such as the breast', commonly are requisitioned domestic fabrics; the corners of sheets, blankets, and other items that might ordinarily reside in a linen cupboard.<sup>24</sup> But perhaps here I am getting ahead of both myself and history.

### Turned Towards the Interior

The infant subject's alignment of the maternal body with domestic space and its contents has a long and familiar history in twentieth-century psychoanalytic discourse. But Freud was not the first to link domestic and uterine interiority, nor the first to associate the maternal body with domestic furniture. Indeed, it seems that Vuillard did not need to know Freud in order to know some of what he knew. He simply needed to be familiar with the 'equality in difference' construction of femininity that dominated mainstream thinking in Third Republic France, aided by the reformist agenda of familial feminists.<sup>25</sup> The 1880s and 1890s commentators debating the legal and social status of women were largely informed, whether they chose to admit it or not, by the mid nineteenth-century biological conflation of femininity with uterine interiority (itself shaped by republican ideology) whilst, in the main, advocating legal and social reform of women's status within the marital and domestic arena; doing so with ever-greater conviction in a climate of anxiety about depopulation, Neo-Malthusianism, and new models of extra-domestic femininity.<sup>26</sup> Veterinary and medical research carried out during the 1840s had provided evidence of women's unique powers of reproduction through menstruation, thus dismantling dearly held hierarchies of male procreative power.<sup>27</sup> However, new hierarchies of perpetual feminine weakness linked to menstruation were constructed on the basis of populist pseudo-scientific publications, including Jules Michelet's *L'Amour* of 1858 in which, famously, he exalted feminine fertility whilst proclaiming it as pathology.<sup>28</sup> Republican positivism was instrumental in fixing a biological and seemingly indisputable link between the concepts of femininity and uterine interiority. The persistence of this thinking into the late nineteenth century is ably evidenced in Officer of Public Instruction, Dr Ludovic O'Followell's unreconstructed claim, made in a 1900 book debating the gynaecological effects of cycling, that: 'Woman is but a womb... a uterus. Woman is not a brain, she is a sex'.<sup>29</sup>

From this line of reasoning flowed the conviction that women's uterine interiority determined their domestic interiority. And even as the biological rationale for the feminine condition was questioned during the final decades of the century, this assumption remained. In his popular 1880 book, *La Femme, le mariage et le divorce*, social reformer Dr Louis Fiaux argued against the legal inequalities enshrined in the Civil Code and in favour of the re-introduction of the divorce law (achieved in 1884) as the means to improve women's status within the family. Indeed, he cited in order to critique, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's conviction that 'the man alone produces the seed that gives birth to a new life, whilst the woman is just a receptacle, a sort of vessel where this seed finds the conditions favourable to its development'.<sup>30</sup> Rejecting Proudhon's 'brutal' essentialism, Fiaux nonetheless concluded that 'necessity and instinct' lead educated women to



domesticity, where children and husbands would be the first to profit from their improved status.<sup>31</sup>

The prolific writing of the philosopher and sociologist Alfred Fouillée, a keen promoter of the ‘equality in difference’ agenda, lent further psychological credibility in the 1890s to reductive biological discourses.<sup>32</sup> Fouillée actively engaged with new psychological theories, including those of the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot with whom, of course, Freud studied when in Paris during 1885 and 1886. In his essay of 1893, ‘The Psychology of the Sexes and their Physiological Foundation’, one of a series of celebrated articles for the *Revue des deux mondes*, Fouillée favoured the deployment of phenomena derived from the study of non-human species as a means to explain socially developed behavioural characteristics in gendered human beings. Fouillée consistently maintained that male organisms were biologically affiliated to exteriority and female organisms to interiority. Writing, for example, on the subject of animal behaviour, Fouillée noted how aggressive tendencies in females always derived from the maternal instinct as this is ‘turned towards the interior’.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Fouillée characterised femininity in terms of ‘concentration, unification, and cohesion’ in direct and complimentary opposition to the diffuse and divisive tendencies of masculinity.<sup>34</sup>

The metaphorical language of physiological and psychological essentialism occurred in the texts of other notable republican thinkers, including ardent anti-feminist senator Jules Simon. In his journal *La Revue de Famille*, Simon invoked historical precedence as evidence for the universally different roles ascribed to men and women; not least in an 1889 article in which he declared a natural and historically proven link between femininity and domestic interiority, via maternity.<sup>35</sup> Whether espoused by reformists or anti-reformists, misogynists or feminist-sympathisers, the dominant fin-de-siècle ideology in respect of femininity and domesticity might be summarised in the following terms: feminine domestic interiority need not be enforced legally; it is entirely instinctual, deriving psychologically from women’s capacity for maternity and is, therefore, something towards which women will be naturally predisposed. Within this broad ideology, one suspects that political differences might be established in the extent to which late nineteenth-century commentators were willing to invest directly in uterine interiority as the means to rationalise the generally accepted condition of women’s domestic interiority.

As Guy Cogeval has suggested, it is difficult to be specific about Vuillard’s political sympathies. Certainly, he was a republican and a Dreyfusard, but Vuillard committed neither publicly nor privately to any political faction.<sup>36</sup> During the 1890s he counted socialist Léon Blum and anarchist Félix Fénéon amongst his friends, suggesting leftist sympathies. But Vuillard was also a member of the Nabis, whose unofficial spokesperson was the anti-Dreyfusard nationalist Maurice Denis. In specific relation to the legal and social status of contemporary women, Vuillard remained silent, despite in his journal expressing a clear preference for feminine motifs; claiming to find the female body easier to objectify.<sup>37</sup> The critical response to the 1890s interiors paintings was much less equivocal and, in the main, positively identified his work, though not in explicit terms, with the hegemonic republican position described above. Indeed, critics seemed to relish the opportunity offered by a Vuillard painting to imagine themselves contained within an interior considered co-extensive with the female body and that might be the imaginative source of seductive visual and haptic experiences. Maurice Cretnitz’s 1893 review of the fifth *Exposition des Peintres Impressionistes et*

31. Fiaux, *La Femme*, pp. 76 and 100–1.

32. For Fouillée’s solidarist conceptualization of women’s position and his links to the *psychologie nouvelle*, see Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1989), pp. 73–4 and 90–1.

