



# Alimentary Images as Metaphor of Education

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore how the history of images and conceptual metaphors resulting from them that we use in educational reflections are formed regardless of if they are problematized in practical life. Insight into history shows how these images are shaped not only by our own experiences and by the context of our lives, but also by the history of such images, which are unconsciously inscribed in our metaphorical speech through so called “residues of meaning”. The paper clarifies this, using the examples of *alimentary images*, that are a transition from *nutrix* (wet nurse) to *nutritor* (teacher). The text offers selected examples of consideration of alimentary images. These are among the most primitive and therefore the deepest images of human experience. This history is an example of a cultural line that goes from ancient educational imagination to the more recent forms of such images, even if always with different accents.

**Keywords** Alimentary Images · Residues of Meaning · Metaphors · Language · Education

There are many metaphors, images, symbolic mythic structures that are unconsciously used in ordinary speech, our attitudes, and social frameworks. These conceptual metaphorical systems are an everyday part of our language without our questioning or considering them in any way; they are “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action” as Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 454) have pointed out. We have long since ceased to look for any deep symbolism or uplifting meaning in them; many of them are no longer the subject of our meditations; they have remained for us merely the automated semantic elements of our speeches, communication strategies, culture and lives. As Deignan (2005; pp. 13–24) has shown, conceptual metaphors are now also the subject of cognitive research, since they have an important influence on the structuring of our thinking, knowledge and abstract language, they are based on our physical experiences, and they can constitute an

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ideological foreground for various prejudices or ideas. In this sense, conceptual metaphors have an unquestionable influence on social reality, on our understanding of human beings, and lead to serious ethical implications (Mattice 2014, p. 17), which is the greater the more it concerns the field of education.

But before the conceptual metaphor was formed, imagination had to play its part. Metaphors are shaped on the foundation of beloved or preferred images. None of these images is entirely meaningless, for at their base are present what I would like to call *the residues of meaning*. These residues may be inactive or latent, but—though unnoticeable by sedimentation—they remain present in the images we take up from the past to describe somehow our present experience.

When we decide to trace the history of such images, they turn out to be dynamic and intricate. Let me follow one line of such history, the history of what I will here call the culture of *alimentary images*. It is one type of what I dare to call *imaginative sets*, collections of preferred images. We can track them back to their earliest uses, though their full origins may already be lost to us. Alimentary images refer to nourishing, breastfeeding children, common receiving food, but they also refer to practices of education, learning and receiving knowledge, and of political growth (in classical Athens, constitution was understood by Socrates as *trophe*, nourishment of people; Zvarik 2023; p. 29). Historically and ideologically, they have carried a strong feminine aspect of motherhood and intimate care, even if they have also often been masculinized by reducing women's role in generative acts to breastfeeding and maternal care, as pointed out by some feminist philosophers, such as Irigaray (2013; p. 81; 1987, p. 302; and see also Freeland 2005; p. 38). Feminist philosophy can undoubtedly be a good guide in such a topic, and I will touch on it lightly in some places of my paper, although my intention here is not to pursue gender discussions of masculinities and femininities of our attitudes. Nevertheless, we should not bypass them, as they offer important material for reflection on how we think about our professions, families, and relationships.

Well, but does not a philosopher run a risk today when he writes about maternal images of education? Why again immerse oneself in the history of images that express only a particular aspect of education and care for the psycho-physical and spiritual growth of man? I am convinced that the significance of such a project lies in the description of anthropologically determined symbolic structures that have gained and lost their solidity, at times dominant, at other times in crisis, but these imaginative structures stubbornly (whether this is a positive or a negative feature) persist in our experiences. It is not enough to say that our imagination is involved in shaping how we understand the value of education or even the social world. Something more needs to be added: understanding our imaginative practices and dealing with it creatively can lead us to a crucial deepening of the meaning of pedagogical work. What does it mean to nourish/teach someone? And what does healthy nutrition mean here? Can male teachers empathize with the women embodiment, with a mother nourishing child from within in its prenatal years? And although they have many times in the past appropriated the role of teachers as 'nurturers,' how can deepened reflection on this link between nourishing and teaching change their current pedagogical practice? I will glad, if this text offers at least a hint of answers to these philosophical questions.

In the paper, I will first explain what I mean by *the residues of meaning* and how it relates to the topic of my paper. Then, I will turn to the issue of *alimentary images*. This will open the way for a historical excursus that will show the formation of this concept and its

meaning-shifts in different periods. We will move from early Christianity (where alimentary images dominated in the framework of Western experience) through the Carolingian Renaissance and the Middle Ages to a completely new use of alimentary imagery which no longer develops on the field of Christian thought but breaks away from it (for example, in Jules Michelet, in psychoanalysis, or in Gaston Bachelard).

To begin with, let me touch more closely on why and in what context I speak of the residues of meaning.

## Sedimented Meaning

Discussing about speech, language and meaning, French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1996; p. 127) in 1958–1959 wrote about “the production of a whole new meaning from elements that are retained in it, that no longer need to be considered separately” and he called such an act “sedimentation”.

