

The Eternal Woman (1954)

Gertrude von Le Fort

SYNOPSIS

The book is divided into three chapters :

- “The Eternal Woman”

This chapter is largely about the sinless Virgin Mary, the Queen of Heaven, *Co-Redemptrix* and *Mediatrix* of All Graces. It contains excellent insights into the nature of ideal womanhood — in von le Fort’s own words, it treats of “*the cosmic, the metaphysical countenance of woman*” (p. 6). It describes **womanliness as a mystery**, its religious rank, its archetype, and its ultimate image in God. The baroness also writes about **surrender** as an essential quality of womanhood : “*Wheresoever woman is most profoundly herself, she is not as herself but as surrendered, and wherever she is surrendered, there she is also **bride and mother***” (p. 11). Von le Fort understands bride and mother not just literally, but also figuratively ; she writes later on in depth about how even the childless woman may be a spiritual mother, and even the unmarried woman, particularly the consecrated virgin, but also she who has not yet found a husband, may be a bride to Christ. She insists that “*the woman who does not surrender herself, even in the sphere of the sensuous, and is dedicated only to the most miserable of all cults, that of her own body, [...] represents a degeneration that has torn asunder the last bond with her metaphysical destiny.*” (p. 15)

But she counterbalances this point later in the book with the acknowledgement that **not all submission is good or godly**, and there is also the danger of a woman’s **exaggerated surrender to man**. “*It is then that her relationship to man absorbs also that which belongs to God. [...] There exists also a certain type of feminine extreme humility that betrays the man and delivers him to his own pride. [...] Where the woman who no longer gives herself according to this divine order ends, the woman who either refuses herself or becomes the slave of man begins.*” (p. 58)

Marriage and surrender itself are **intimately tied to childbearing**, and these are tied to Mary's FIAT : "*Be it done unto me*" means the **readiness to conceive** or, when expressed religiously, **the will to be blessed**, then "*there is always misery when the woman no longer wills to conceive, no longer desires to be blessed*". (p. 14) She adds that "*This does not apply only in a biological sense*" (p. 14). Surely we, along with von le Fort, can look around at the degeneration of the family in our culture and see that this is the case !

- **"The Woman in Time"**

Le Fort contemplates the **relationship of woman to man** as well as **woman as distinct from man**. She points out that, while men are often more prominent than women in public life, women perhaps have the more significant role in that they are mothers of men. She writes :

"If one wishes to find the source of great personal endowments one must not proceed from sons to their fathers, but to their mothers. To this fact a great number of gifted men and their mothers bear testimony. On the other hand, extraordinary men frequently have insignificant sons. This seems to indicate that man spends his strength in his own performance, while woman does not spend but transmits it. Man spends and exhausts himself in his work and in giving his talent gives himself with it, while woman gives even the talent away to the coming generation". (p. 21)

"Man signifies the eternal value of the moment ; woman, the unending sequence of the generations. Man is the rock upon which the times rest ; woman is the stream that bears them onward. [...] Like the individual woman who in general lives longer than the individual man, so also the female line of generation survives that of the male" (p. 22) — that is, in terms of her influence. For all the positive things von le Fort says about motherhood in this chapter, it is also here that she dwells on the meaning of virginity.

- **"Timeless Woman"**

The final chapter is probably my favorite chapter. Here she writes poignantly of the **inherent loss of the child that the mother experiences**, first in childbirth, as the infant is separated from her body, and soon thereafter when the child is baptized into the Mother Church : "*In the presence of the supernatural mother, the earthly mother recedes*" (p. 95). And **as the child**

grows, the mother continues to lose it ; just as she received it upon conception and it is formed from her, not by her, so as it grows up “*she cannot fashion it according to her own wishes ; she can only foster and protect that which was entrusted to her*” (p. 96) ; again, “*Every mother’s destiny is, in the last analysis, the unending renewal of the pangs of giving birth. To give life to a child means fundamentally that the child detaches itself from her life*” (p. 98). It is also in this chapter that the author writes about spiritual motherhood, demonstrating that the woman is not only mother to her biological children, but also to her husband if she is married, to other family members, other people’s children, and indeed, other adults. Under this umbrella, she affirms the role of the woman who works outside the home :

“For the woman who is maternal in the spiritual sense, this gives the correct insight into the question of vocation so far as women are concerned. For a woman to be a physician, a guardian, teacher, or nurse is therefore not a profession in the masculine sense of the word, but it is a form of spiritual motherhood.” (p. 85-86)

Likewise, the woman who is in politics, whether as head of state or at some lower level, is “*mother of her people*” (p. 87). Even the everyday woman is the “***protectress of culture***” (p. 90) ; therefore “***there is nothing that contributes so effectively to the downfall of culture as the decline of woman’s spiritual motherhood. In this event the protectress of culture has become its squanderer***” (p. 90). The protectress of culture is a patron of the arts, but her even higher calling is to preserve the faith : “*The role of the motherly woman as protectress completes itself primarily in her role as the guardian of religious values and becomes thoroughly intelligible only through the position of the mother in the religious world*” (p. 91). The woman, though not entrusted with priesthood, “*for thereby the very meaning of woman in the Church would have been annihilated*” (p. 101), does have her own “apostolate” place within the Church, as **prefigured by Mary’s presence on the Day of Pentecost and carried out in the “hidden life of Christ in the Church”** (p. 102) as she brings up her children.

DRIVING FORCE

One of the constant themes of the book is woman’s mystery and hiddenness, the fact that little is known about her, and that **the more she asserts herself and her personality, the less faithful she is to ideal womanhood...**