33. ‘... chez la femelle, le courage est d’ordre maternel, défensif, tourné vers l’intérieur, au service de l’espèce; chez le male, il a une tout autre direction: il est agressif, tourné vers le dehors, au service, de l’individu et de son indépendance’. Alfred Fouillée, ‘La Psychologie des sexes et ses fondements physiologiques’, *La Revue des deux mondes*, vol. 5, 1893, pp. 408.

34. ‘M. Armand Sabatier avait déjà trouvé que le caractère de l’élément féminin est la concentration, l’unification, la cohésion: cet élément tend à rester un et à ne pas se fragmenter, à ne pas se sectionner, tant qu’il est livré à lui-même. Le caractère de l’élément masculin est au contraire “une role de division, de dispersion”’. Fouillée, ‘La Psychologie’, p. 403.

35. ‘What is the vocation of man? It is to be a good citizen. And for woman? It is to be a good wife and mother. One is in some way called to the outside; the other is retained inside. Study history, you will find that in all ages, across the world, under all the latitudes, man is made for competing and working outdoors; woman for raising the children, and for making order and happiness reign in the house’. (‘Quelle est la vocation de l’homme? C’est d’être un bon citoyen. Et de la femme? D’être une bonne épouse et une bonne mère. L’un est en quelque sorte appelé au dehors; l’autre est retenue au dedans. Étudiez l’histoire, vous trouverez cela à tous les âges; parcourez la terre, vous le trouverez sous toutes les latitudes... [l]’homme est fait pour combattre et pour travailler au dehors; la femme pour élever les enfants, pour faire régner l’ordre dans la maison et pour y organiser le bonheur’. Jules Simon, ‘L’Éducation des femmes, l’épouse’, *La Revue de famille*, vol. 2, 15 August 1889, p. 97.)

36. Cogeval, ‘Backward Glances’ (2003), pp. 32–8.

37. ‘I should have a multitude of varied objects represented in my paintings, yet I realise I never introduce male characters. On the other hand when my focus is on men, I always see the infamous charges, I have a feeling of ridiculous objects. Never so in front of women where I have always found a way to isolate some elements that satisfy the artist in me. But some are not uglier than others, they are only so in my imagination’. (‘Je devrais avoir une multitude variée d’objets représentés dans mes peintures, or je n’introduis jamais de personnages hommes, je constate. D’autre part quand mon attention se porte sur les



**Fig. 4.** Édouard Vuillard, *Madame Vuillard Sewing*, 1893, oil on cardboard, 19.5 × 24 cm. Private Collection, William Kelly Simpson, New York. (Photo: William Kelly Simpson, New York.)

hommes, je vois toujours d'infâmes charges, je n'ai qu'un sentiment d'objets ridicules. Jamais devant les femmes où je trouve toujours moyen d'isoler quelques éléments qui satisfont en moi le peintre. Or les uns ne sont pas plus laids que les autres, ils ne le sont que dans mon imagination'. Paris, Institut de France, Journal of Édouard Vuillard, MS5396, carnet 2, 27 July 1894, p. 46r.)

38. 'Ce sont toujours des femmes en effet dont la tiède haleine embue ces douzes tableautins, dont les contours gracieux indiqués en lignes tremblées et comme émues et comme caressantes peuplent ces intérieurs aux tentures mouchetées'. Maurice Cremonitz, 'Exposition de quelques peintres chez le Barc de Boutteville', *Essais d'art libre* (December 1893), pp. 232.

39. 'deux exquis intimistes. . . c'est qu'ils savent fixer ce bonheur très calme et très doux, insaisissable papillon qui semble voltiger dans l'atmosphère d'une chambre amicale, c'est le chuchotement qui rôde dans les coins de pénombre, c'est la lumière amie et l'abat-jour, la ligne plus souple et plus harmonieuse des objets qui nous sont habituels, ce frôlis d'étoffe et cette gracilité de geste, l'oeil effaré du baby et le regard attendri de la mère, la femme qui lit ou qui coud, enfin toutes ces attitudes, qui plaisent, de l'animal en son gîte'. Cremonitz, 'Exposition', p. 231.