What do these words of Merleau-Ponty mean? The history of an expression is intertwined with the latent history of its meaning. Even when we return to old, established meanings, we always do so “by a sort of *ruse*”—as Merleau-Ponty (1964; p. 92) writes in his *Signs*—when we espouse “them only in order to infuse them with a new life.” And so it has been in their past usages. Words or images serve as units of the complex of our speech, and these units are already established, sedimented, embodied, commonplace, even seeming to be contentless and empty, without any conscious symbolical value.

In another lecture from 1959 to 1960, Merleau-Ponty (1970; p. 120) writes: “The sedimentation which makes it possible for us to go further is also responsible for us being threatened by hollow thoughts and for the sense of origins becoming void. The true cannot be defined outside of the possibility of the false.” The sedimented sense is unproblematized, experienced, profane, speech-in-action. We do not resolve the meaning of every image or metaphor we use, we do not have to reactivate them endlessly, we take the phonic node along with the residues of meaning it contains. What we are reproducing anew is the entire image context. Through the meaningless we understand the world; through the nothing we understand the being. As Merleau-Ponty points out in another lecture, spoken language is sedimentation, speech runs forward, ordinary communication does not like philosophical stops. Ordinary speech is a speech in action and for Merleau-Ponty philosophy should not be only reflection or description, but also active engagement on life activities (see Lipták 2021; pp. 278–279), including ordinary communication. And thus Merleau-Ponty (2003; p. 227) writes—referring to Jean Giraudoux—that the world is a *caryatid of the void*:<sup>1</sup> as when I put my hands behind my head, and it looks as if I am supporting the whole heavy world with them; heavy world with hidden meaning.

However, what happens when we step into history of meanings? By examining history, we cannot revive or reactivate the meaning of a symbol that is not reflected in ordinary speech. The meaning of a word or an image is only revived by its use in language, and this without regard to the lofty considerations of philosophers. For the practical ends of life, such histories are a useless adjunct, a cultural ornament, an unimportant digression that leads one away from the practical to the theoretical or the ideal. The work in history is a search for the truth about man, culture and society, and in this sense, it is an anthropological pursuit.

<sup>1</sup> See also Merleau-Ponty (1964; p. 242).

Nevertheless, I think that the meaning attached to an old myth, symbol or image never completely disappears. Even as a relic, it carries residues of meaning. The meaning of these metaphorical or mythical areas remains as if coiled, encapsulated in speech act.

These residues of meaning are not only a testimony to the fact that a certain mythical image once, in the distant past, made sense to those who used it and had immediate access to it, but that the same mythical image could, in a modified form, describe the cultural experience today, since it was originally based on it. However, it may encounter uninterest, misunderstanding, misinterpretation, reframing and so on. Eliade (1963; p. 176) expresses this idea very precisely: “Mythical thought transcends and discards some of its earlier expressions, outmoded by History, and adapts itself to the new social conditions and new cultural fashions—but it resists extirpation.”

It is the same with the history of alimentary images, which I would like to point to here as one example.

## Alimentary Images

When I studied the images and metaphors that we usually use to refer to reading and education, one group (an imaginative set) consisted precisely of images related to nourishment. These alimentary images mark a transition from the notion of *nutrix* (breastfeeding woman) to *nutritor* (teacher). The Latin *alere* (to eat, to nourish oneself or someone else) stands not only at the base of the word *aliment*, but also *alumnus* (pupil) or in the old but still used designation of a university as an *alma mater* (nourishing mother), a term originally attributed to the earth by Lucretius.<sup>2</sup>

Today, when we speak of a book, for example, as *nourishing* (in terms of information or value), aren't we quite naturally keeping alive this old image of alimentation which has incorporated itself in our speech precisely because it was based on cultural and anthropological assumptions that remain valid today? We must often use such an image unreflectively. However, some residues of meaning that made the old image meaningful are still present: at least, latently.

The term alimentary image is not exactly a new phenomenon. The German literary historian Curtius (2013; pp. 134–136) used the term “alimentary metaphors,” pointing out how often the metaphor of eating as learning occurs, for example, in St. Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* (*vescentes atque discentes...*). Curtius also noticed that Alain de Lille in the 12th century in the *Book of Sentences* (interpreting verses about suckling from the breast of consolation in the prophet Isaiah 66:10–11) understood milk as “an elegant” comparison to Scripture and its traditional triad hermeneutic, speaking of the threefold breasts: the breasts of desolation, consolation, and fullness (the first being the breast of mothers, the second the breast of the church, and the third the breast of the heavenly Jerusalem).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Lucretius, *De rer. nat.* II, 992–998, in Titus (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Alanus de Insulis' *Liber sententiarum* in Migne's *Patrologiae cursus completus* [PL 210: 149], where Alanus distinguishes three substances: a watery liquid (*serum*, whey), cheese (*caseum*, which is separated from the whey), and butter (*butyrum quod pinguius est et lenificativam*, butter that is thick and soft). And this is according to him a natural reference to the threefold meaning of Scripture: historical, allegorical, tropological (moral). Let me note that three senses of Scripture through the metaphor of eating will also be used a few centuries later by Peter Abelard, albeit in a somewhat shifted context. In his nocturnal hymn *Dominica ad matutinum II* (*In II Nocturno*) he writes: „The triple intelligence provides various meals,

The metaphor of eating in the context of culture and education is quite common in today's language: we talk about the need to chew over an idea, to devour a book, to write a nourishing text, to feed others lies or foolishness, to satiate oneself with wisdom. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 470) said of this type of metaphor: "ideas are food".

If the mythical image is always anthropological and based on human and cultural experience, the alimentary image in Western literature also has several different levels: young children—as Clement of Alexandria observed—do not drink milk like full-grown, but they suck;<sup>4</sup> they do not make a choice but are totally dependent on the parent; without feeding, the child would languish. The alimentary image therefore includes the subjective field of such an experience as hunger, or the subjectivity of the hungry (and it makes a difference whether the subjective experience is that of an adult or that of a child).

It may be surprising that alimentary images have developed most strongly in the Christian milieu. It seems to be mildly obsessed with them; alimentary images are everywhere and develop into controversial, often bizarre consequences, although they take on different emphases at different times. In the history of Christianity it is not a monolithic phenomenon; it has its distinct types, and I would like to present these more closely here. From here it will be easier to show how the theme of suckling became detached from the purely Christian domain, but returned as a metaphor in the nineteenth century, albeit in a somewhat altered form.

After the Enlightenment, the topic of breastfeeding revived, but more as a medical issue. With the advent of abolitionist movements, a return to breastfeeding mothers and the non-enslavement of wet-nurses is emphasized (e.g. in Rousseau). The Enlightenment retains from the alimentary metaphor considerations about whether breast milk can change character traits in the newborn or whether wet nurses can inculcate primal prejudices and pseudo-scientific beliefs in children that will be later difficult to eradicate (Voltaire).

The alimentary image gets back to its mythical (figurative, metaphorical) function in the 19th century in Jules Michelet, but also through Freudian psychoanalysis (especially in Melanie Klein<sup>5</sup>) or later, through the theory of the primitivity of material and maternal images in Gaston Bachelard. And finally, contemporary philosophy (phenomenological and feminist) deals with the subject of breastfeeding through descriptions of maternal subjectivity, e.g. in Depraz (2007; pp. 163–180) or Sutherland (1999; p. 3), even if this is much more an area of subjectivity and its description that would require inevitably a separate treatise.

Leaving out a lot, let us now make an important transition and turn to history.

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abounds in various delights; the sacred table of fruitful Scripture feeds the little ones with history, the adults with mysticism, and moral lessons are imparted to the matures by their ardent study. (...) These meals, O God, have been prepared for us by your grace, to lift us up on our pilgrimage as the food of the wayfarers" [PL 178: 1775–1776].

<sup>4</sup> Clement of Alexandria: *Paedagogus* I, 36, 4 [PG 8].

<sup>5</sup> When Klein (1960; p. 185) describes childish cannibalism in reference to mother-food in the early stages of infant development, she talks about the infant's oral-sadistic phantasies, which combine the stages of oral-sucking and oral-biting, in which the infant wants to take possession not only of the mother's breast but of her whole body: "This desire to suck and scoop out, first directed to her breast, soon extends to the inside of her body ... I have described an early stage of development which is governed by the child's aggressive tendencies against its mother's body and in which its predominant wish is to rob her body of its contents and destroy it."

## Across History of Literary Feeding

The early Christian tradition took the concept of nourishment as the primary education from the ancient world. This did not just involve comparisons of the Earth to the Mother, descriptions of the goddess Ceres, and so on; ancient philosophers also created a certain platform of thought on which the theme could be further developed. Although Plato, in *Republic*, when describing the best society, says that children should be handed over to wet nurses to be fed and brought up after birth, he also warns “against the corrupting of children’s souls through the immoral stories told by the nurse (*trophos*). For Plato, education begins in the lap and at the breast of the one who provides the earliest nourishment” (Penniman 2017; p. 30).

However, the early Christian model of the alimentary myth is based on two key problems: the first is the image of God as a mother, the second, the words of the apostle Paul from the First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 3:2), “I have fed you with milk (as children in Christ), not with meat; for ye were not able, neither yet are ye now able.” This created the primary early Christian dilemma between Christians of the apostolic tradition and the Gnostics: milk or solid food?

First to the motherhood of God. Apparently in the 2nd century, a Syrian-Aramaic apocryphal text called the *Odes of Solomon* was written. The nineteenth of these odes (19, 1–5) says this: “The cup of milk was offered to me. And I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord’s kindness. The Son is the cup. And the Father is He who was milked. And the Holy Spirit is She who milked Him because His breasts were full; and it was undesirable that His milk should be released without purpose. The Holy Spirit opened Her bosom and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father. Then She gave the mixture to the generation without their knowing...” (Charlesworth 2011; p. 55). Strange words for today’s ears? It should come as no surprise that this text perhaps influenced early Christian fathers.