*Symbolistes* at the Le Barc de Boutteville gallery is indicative: 'They are indeed always women that populate these interiors of speckled draperies, whose warm breath mists up the twelve small paintings and whose graceful contours are indicated in trembling lines, so emotional and so caressing'.<sup>38</sup> Writing in the same review, Cremonitz claimed of both Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard that these 'two exquisite intimistes . . . know how to fix this very calm and gentle happiness, this elusive butterfly that seems to flutter about in the atmosphere of a friendly room, it is the friendly light and the lamp-shade, the most supple and harmonious line of objects familiar to us, this touch of material and this gracefulness of gesture, the alarmed eye of the baby and the tender look of the mother, the wife who reads or who sews, finally of these attitudes which please, of the animal and his home'.<sup>39</sup> Here the sensory fantasy is more maternal than erotic and in this respect it is particularly worth noting how Cremonitz aligns the female body with a haptic experience of domestic fabric and answers the searching gaze of the infant with the reciprocal gaze of the mother. Despite the liberal scattering of 'intimacy' across the critical horizon of the 1890s, Cremonitz was one of the first critics to use the term 'intimiste' in respect of Vuillard's work. Here, Cremonitz exemplifies the 1890s association of Intimisme with an aesthetic of specifically domestic intimacy, in contrast to the intimate relationship between any figure and ground deployed by Huysmans in his 1879 review of Raffaelli. Whilst twentieth-century art historians have laid claim to the label Intimisme as a means to ensure the artist's modernist status, most 1890s critics deployed the concept of an aesthetic of domestic intimacy in the context of identifying Vuillard's interiors with dominant domestic ideologies. That is, as feminine, sometimes specifically maternal, spaces nurturing nostalgic fantasies of masculine retreat. Leftist critic Gustave Geffroy stands out for his slightly more ambiguous, though still positive, identification of

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**Fig. 5.** Maurice Denis, *Maternity with lace cuffs*, 1895, oil on cardboard, 42.8 × 34 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes. (Photo: MBA, Rennes, Dist. RMN/Adélaïde Beaudoin, ©ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2010.)

Vuillard as ‘an intimiste with a delicious sense of humour, who knows how to mix the melancholic and the comic’; evidently sensing an ironic and less ideological potential to Vuillard’s work that I will return to in due course.<sup>40</sup> Despite the recent assertion by Susan Sidlauskas that one of the *maman-motif* paintings (Fig. 8) subverts the interior’s ‘commonplace associations with comfort and safety’, less sympathetic reviewers eventually criticised Vuillard not for disrupting the values associated with domesticity but for repetition and self-satisfaction, for re-playing the same old motif.<sup>41</sup>

By focusing upon the ritualistic significance of storing linen, *The Linen Closet* does accord, at the most obvious signifiatory level, with the dominant ideology, determining that women bear responsibility for the management and upkeep of the home. The painting’s material properties seem to function no less ideologically. Seen from the rear and absorbed in its activity, the maternal figure is quite literally ‘turned towards the interior’ and the terms of Fouillée’s analysis. The centripetal arrangement of the various patterned surfaces, including the folding screen, that gravitate around the maternal

40. ‘un intimiste d’un humour délicieux, sachant mêler la mélancolique et le comique’, Gustave Geffroy, ‘Chez Le Barc de Boutteville’, 28 November 1892, reprinted in *La Vie Artistique*, vol. 2 (E. Dentu: Paris, 1893), pp. 381–2.

41. Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self*, p. 3. Reviewing the sixth Le Barc de Boutteville exhibition in March 1894, at which Vuillard exhibited an unidentified painting entitled *Soir*, Alfred Jarry refused to discuss the work of his friend Vuillard and several other artists because ‘they neither add nor subtract from anything that one has already seen of them’ (‘... elles n’ajoutent ni retirent à ce qu’on a vu d’eux’). Alfred Jarry, ‘Sixième exposition chez Le Barc de Boutteville’, *Essais d’art libre*, March 1894, p. 42.) In 1898 the normally supportive André Fontainas wrote of Vuillard that ‘it seems the artist suffers

from an unfortunate tendency not to renew, to be satisfied with things already done'. ('il semblerait que l'artiste subisse une fâcheuse tendance à ne pas se renouveler, à se satisfaire de choses déjà faites.' André Fontainas, 'Art moderne, l'exposition à la galerie Volland', *Le Mercure de France*, May 1898, p. 599.)

42. 'The mother never leaves the adult child, her heart follows him everywhere, and when she is a good mother and knows how to love at any age in life, a child that has become a man seeks his mother again'. ('L'enfant grandi, la mère ne le quitte point, son cœur le suit partout, et quand elle est bonne mère et qu'elle a su se faire aimer, à tout âge de la vie, enfant devenu homme cherche encore sa mère'. Mgr. Le Nordez, *Le Livre des femmes de bien*, vol. 1, 'La Mère', 1900, p. 3); 'Whether a man is 30, 40 or 50, he always will find refuge and support in this mother, just as he found refuge and support from his first day to his 20 or 30 years of age'. ('Que l'homme ait 30, 40 ou 50 ans, il trouvera toujours refuge et soutien en cette mère, comme en elle il trouva refuge et soutien de son premier jour à ses 20 ou 30 ans.' Ambroisine Dayt, *Pensées et réflexions d'une mère*, 1905, p. 57.); 'Having left the female breast, our heaven here on earth is none other than returning to her breast' ('... après avoir traversé les faux bonheurs de ce monde, nous retournerions volontiers vers le paradis maternel! Sortis du sein de la femme, notre ciel d'ici-bas n'est autre que de revenir à son sein.' Jules Michelet quoted in a periodical special issue 'La Mère dans la littérature et dans l'art', *Les Annales*, 1st December 1907, p. 1.)

body also provokes comparison with Fouillée's characterisation of sexual difference in terms of 'the concentration, the unification and the cohesion' of the feminine element. This direct association between Vuillard's composition and form and Fouillée's terminology may seem over-determined, but it serves to articulate the extent to which each surface, whether maternal body or domestic object, is treated with an equivalent decorative and textural value so that the maternal body is rendered almost indistinguishable amongst the contours and surfaces onto which it is displaced and which, in turn, project back a metaphorical language of maternal interiority.