The second focal point is the passage of St. Paul cited above, which expresses the nourishment of beginning Christians with mother’s milk of the true doctrine. This would become a significant issue for Clement of Alexandria in his defence of the Christian image of the still-only-breastfed children of God versus the Gnostic emphasis on adulthood (those already eating solid food of knowledge).

The Christian, who is still on the way to but not at the goal of his pilgrimage, is described by Clement through the value of the childish and imperfect (*paidariódés kai ateilés*) rather than of the mature and knowledgeable (*teleiú kai gnostikú*). For Clement milk is a true symbol of the Word as spiritual food.

Here begins a longer passage on breast milk, inspired by the medicine of the time, which understood breast milk as foamy blood. This persisted into the Middle Ages, especially through the image of the pelican symbolizing Christ with a wound at his side—as it is known from anonymous writing *Physiologus*, sometimes wrongly attributed to Clement. He goes on to call the Church the virgin mother; as a virgin she nurses her children with milk, the Word, the body of Christ: “The Word is everything to the little one: father, mother, teacher and nurse.”<sup>6</sup> No longer is the image of breastfeeding here purely feminine, and in another passage Clement says that to satisfy desire is to give those who long for the Word

<sup>6</sup> Clem. *Paedag.* I, 42, 3.

the *breasts of paternal (!) love to drink their milk*.<sup>7</sup> At this point, breastfeeding becomes a metaphor for such a kind of nourishment that men can offer just as well as women.

Already here the role of the wet nurse, which in antiquity does not necessarily refer only to the mother, is shown. In fact, more affluent, even Christian families made it quite common for their children to be fed by wet nurses. Laes (2016; p. 190) argues that “the child in late antiquity had three functional authorities: the father, the mother, and the wet nurse.”

But the child’s upbringing also depended on what milk the child was raised on. Therefore, the choice of wet nurses was strictly monitored. Aristotle 1959 wrote in *Politics* that a village was originally a family settlement, and he called its members *milk brothers* or fellow-nurslings (*homogalaktas*), those raised on the same milk—fellow tribesmen, members of a clan.<sup>8</sup> The early Christian tradition takes the image of breastfeeding as the transmission of a particular tribal type of teaching and transforms it in its own context. Tertullian writes to the Carthaginian proconsul Scapulus about Antoninus Caracalla saying that he was “raised on Christian milk” (*lacte Christiano educatus*), for his father Severus had provided him with a Christian wet nurse (Penniman, p. 9). It seems he was raised on Christian milk ineffectively, however, because he did not like Christianity very much and later persecuted its followers.

Goes all the way back to St. Augustine. Severus, bishop of Mileve, in a letter to Augustine, writes that he values their friendship and says that he desires to suck wisdom from his friend’s breast: “I draw strength by clinging to you and sucking the abundance of your milk. May I thus be enabled to penetrate and explain those thoughts of yours, and may they deign to pour out to me whatever secret and hidden meaning they guard within them, even their very vitals, if possible, when I have removed the outer skin which is between my lips and the source of milk.”<sup>9</sup>

But Augustine himself often develops this, too, as we have already seen in his identification of eating and learning, but also, for example, in his *Confessions*.

Penniman (2017; p. 182) in his book *Raised on Christian Milk* also writes this about Augustine: “Augustine also refers to some of Ambrose’s circle as *sub Ambrosio nutritore*—apprenticed ‘under Ambrose the nourisher,’ or more emphatically, ‘raised on Ambrose’.” According to Penniman, *paideia* in the early Christian (but also Platonic) world was associated with nourishment (*trophé*). The terms pedagogue/nourisher and other related terms often referred to one and the same person who was expected to “nurture” the child—both in the sense of supporting its growth and education.

If we go on a few centuries further, we find the theme of nourishment as a doctrine especially in the Celtic milieu, in Ireland, and in texts from the Carolingian period. After founding of monasteries and their educational function, the form of monasticism changed later to quasi-family life, modelled on the Roman *paterfamilias*. Abbots, superiors, or bishops are suddenly those who offer “breastfeeding” to the other monks or believers (thus feeding others with sacred doctrine). Such a transformation of the female profession into the male world was a typical sublimation in the Middle Ages. Alcuin of York in his poem *Ad amicos poetae* (*Cartula, perge cito*) calls Bishop Bassinus of Speyer the nourishing father (*pater alme*) and his household the *alma domus* which made them friends.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Clem. *Paedag.* I, 46, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Arist. *Pol.* I, 1252b18–19. See also Penniman (2017; pp. 79–80).

<sup>9</sup> Letter 109 (Severus to Augustine) in Saint Augustine (2008; p. 238).

<sup>10</sup> Alcuin, *Carmina* IV, 57–58 in Dümmler (1881; p. 222).



Celtic culture understood the word *nutritor* (masculine form of *nutrix*) as a nourisher, a foster. Many early Celtic saints were often portrayed as having been fostered from childhood, with abbots and senior monks accustomed to calling themselves by the foster title *nutritor*, *altor*, *patronus*, and lay disciples called *alumni* or *daltai* (foster children, disciples in Irish) (Parkes 2006; pp. 370f). When John Scotus Eriugena writes his dialogue *Periphyseon* (ca. 866), the pair of disputants are identified as *nutritor* and *alumnus*. These expressions bring us back to the role of the mother, again ascribed to males and to still predominantly masculinely understood God.

The image of God (or Christ) as mother enters the new period of Middle Ages,<sup>11</sup> paradoxically, through St. Anselm, who in a prayer to St. Paul (written probably around 1170) calls Paul and Christ mothers: you are not only fathers, but also mothers: fathers in authority, mothers in kindness, fathers in learning, mothers in mercy.<sup>12</sup> This idea was later very popular, especially with the Cistercians, but also with other authors from the 12th to 15th century (especially in Julian of Norwich, 1343–1416) who linked education and pastoral care with motherhood and nourishment of Christ (Bynum 1988; pp. 112 and 127); the breast is not yet an erotic symbol and has almost exclusively the nourishing function of breastfeeding.

In the Speech 41 attributed to Meister Eckhart, its author writes that God is not only Father but also Mother, for if He were only Father, He would have departed from the house after creation as the builder of the house, but as Mother He continues to abide in it and preserves it in being.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in the Sermon on Sirach's words *Ego ex ore altissimi prodivi* Eckhart writes: "Where does the Father-nature have a maternal name? Where it does maternal work. Where the personal nature keeps to the unity of its nature and combines with it, there Fatherhood has a maternal name and is doing mother's work, for it is properly a mother's work to conceive. But there, where the eternal Word arises, in the essential mind, there Motherhood has a paternal name and performs paternal work" (Walsche 2009, p. 442).

The 12th century witnesses a grandiose revival of maternal and alimentary images. Bynum (1988; p. 4) quoted William of Saint Thierry who saw Incarnation as follows: "It is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish the holy infancy of your little ones. It was not the least of the chief reasons for your incarnation that your babes in the church, who still needed your milk rather than solid food, ... might find in you a form not unfamiliar to themselves." And later, Bynum (1988; p. 151) quotes another William of Saint Thierry's words: *gustare, hoc est intelligere*.

The great theme is again the connection between milk and blood, the image of the pelican and Christ's wound at the side (Bynum 1988; p. 178 and pp. 273–274). The image of Christ in Catherine of Siena is also maternal, the blood from the wound in Christ's side is like a milk from the breast, the blood being regarded as the quintessence of milk and food; like the woman's body it gives itself as an offering to the child, it gives itself, it is consumed, it becomes food—breastfeeding here means offering one's own body (Bynum 1988; p. 275).

The key biblical book here is the *Song of Songs*, which children had to read last in their Old Testament reading (Katz 2007; p. 122). Many medieval authors wrote commentaries about this biblical book, and it is significant that the topic of nursing breasts (of Virgin Mary, of Christ, of God, of Church, of Bride and of Bridegroom) was in play again in medieval

<sup>11</sup> This theme is broadly documented by Bynum (1982).

<sup>12</sup> Prayer to St Paul, especially v. 358–486 in Anselm of Aosta (1973; pp. 141–156).

<sup>13</sup> See Pfeiffer (1857; pp. 610–611).



hermeneutics. Jean-Louis Chrétien (2005) devoted one whole chapter to the subject of nourishing breasts in his book *Symbolique du corps*, where he read the *Song of Songs* through the eyes of early Christian and medieval thinkers and ends the chapter by noting that the horizon of the food that is the Word predominates here in all meanings of the breasts.

From a slightly different perspective (but still with the same focus on nursing as teaching), Marie-Madeleine Davy (1977; p. 65) reminds us that Bernard of Clairvaux writes in his sermon of the *Song of Songs* that it is time to do away with sweet kisses and devote oneself to nursing,<sup>14</sup> or “the need to abandon the contemplative life and devote oneself to teaching others.” The Bridegroom’s breasts, according to Bernard, symbolize patience and benevolence and his milk nourishes fervent souls. The Bride’s breasts nourish “new souls,” those who are already beginning to seek and love God (Davy 1977; p. 81).

Mystical visions of Bernard of Clairvaux (*lactatio sancti Bernardi*) were a basis for the later artistic genre of *virgo lactans*, the nursing Virgin Mary.

Although Renaissance art is permeated more often with the eroticized form of a naked nursing Madonna (remember, for example, Jean Fouquet’s *The Melun Diptych*), the subject of breastfeeding as education is less talked about. In the 15th century, at the very end of *De docta ignorantia*, Nicholas of Cusa develops the theme of satiation without over-satiation, but rather the talk is already of solid food.<sup>15</sup> He writes of a feast with an eternal, never-changing food (*cibus vitae*), a tasting (*fruitio*) in which the taste does not diminish, an absorption of the food-Jesus as “blessed forever”, whom Cusanus desires to consume/enjoy eternally. The alimentary image is modified by Nicholas of Cusa, but it still relates to teaching, to celestial education. Expressions such as the appetite for knowledge or the insatiable appetite to know, however, form the leitmotif of Cusanus’s entire work.