Maternal body and domestic interior are rendered most cohesive in a painting of 1893, *Madame Vuillard Sewing* (Fig. 4). As with other images of this type, Vuillard has reduced the figure of his mother to a now familiar pictorial motif whilst undermining the sitter's individual identity. Nonetheless, the maternal figure's symbolic presence is endlessly reproduced across the textures, patterns, and colours of this space. The most elemental physiognomic details of the figure find their decorative equivalent throughout the painting. The figure's white blouse is replicated in the solid form of the door against which the maternal body is placed. As the eiderdown the figure repairs is folded back over itself it threatens to overwhelm the maternal body at the same time as it finds its pictorial equivalent, in terms of comforting plumpness, in the body of the figure itself. In another instance, the muted pink tones of the pattern picked out across the blue wallpaper appear to replicate the dimensions and rhythmical effect of the figure's vaguely rendered hands. Although the maternal figure is almost occluded by the forms that surround it, the viewer retains an overwhelming sense of physical proximity to the maternal body through the soothing textures, tones, and patterns constituting the painted surface. The painting retains a vivid sense of the pleasure the artist took in imagining, remembering, and representing the maternal body within a domestic setting. It is a pleasure that is re-enacted in the perceptual slowness of the viewer's gaze that absorbs and is absorbed by the maternal body as it is displaced across the painted surface.

There may be a related discourse at play here, one linked to the most archaic kinds of nurture and sensory pleasure an infant can gain in relation to the maternal body: breastfeeding. Whilst threatening to overwhelm the maternal body as it is folded back over itself, a corner of the suggestively corporeal striped eiderdown is lovingly held within this figure's touch and gaze, at the site of the maternal breast, the painting's compositional nucleus, where it equally issues from this core in a dense flow out towards the lower right corner of the painting. Though it may initially seem far-fetched to suggest that *Madame Vuillard Sewing* obliquely depicts the resonance of a filial longing for the maternal breast, the belief that the maternal body continued to operate as a life-long sanctuary for the adult child was commonly articulated during this period, as were nostalgic fantasies of infantile pleasure at the maternal breast.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, imagining the eiderdown as simultaneously a breastfeeding infant and the flow of breast milk is entirely consistent with the way Vuillard's work dissolves the maternal body into its domestic surroundings, substituting flesh for furniture and fabric.

### Breast Is Best

Breastfeeding constituted a painterly motif of considerable fascination for Vuillard's contemporaries, part of the broader explosion of maternal imagery fostered by the Third Republic and taken up by male artists from across the



political and artistic spectrum. As with the 'equality in difference' literature, it might be possible to detect some political differences in the extent to which these breastfeeding images emphasise a biological context for breastfeeding. Like Vuillard, many artists staged their immediate family and personal circumstances as the objects of a generalising discourse. These included, most notoriously, the anti-feminist republican Auguste Renoir with his mid-1880s series of overtly ideological breastfeeding images and sculptures.<sup>43</sup> The series, including the Musée d'Orsay's 1885 *Maternity*, features his ample future wife Aline and chubby son Pierre being breastfed in a cottage garden, sometimes in unsubtle juxtaposition with a cat licking itself. In each instance the central focus of the painting or sculpture is given over to the meeting of infant and maternal body at the fleshy site of the breast, proudly held out to the child's lips. Less biological but no less ideological are anti-clericalist and pro-reform republican Eugène Carrière's many breastfeeding paintings featuring his wife and children in interiors, including the Musée d'Orsay's *Maternity*. Here the maternal body is rendered entirely coherent with the textural plenitude of its domestic surroundings, including the breast and other small areas of exposed skin. Most immediate to Vuillard's artistic context are the breastfeeding paintings by fellow Nabis artist, the committed Catholic, Maurice Denis. These include his 1895 *Maternity with lace cuffs* (Fig. 5), an unidentified portrait of his wife and one of their seven children in the guise of a modern Madonna and Child. Here fleshiness returns, to the extent that it is allowed to return according to the pictorial codes of Denis's neo-traditionalist aesthetic.<sup>44</sup> Note how the door and striped fabric of *Mother with lace cuffs* bear a passing similarity to the form and location of these elements in Vuillard's *Madame Vuillard Sewing*. Vuillard, who neither married nor knowingly became a father, did not make maternal breastfeeding in the conventional sense of the motif a core part of his repertoire, though he did produce the odd image of a wet-nurse in a park, breast demurely hidden. Other than the case I am making for an oblique nostalgic reference to it in *Madame Vuillard Sewing*, the 1899 lithograph *The Birth of Annette* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) probably comes closest to this type of motif in Vuillard's practice as it locates the tiny face of his newborn niece close to the maternal body and at the core of a vortex of fabrics and furniture, including a striped mattress, with which, again, the maternal body has been rendered seamless. In this instance, the maternal figure extends into a sheet, the kind of item that might ordinarily reside in a linen cupboard.

Of course, the overinflated spectre of the *femme nouvelle* and the feminist politics that inadvertently produced it seem a convincing means of explaining the popularity of the breastfeeding motif amongst Vuillard's contemporaries, not least in the case of political reactionaries like Renoir and Denis. But this and the related textual culture of filial nostalgia for the maternal breast may be more specifically symptomatic of a reaction to *puériculture*, France's burgeoning medical discourse in relation to infant care. Professional concern for infant care with a view to cutting mortality rates was galvanised by the passing of the 1874 Roussel law, but it took more than a decade for the infant care agenda to gain full public recognition.<sup>45</sup> In the interests of infant care, *puériculture* professionals took an unromantic approach to maternal responsibility that explicitly challenged long-standing ideological positions and the hegemonic republican conception of maternal domesticity exemplified by the 'equality in difference' agenda. In particular, *puériculture* professionals campaigned for the introduction of work-based crèches aimed at helping mothers to continue working whilst caring for and even breastfeeding their

43. T. Garb, 'Renoir and the Natural Woman', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1985, pp. 11–14.

44. Maurice Denis [pseud. Pierre Louis], 'Définition du Neo-Traditionisme', *Art et critique*, 23 August 1890, pp. 540–2 and 30 August 1890, pp. 556–8.