After the Renaissance and the return of women (especially those from wealthier circles) to social life, breastfeeding as a metaphor for teaching seems to disappear and in the same time women increasingly leave breastfeeding their children to wet nurses. This was a time when alimentary images seem to be completely absent. But quite unexpectedly the Enlightenment gives them a new lease of life. The subject of breastfeeding is most prominently treated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

In his *Emile*, Rousseau (1979; p. 42) raises the question that mothers are first educators for their children by breastfeeding. He considers this first education by women the most important. However, he knows that times have changed and: “Our first preceptor is our nurse. Thus, this word education had another meaning for the ancients which we no longer give to it.” But mothers under the influence of husbands, doctors, and especially their own mothers, have decided to stop nursing their babies and leave it to the alien wet nurses. According to Rousseau (1979; p. 45) it is better for the child to be nursed by a healthy wet nurse than by a spoiled, and thus bad mother, “if he had some new ill to fear from the same blood out of which he was formed.”

Rousseau adds, however, that the mother must nevertheless be uncomfortable that her child loves as much or more an alien woman (the wet nurse). If such a mother, Rousseau writes, dismisses the wet nurse after weaning her child, she is mistaken if she thinks that the child will now come to love her. For Rousseau (1979; p. 46), refusing to breastfeed one’s own child is the first corruption: “Do you wish to bring everyone back to his first duties?

<sup>14</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones in Cantica Canticorum*, Sermo IX, 6–7 [PL 183: 817–818].

<sup>15</sup> Cusanus, *De docta ignorantia* III, 12, 258–264 in Wilpert (1967).

Begin with mothers. You will be surprised by the changes you will produce. Everything follows successively from this first depravity. (...) Let women once again become mothers, men will soon become fathers and husbands again. Superfluous speeches! The very boredom of worldly pleasures never leads back to these. Women have stopped being mothers; they will no longer be; they no longer want to be. If they should want to be, they hardly could be. Today the contrary practice is established.”

Did Rousseau thereby refute our understanding of the nursery and kindergarten educator’s profession as an exclusively feminine, even maternal role? Does he bear responsibility for this gender-laden shorthand, according to which a man has no feel for this type of work or education? Is this description of femininity perhaps hiding a stereotypical attitude according to which a woman is supposed to be an image of tenderness and love, while a man is an image of reason and strength? Is it responsible for the persistent prejudice that milk belongs in school, where “it holds symbolic power,” as Deane and Schultz (2021; p. 197) have pointed out? Feminist and gender studies have already commented on these issues many times and very critically. But let us follow history and its shifts.

Rousseau may also have drawn on the teachings of the German physician Michael Ettmüller (1644–1683) who was the first to advocate the attachment of babies to their mothers’ breasts during the period of colostrum discharge, something which had been routinely forbidden in the previous period. But Ettmüller also believed that breast milk could not be judged by its density or taste, but rather by the transmission of the infant’s character and temperament. The French surgeon Jacques Guillemeau (1550–1613), who had a similar stance toward breastfeeding and the return to breastfeeding mothers, pointed out four problems with breastfeeding: “The first was the possibility of the child to be exchanged for another child, the second was that the love between mother and child might be reduced, the third was the possibility of the child adopting an undesirable trait from the nurse, and finally that the child might inherit the wet nurse’s bad physique.”<sup>16</sup>

Later, in *Lectures on pedagogy*, Immanuel Kant also devotes several paragraphs to breastfeeding and condemns the practice of pouring colostrum, which was the custom at the time (referring to Rousseau, who first brought this to the attention of physicians). He adds, however, that breastfeeding does not affect the child’s character traits in any way: “That the child soaks up dispositions with it—as the saying goes: ‘You have already soaked up that with your mother’s milk’—is a mere prejudice. It is most beneficial to the mother and the child if the mother breast-feeds in herself.”<sup>17</sup>

The topic of how mothers should feed their babies is thus raised again, but also the issue of fashion trends is raised: What about the corset? It hurts, but it is a convention—the result: modifying the corset for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers so that the tie is in front and not too constricting (Ventura 2015; pp. 536–564).

As we can see, Enlightenment thought does say a lot about breastfeeding, but the alimentary metaphors suddenly lose their use here, as we have seen in the case of the Christian Middle Ages. We had to wait until the 19th century for alimentary images to come into play again, but this time on a different platform, even if inspired by Rousseau. They were brought back into play by Jules Michelet in the framework of his “sexualized mysticism.”

<sup>16</sup> See Papastavrou et al. (2015; p. 5).

<sup>17</sup> Immanuel Kant in *Lectures on pedagogy* in Zöllner (2007; p. 449).

## From Michelet to Contemporary Society

Alimentary mythical images reappear in the 19th century and this time in the anticlerical milieu of the post-French Revolution period, when the famous French historian Michelet (1874; pp. 193–194) (according to whom modern man no longer has the Bible as his referential book, but Rousseau's *Emile!*)<sup>18</sup> speaks in his book *Priest, Woman, and Families* about *intellectual nourishment* (*allaitement intellectuelle*):

Nursing is not yet finished. Intellectual nourishment, like physical food, ought in the beginning to be administered to the child under the form, as it were, of milk, fluid, tepid, mild, and full of life. Woman alone can so give it. Men expect too much at once of this new-born babe, whose teeth, scarcely formed, are painful. They want to give it bread, and they beat it if it does not bite. In God's name give him more milk: he will drink willingly.

Who will believe some future day that men have thus undertaken to nurse and feed these sucklings? Ah! leave them alone to women! A lovely sight to see a child rocked in the arms of a man! Take care, awkward idiot! It is fragile; handling it in your clownish hands you may break it.<sup>19</sup>

Michelet (1874; p. 194) also adds that gestation, incubation, and education have long been synonymous and that the mother and her affection, her love, her tenderness, should be the first educator and not a man with his crude, overly rationalistic methods. And further: "I do not know whether it be indispensable for the mother to feed it from her breast; but I am very sure it is necessary that she should nourish it from her heart." Or at another place: "We also have our school-divinity, the spirit of empty abstractions and verbal disputes: we shall be able to combat its influence only by prolonging that of the mother, associating her with education, and by giving the child a well-beloved teacher. Love, they say, is a great master" (Michelet 1874; pp. 194–195).

Vinken (2007; p. 156) develops the argument that Michelet, in his desire to establish in France his form of secular religion, even a kind of sexualized mysticism of which the French Revolution was the epiphany, uses the principle of the two bodies of the *sponsa Christi* (bride of Christ), the mystical and the natural—Michelet biologizes, sexualizes, even grotesquely eroticizes the mystic.

However, it is interesting to see how Michelet's thinking on motherhood was able to permeate the works of 20th century philosophers and psychoanalysts. Merleau-Ponty (2003; p. 279) recalls Michelet in one note in connection to the topic of corporeality in Melanie Klein: "Non-dividedness of the world and of beings: The maternal body is the world (cf. Michelet: language is the speech of the mother). The mother is not an individual, but a category (a Mama-ness, '*Mamaité*')."<sup>20</sup>

But I would like to refer to another philosopher here, Gaston Bachelard. In *Water and Dreams* Bachelard (1999, p. 116) begins the chapter "Maternal Water and Feminine Water" with the psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte and quotes her words about our unconscious mem-

<sup>18</sup> See Vinken (2007; p. 155).

<sup>19</sup> In another book, *Woman*, Michelet (1860; p. 62) says that mental nursing is a more intimate relationship between mother and child than just ordinary breastfeeding.

<sup>20</sup> See also Merleau-Ponty (1970; p. 21).

ories as “a product of our childhood loves, of these loves which in the very beginning went out only to the one who was our source of shelter, our source of food, who was our mother or our nurse.” For Bachelard, these memories shape our safest, most reliable perspective: the maternal. This primordial love stands at the foundation of all other loves, and it is impossible to destroy it. And it is here that we reach a crucial passage in his text: “The chronology of the heart is indestructible. Later, the more metaphoric a love or friendship is, the more it will need to draw its strength from the one fundamental feeling [*child’s love to mother*]. Under these conditions, to *love* an image is always to *illustrate* a love; to love an image is to find, without knowing it, a new metaphor for an old love” (Bachelard 1999, p. 116).

The love for an image is a strong stimulus for its illustration, for new metaphors, for new attempts to grasp what comes to the surface from the unconscious only in the form of glimpses, vague feelings, but ones which are solidly rooted in the anthropological experience of a newborn, an infant in relation to mother and her breast.

Although Bachelard had read Michelet and was undoubtedly influenced by him in some way, he nonetheless subjects his perception of motherhood to criticism. Michelet, thematizing sea water in his *The Sea* as the first nourishment of all living things,<sup>21</sup> puts the “nourishing” image above all other images and “does not hesitate to continue on the cosmic plane from milk to the breast.” Here Bachelard (1999, p. 119) asks: “In the curve of which gulf, before which rounded cape could Michelet have seen the image of a woman’s breast if he had not first been won over, caught up in the strength of material imagination, in the power of the substantial image of milk? For such a daring metaphor, there is no other explanation: *it is matter that governs form.*”

Bachelard (1999, pp. 120–121) continues and chooses passages about the milky waters, the sea as a liquid element, “ultramilk” as a mother’s milk of all mothers; next about the warmth of air, softness of light, and peace of soul: “These are the material components of the image, the strong, primitive components.” Bachelard thus captures the essence of the formation of alimentary images which have their origin *in materiality, in corporeality*. All metaphors that are derived from the old image of motherhood and nursing persist in the human being precisely because they are based on this indestructible, primordial image. We can see it in another of Bachelard’s texts: the lecture “The Poetry of Water” where he writes: “Put psychoanalytically, the water of youth is a symbol of the return to the maternal breast, it is, among other things, the landmark of the primitiveness of maternal images of water” (Bachelard 2005; p. 38).

The alimentary image takes on a new form if we read Bachelard’s texts about formation of a new scientific mind: it is about what our foundations of education are; if they are wrong or incorrect, we will not so easily reach the level of abstraction of modern science. Bachelard’s thinking is deeply steeped in the alimentary myth, but it doesn’t matter for ours is too: we are also convinced that without the right or even with the wrong foundations, any further education becomes more confused.