45. George D. Sussman, 'The End of the Wet-Nursing Business in France, 1874–1914', *Journal of Family History*, vol. 2, no. 3, Fall 1977, p. 237.

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**Fig. 6.** Paul-César Helleu, *Hide and Seek*, date unknown, coloured pencil on paper. Musée Bonnat, Bayonne. (Photo: Musée Bonnat, Bayonne, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.)

children.<sup>46</sup> It is not difficult to see how an authoritatively pragmatic conceptualisation of motherhood that sought to promote the funding of extra-domestic spaces for mothers and infants might elicit a nostalgic reaction from artists and others aimed at shoring-up the spatial, ideological, and representational boundaries of the maternal.

One might wonder why the childless Vuillard would have taken an interest in, let alone have been aware of, infant care discourses prior to the birth of his niece in 1899? I suspect that issues of infant care were a topic of everyday conversation for the small cohort of seamstresses Madame Vuillard employed in her corsetry atelier, located in the same Parisian apartments that mother and son shared and which were also the location of his 'studio-bedroom' practice. Besides, *biberons* (glass feeding bottles featuring a rubber nipple sometimes attached to a pipe) were a marketing phenomenon of the 1890s and undoubtedly precipitated a decline in breastfeeding that lasted into the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> The subject of a special display at the 1889 Universal Exhibition, *biberons* were not new products but their market potential only began to be fully realised during the early 1890s when pasteurised milk was first made commercially available. Contemporary infant care experts now began to recommend bottle-feeding as a safe and superior alternative to outsourced wet-nursing in the event that the preferred option of maternal breastfeeding were not possible.<sup>48</sup> Vuillard was born in 1868 in the small town of Cuiseaux, Saône-et-Loire (the Vuillards relocated from the Jura provinces to Paris in 1877). As a child born in this era in a rural region to a moderately bourgeois mother that did not work (the corsetry business was started in 1879, five years before Monsieur Vuillard's death), Vuillard had a good chance of having been maternally breastfed as opposed to having been wet-nursed, the latter being the more common practice for infants born in urban areas.<sup>49</sup> But whether Vuillard and his contemporaries were nursed by their mothers or by wet-nurses, they were almost certainly breastfed since survival rates for babies drinking unpasteurised cow's milk were poor.<sup>50</sup> So, it is not unreasonable to consider that the now legitimate and hard-to-miss spectre of the clinical *biberon* (regardless of marketing attempts to promote its 'natural' credentials) would have galvanised all kinds of filial longing, whether as memory trace or pure fantasy, for the concept of the soft and sheltering lost maternal breast, whether that nostalgia is staged with the transparency of Denis or the opacity of Vuillard. But whatever Denis and Vuillard may have or have not shared as an impetus, it is tempting to interpret Vuillard's oblique foray into the breastfeeding theme as a knowingly playful re-working of this over-exposed motif, though it is debatable whether this alternative significance would have registered with most contemporary critics had *Madame Vuillard Sewing* been exhibited alongside Denis' *Maternity with lace cuffs*.<sup>51</sup>

### At the Mother Cupboard

Alexandre Charpentier's 1882 relief, *Maternity*, was one of the most celebrated breastfeeding images of the late nineteenth century. The plaster original was purchased by the state in 1883 and subsequently re-worked by the sculptor into various stone and metal versions including his 1893 *Layette Cupboard* (Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels). This wall-mounted cabinet features interior compartments upholstered in silk for the storage and display of a baby's precious clothes, whilst the pewter relief of a breastfeeding mother and infant forms part of the fabric of the cupboard itself. *Layette Cupboard*

46. Dr Gonzague Eustache, *La Puériculture: Hygiène et assistance* (Librairie J.-N. Baillière et fils: Paris, 1903), pp. 276–81. See also Paul Strauss, *De population et puériculture*, (Charpentier: Paris, 1901) and Dr Henri Fischer, *Puériculture. Hygiène et assistance*, (Baillière: Paris, 1903).

47. Sussman 'The End of the Wet-Nursing Business' (1977), p. 251–3.

48. Sussman 'The End of the Wet-Nursing Business' (1977), p. 241–2.

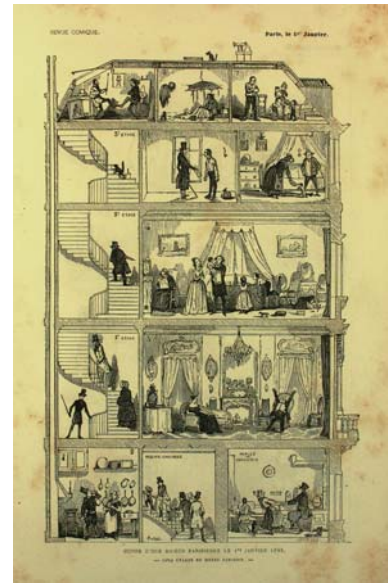
49. George D. Sussman, 'The Wet-Nursing Business in Nineteenth-Century France', *French Historical Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, Autumn 1975, pp. 307–9 and 322.

50. Sussman 'The Wet-Nursing Business' (1975), p. 321.

51. In the event *Madame Vuillard Sewing* was publically exhibited for the first time in 1968. Salomon and Cogeval, 'Vuillard', vol. 1 (2003), p. 306.

materially engages an established metaphorical association between the maternal body and the cupboard that found other manifestations including society portraitist Paul-César Helleu's drawing *Hide and Seek* (Fig. 6), in which the maternal figure momentarily represents for the young child the emerging contents of an imposing cupboard and, of course, Vuillard's *The Linen Closet*. In the terms of mid- to late nineteenth-century discourses of domesticity, the armoire or bedroom wardrobe, a high-cost item usually purchased upon marriage, functioned as a symbol of a family's prosperity and domesticity and was traditionally used to store expensive linens.<sup>52</sup> Turn-of-the-century domestic manuals were still keen to emphasise to young women how learning to store and arrange cloth in cupboards (armoire or simple placard à linge) constituted an important step in the process of becoming a good wife and mother, though in the context of mass-produced textiles it is questionable whether young women felt the same way.<sup>53</sup> Despite, or perhaps even as a result of, the decline in the economic value of linens, in the 1890s the cupboard metaphorically signified a mother's obedience to the codes and rituals of domesticity, but also and by extension, operated as a metaphorical signifier of the mother herself; perhaps even more so in relation to a woman of Madame Vuillard's age.<sup>54</sup> *The Linen Closet* is just one of several mother-cupboard images that constitute a distinct sub-category of the maman-motif images and analysis of these paintings suggests a protracted, knowing, and rather more playful analysis of the symbolic affiliation between the maternal body and the cupboard than either Helleu or Charpentier envisaged.

At the most fundamental level, Vuillard's interiors suggest their own metaphorical relation to the internal compartments of a cupboard. The maman-motif images give experiential texture to the apartment building cross-section's (Fig. 7) satirical compartmentalisation of domestic life as a result of the emphatic perspectival blindness of their windowless rooms, the physiognomic dissolution of the body into furniture and fabric and, in the specific example of *The Linen Closet*, the dematerialisation of the linen cupboard itself which, as suggested above, invites the painting in its entirety to be imagined as the internal compartment of a cupboard. In notable contrast to *The Linen Closet*, the large chest of drawers featured in the 1893 *Interior: the Artist's Mother and Sister* (Fig. 8) dominates the compositional structure of the painting. Its physical and symbolic function extends, moreover, in direct relation to the maternal figure located in front of the cupboard. Note how maternal body and cupboard balance each other in terms of sheer physical presence, monochrome colouring, and absence of detail. Moreover, each is solidly anchored within the space whilst other elements, including the deflated female figure and highly patterned wall to the left appear weightless by comparison. No longer 'turned towards the interior' or lost in some routine domestic task, this maternal figure is emphatically present, though I am not intending to imply that this presence in some way signifies 'the real' Madame Vuillard. Wearing the colour more closely affiliated with contemporary male costume and holding a pose notably reminiscent of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' 1832 *Louis-François Bertin* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), the maternal body is masculinised in comparison with its regular more plump form and when juxtaposed with the deflated, even emasculatory, form of the second female figure. Located in front of and in emphatic symbolic relation to the cupboard, the maternal body in this painting appears to be surprisingly authoritative; one might even say, phallic. At the same time, the implied viewer's normatively stable relation to the pictorial space is undone as the floor rushes steeply away and as their gaze,



**Fig. 7.** Bertall, 'Cross-section of a Parisian apartment building, 1 January 1845 - Five floors of Parisian Society', *Le Diable à Paris* (J. Hetzel: Paris, 1845-1846), vol. 2, 1846, p. 27. (Photo: Special Collections, Cadbury Research Library, The University of Birmingham.)

52. Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1996), pp. 273-7.

53. 'AUNT MARTHA: "This is something essential in a household, little one. Special cupboards must be assigned to laundry and arranged with the utmost care. The household linen must not be confused with the linen for each person. Everyone has a place here"'. ('TANTE MARTHE: "C'est une chose essentielle dans un ménage, petite. Des armoires spéciales doivent être affectées au linge rangé avec le plus grand soin. Le linge de maison ne doit pas être confondu avec le linge de chacun. Tout le monde a sa place ici."'). Aline Valette, *La Journée de la petite ménagère*, (G. Delarue: Paris, 1883), 1898, p. 97.) For the changing economic value and status of domestic linens, see Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1992), p. 101.

54. 'Nothing speaks better for a woman than the look of a carefully maintained linen cupboard'. ('Rien ne parle mieux en faveur d'une femme que l'aspect d'une armoire à linge entretenue avec soin.' Ernestine Wirth, *Premier leçons d'économie domestique*, (Librairie Hachette et Cie: Paris, 1886), p. 45.); 'It is Saturday evening or Sunday morning when the mistress of the



**Fig. 8.** Édouard Vuillard, *Interior: the Artist's Mother and Sister*, 1893, oil on canvas, 46.3 × 56.5 cm. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. Gift of Mrs Saidie A. May. 141.1934. (Photo: DIGITAL IMAGE © [2011] The Museum of Modern Art/SCALA, Florence.)