But if we are already talking about the foundations of education, don’t we suddenly find ourselves in a completely different imaginative area: the architectural myth of education as a building?

<sup>21</sup> Michelet (1861; p. 63) says it literally: “It seems probable, however, that the depths of the great mass of the waters are quite peaceable; were it otherwise, the sea would be unfitted for her office of nursing-mother to her myriads upon myriads of living beings.”

## Silence at Meaning

Let us now return to residues of meaning again. I have shown above that we use any imaginative or metaphorical structures (alimentary images are just one example of them) in literature and ordinary speech and in the pursuit of the practical goals of life often without problematizing them.

Residues of the meaning of alimentary images remain in our common speech, regardless of whether one reflects on their histories, nuances, or intellectual or spiritual content. Bachelard was right when he argued that the power of such images depends on their primitive anchoring in human experience.

However, the moment we observe these images in their history, when we follow the history of subjectivity or subjective attitudes towards more or less the same image, we can quickly observe that our reflections on such a phenomenon are richer the more perspectives we include in our investigations. As soon as I know the history of the nourishing/education doublet, I cannot use this metaphor non-contextually. I am faced with the whole fascinating play of images that has entered and exited the scene over many centuries, shaping, conditioning, or loading (through gender, religious, political, or ideological influences) our thinking.

Of course, even perspectives that have become dead ends for us, for whatever reasons, form an unconscious part of our attitudes. We have seen this well in Jules Michelet, who, although he seeks to distance himself from and fight against clerical Christianity, offers poetic reflections on motherhood which grow out of similar foundations to those that inspired the medieval Christian contemplating *Song of Songs*.

Michelet is influenced by Rousseau, who seems detached from the medieval tradition that preceded him, but in fact is constantly connected to it (at least, including through the theme of motherhood and breastfeeding). This theme is constantly at play, but always in new variations that depend on the contextual framework.

The early Christian philosophizing theologian has before him an apologetic struggle with Gnosticism, which prides itself on ingesting solid food while Christians still drink only milk. His dilemma forms his context: milk or solid food? How can he defend the Christian claim to call himself a child of God against the idea of rational maturity?

The Carolingian philosopher again develops the subject of breastfeeding, and although he makes many of the same points as the early Christian philosopher, his context has shifted: It is no longer a dispute about mother's milk or solid food. For him, nursing is the same as fostering, and therefore learning. In his thinking, the *nutritor* is quite commonly the teacher. The pupil, *alumnus*, is the one who ingests the food given by the teacher. The school is *almus domus*, *alma mater*, the nourishing space, the place that offers food to the hungry. The pupil is the hungry one, hungry for knowledge, for true doctrine. He wants nourishment and calls out for it.

From the 11th century to the 15th century, alimentary images are associated with the context of new interpretations of *Song of Songs*, with a new mysticism that draws on these interpretations. Medieval saints based their deep spirituality on these imaginings. The image of God (or Jesus) as Mother feeding her children with the Perpetual Milk (the Word) is again interwoven with all the functions of motherhood attributed through their claim to be affective to men (abbots, priests, or bishops), too. For the medieval mystic, the sucking of the breast of God is not just a simple poetic expression, but a spiritual fact. It is so much a

part of his being that it takes on bodily characteristics (by which I do not refer to the several medieval descriptions of the miracles of male lactation). In short, alimentary images are literally embodied in him, he lives them completely; the spiritual vision has the function to sanctify corporeality and permeate it.

Modern thinking, in its attempt to re-found the method of rational inquiry on experience bounded by our sensory givens and our own rationality, has set aside many of the images that dominated earlier periods. But the distance of philosophers is not the distance of ordinary people who continue to think in the images that are so familiar to them. That is why we can trace these ideas again in Rousseau. There were new cultural dilemmas: Mother or wet nurse? Mother's milk or a bottle (the brand-new question)? Fashion and social life or motherhood at home?

We then later encounter Michelet's sexualized dreams about motherhood, new considerations of psychoanalysts about the return to the mother, Freudian ideas about the impact of wrong nursing on later traumas and Klein's analyses of the child's stage of eating the mother's body forming a new wave of interest in alimentary images forged for 20th and 21st century experiences. And as we saw in Bachelard, this new wave led him to his special, material mysticism where God is hidden very well, or is not there at all. Who knows? Like Bachelard, we still love to dream about basic elements and matter, about images of poets who for us open doors to our own primordiality. We love them because they form the only depth which remains for us as a promise of possible transcendence. Alimentary images spring from that kind of primordial anthropological and cultural experience.

The nourishment of meaning lies not in our philosophical reflections on language and its structures, but in its use in ordinary speech, in communication, in reading literature, in carnal language, in culture, and of course, in our common pedagogical attitudes. We may be speaking together, but at the same moment we are silent at meaning. And it is precisely this silence at meaning that is woven—happily or dangerously, sensitively or ideologically—into the fabric of the social activity of language.

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