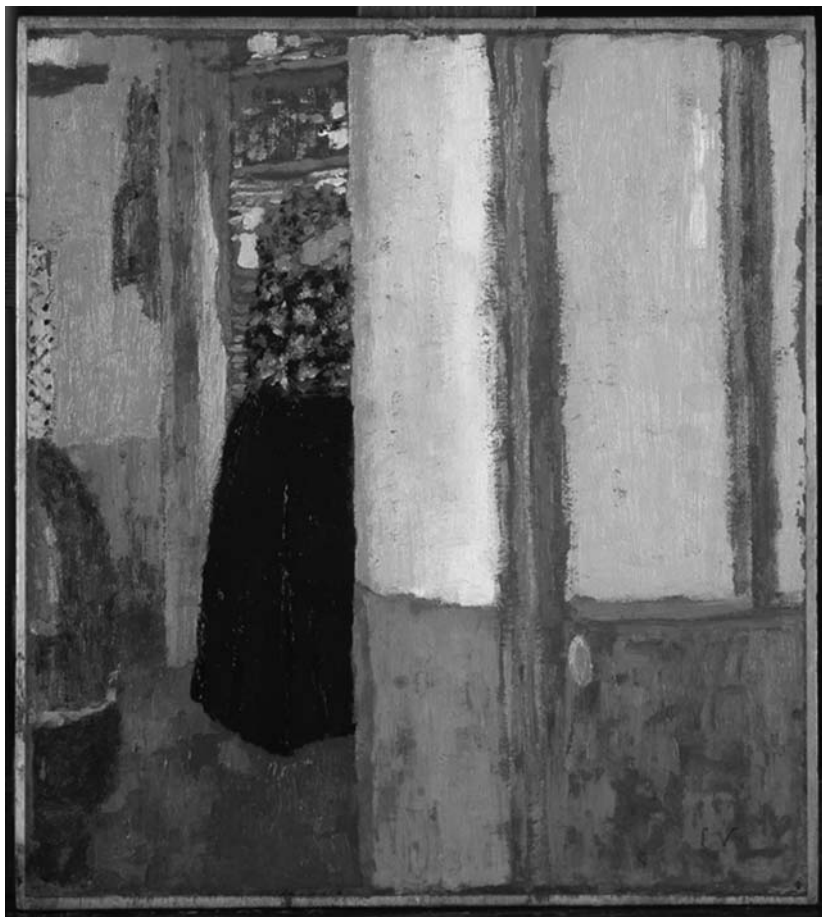
house distributes both to children and to servants, the following week's linen. . . On the basis of this truth we believe a principle can be established: where there is order in the linen of a house there is order in all the house'. ('C'est le samedi soir ou le dimanche matin que la maîtresse de maison distribue tant aux enfants qu'aux domestiques, le linge nécessaire pour la semaine suivante. . . Nous croyons que l'on peut ériger en aphorisme cette vérité: Lorsqu'il y a de l'ordre dans le linge d'une maison il y a de l'ordre dans toute la maison.' Augusta Moll-Weiss, *Le Livre du foyer* (Librairie Armand Colin: Paris, 1912), p. 167.)

for the first time in this analysis of the *maman*-motif, is met by that of the maternal figure. In Lacanian terms, this maternal figure offers the implied viewer the longed-for object of desire: the lost maternal gaze. And yet it is here, where the implied viewer seemingly achieves recognition as a separate subjective presence in the eyes of the maternal that the maternal figure and its metaphorical representative, the cupboard, are made to appear unacceptably, even terrifyingly, omnipotent.

*Interior: the Artist's Mother and Sister* constitutes a highly unusual, certainly ambivalent, take on the *maman*-motif, though one that seems entirely knowing from Vuillard's perspective. In the specific context of the mother–cupboard thematic, the c. 1894–1895 *Woman at a Cupboard* (Fig. 9) constitutes a rather more familiar version. As with *The Linen Closet*, this is a painting that portrays the maternal figure in the self-absorbed task of arranging the contents of a cupboard, in this instance the china and glassware of a large kitchen cupboard. Once again the figure is contained within a small area of the composition where, in this instance, the body becomes physically constricted by the forms of the cupboard itself. The door of the kitchen cupboard remains only partially open to the left of the figure, whilst an ill-defined compositional relationship between cupboard, kitchen wall, and glass-panelled door dominates the right vertical, creating the effect of a large door folding away from the viewer and towards the compositional centre of the painting. Both 'doors' reach towards and across the body, producing the playful visual effect of pushing the maternal figure into the cupboard itself.

A slightly later painting, produced as Vuillard was starting to turn away from sub-Symbolist artistic principles, the 1900 *La Coiffure* or *Madame Vuillard arranging her hair* (Fig. 10), once again enacts the mother–cupboard thematic, in this





**Fig. 9.** Édouard Vuillard, *Woman at a Cupboard*, c. 1894–1895, oil on cardboard mounted on cradled panel, 37 × 33 cm. Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne. (Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln.)

instance, in relation to a mirrored armoire. Even as slight accessions are made to spatial legibility and naturalistic detail such as the haptic difference between woven rug and polished wood, many of the tropes we have come to associate with the *maman*-motif images are present. These include a rear view of the maternal figure largely articulated as patterned fabric and absorbed, tonally in this instance, into its domestic setting and self-absorbed in the task of applying the finishing touches of a toilette. Here our analysis of the mother–cupboard category reaches its fruition for in this toilette scene the maternal figure’s identification with the cupboard is staged in three related ways. First, as a figure in front of the cupboard arranging its hair; secondly, as a figure reflected on the surface of the cupboard, ostensibly registering as part of the fabric of the cupboard itself; and, finally, as a figure inside the cupboard, its shut-up contents. This and the other mother–cupboard images, when considered together, offer a playful comment upon the cupboard as a maternal metaphor that brings to mind a letter Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess in 1897. In this letter, Freud described to Fliess ‘memories’ from when he was two-and-a-half years old in which he imagines his mother to be both ‘standing in front of a cupboard’ and then later, to be ‘shut up in this wardrobe or cupboard’.<sup>55</sup> Freud’s recollection suggests two points of significance to our understanding of

55. The content of the memory is described and analysed in Sigmund Freud, ‘Childhood Memories and Screen Memories’ (1901, 1907), trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 6, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, p. 50 and quoted in Mary Jacobus, ‘Freud’s Mnemonic: Screen Memories and Feminist Nostalgia’, *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art and Psychoanalysis* (Routledge: New York and London, 1995), p. 6.



**Fig. 10.** Édouard Vuillard, *Madame Vuillard arranging her hair*, 1900, oil on canvas, 49.5 × 35.5 cm. Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham. (Photo: By permission of the Trustees of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham.)

Vuillard's practice and the historical and theoretical significance of its meanings for the maternal. First, Freud's re-imagining of the maternal body as a domestic object dates further back than his 1920 conceptualisation of the fort-da game. This locates in the 1890s concepts that would subsequently inform the development of object-relations theory in the 1920s. Secondly, it bears direct comparison with Vuillard's contemporaneous conceptualisation of the maternal figure, firmly locating Vuillard's approach within a wider culture of filial dialogues and suggesting, in this instance, that Freud may have known something of what Vuillard knew.

In discussing the function of the maternal in psychoanalytic discourse, Mary Jacobus has analysed Freud's recollection in order to highlight the significance of 'autobiographical memories' for the origins of psychoanalysis and to illustrate how, in psychoanalytic theory, the infant subject's attainment of subjectivity is dependent upon imagining the mother's discursive interiority.<sup>56</sup> It would be possible to end my analysis of Vuillard's maman-motif here by claiming, as Jacobus has claimed of Freud, that Vuillard's achievement of artistic identity is enacted at the expense of Madame Vuillard's subjectivity and is metaphorically represented in the mother-cupboard paintings by the transition of the maternal figure from container to contained. I can imagine concluding along the lines of Suleiman: whilst the avant-garde artist may 'play with the body of his mother', he can never imagine 'his mother playing'.<sup>57</sup> Here, Vuillard's Lacanian dismissal would flow neatly into his ideological dismissal. Certainly, the largely ideological meanings fostered by the 1890s critical response offer little to suggest otherwise. Except, that is, for Gustave Geffroy whom, we may remember, described Vuillard as 'an intimiste with a delicious sense of humour, knowing how to mix the melancholic and the comic'.<sup>58</sup> It seems Geffroy glimpsed an ironic potential to Vuillard's art that, again, signals historically and theoretically significant meanings for the maternal. Perhaps, it was irony that led Vuillard to re-work the breastfeeding motif in *Madame Vuillard Sewing*. And maybe a more general sense of ironic engagement with the formulaic status of the maternal in the work of his peers motivated Vuillard's complex temporal layering of filial experience and desire in paintings of a mature maternal figure. Certainly, Geffroy's citation of 'the melancholic and the comic' gestures towards Vuillard's seemingly knowing capacity to evoke boyish longing for the maternal body via its playful manipulation and metaphorical association with domestic space and its objects. What Geffroy could not have known was the extent to which a full articulation of the maman-motif's historical and theoretical significance could only be realised with reference to a parallel discursive formation: object-relations theory.

Psychoanalytically, there are glimpses of a less dismissive interpretation. Both the child's attainment and the mother's loss of subjectivity are imagined too completely in the negative Lacanian model cited by Suleiman and Jacobus. Elements of semiotic glossalalia, of the artist's failure to achieve full artistic subjectivity, might be deemed to linger in those inexplicable black brushstrokes to the left of the figure in *The Linen Cupboard*. And what are we to make of the insistent personality of the maternal figure in *Madame Vuillard arranging her hair*, the painting in which the maternal figure appears to be most contained? This figure has hands, rather large hands, and these hands are fleshy, the paint having been thickly applied. The more visible hand is even constituted of gnarled fingers and a thumb, whilst the positioning of the thumb and the strangely brief forearm from which the hand extends, indicates that this figure's arms are tightly crossed over its chest; connoting a mature woman fussing about her hair to characteristically comic effect. And

56. Jacobus analyses Freud's recollection of his mother's status as both container and content, by drawing upon the latter's cupboard metaphor: 'The persistent but unacknowledged punning on insides and outsides points to an indeterminate structure: the mother is both inside the cupboard, its shut-up or repressed content, and the cupboard itself - the 'inside' that contains the baby (inside its inside)... The mother is always absent, lost or sequestered, and always doubly inscribed - both contained and container, both the content of memory and the structure that produces 'mother' as its meaning...'. Jacobus, *First Things*, p. 7.

57. Suleiman, *Subversive Intent*, p. 145.

58. Geffroy, 'Chez Le Barc de Boutteville' (1892), pp. 381-2.



59. Mavor, *Reading Boyishly*, p. 35.

when we look in more detail at the reflection contained on and inside the cupboard, it is possible to determine a face vaguely composed of a pair of eyes, a nose, and even a smile. By virtue of Vuillard's more naturalistic approach it seems this maternal figure is enabled to achieve a (limited) playful individuality that is otherwise absent from the maman-motif paintings, and which disrupts the Lacanian narrative drive towards the maternal figure's discursive interiority.

Finally, Mavor's account of boyish desire offers an alternative rationale for the maman-motif and its erasure of maternal subjectivity to those that are artistic, ideological, or Lacanian. Turning the maternal figure towards the interior might be interpreted as 'a feminine (maternal) act' on behalf of a loving son protective of his mother's identity.<sup>59</sup> In an institutional and discursive climate dominated by the public representation and discussion of domestic life, perhaps Vuillard has only offered to view that which he wants to be seen: an approximation of his mother and her everyday habits. But however persuasive this simple explanation may appear to be, it probably offers Vuillard one indulgence too many in my attempt to resolve his practice to the terms of a more positive feminist analysis.

*I would like to express my gratitude to Tamar Garb for helping me to shape early versions of this research.*