

## ***Places: Relations between Body and Language***

**By Betty Berardo Fuks**

Review of Paola Mieli, *Figuras do espaço: sujeito, corpo, lugar* (São Paulo. Annablume, 2016, 287 pages)

In lean times, when some continue to insist on popularizing and simplifying psychoanalysis, and others, with a great fuss in the media, declare the place of the unconscious in contemporary times is no longer the one Freud constructed, a well-defined, incisive book, written in clear and precise language, is cause for celebration. So we owe a toast to the Brazilian edition of Paola Mieli's *Figures of Space: Subject, Body, Place* [*Figuras do espaço: sujeito, corpo, lugar*], recently launched by Annablume Publishers. Having lost none of the intellectual honesty and creativity with which she wrote *On the Irreversible Manipulations of the Body and Other Psychoanalytical Texts* [*Sobre as manipulações irreversíveis do corpo e outros textos psicanalíticos*] (Contra Capa, Rio de Janeiro), Mieli, one of New York's most renowned psychoanalysts, recognized in several countries for the firm grasp she demonstrates of psychoanalytic concepts, turns the theme of space into an instrument of reflection on the relationship between the subject and the world.

This motif – space – so exalted in philosophical, religious, and scientific debates, thus assumes an uncustomary place in the author's approach to the common, day-to-day, and, at the same time, odd if not alien experiences on which she writes. It is noteworthy that the assumptions Mieli presents are, from the very outset in the book, couched in an exactness of thought and writing that spawns antibodies against the expansion of a certain "psychoanalese" common in current psychoanalytic literature – a point we'll come back to.

To start a psychoanalytic work by reclaiming Freud's oeuvre is not without consequences. In Benjaminian terms, Mieli, with the intensity of those who possess the courage to step back from what has been said to introduce a new utterance, returns to the origins of psychoanalysis, always incomplete and unfinished, to gain a grasp on something she considers to have been lost. The effect of Benjamin's strategy on the author – recognizing that the ideas originated in history are in themselves atemporal, yet

contain, in the guise of “virtual history,” a remission for its pre- and post-history – infects the reader of *Figures of Space*. It is an invitation to go over the terrain of the inception of the “other scene” – the unconscious – and thus to abandon all the haughtiness contained in the expressions “but we know that,” “that’s old hat,” “times have changed,” or “Freud is a thing of the past.”

What interests me most is highlighting the manner in which Mieli manages, with no awkwardness whatsoever, to create openings onto some of the Freudian paradoxes – psychic reality, deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), trauma, repetition, phantasy etc. – thanks to her concise and poetic style of approaching Freudian concepts. I say poetic, since, as Mário Quintana has put it, someone who is willing to rescue “the drowned” ends up creating poetry. Mieli enacts a “return” to Freudian theory, which, as she shows, introduced a sui generis concept of space, one in keeping with the cultural spirit of the start of the 20th century and its advances in geometry and physics, giving it back its due. Mieli’s loyalty to the Freudian letter throughout her essay remains all the more evident through the explicit command she demonstrates of Lacanian theory. Guiding the reader step by step through Lacan’s conceptual system, which broaches central notions such as subject/subjectivity, *a* object, *lalangue*, the Other etc., our author elucidates the highly original theory of subjectivity found in the work of the French psychoanalyst, the most loyal reader of Freud in the history of psychoanalysis.

The subject “emerges at the center of the world,” which means s/he emerges as an effect of a “transferential relationship with what is other.” From this and related statements, Mieli extracts a singular definition of place: a space libidinated and mediated by the signifying relationship by which the subject approaches the world. A definition which requires that the reader rethink the status of the body and of language in psychoanalysis; a task the author herself takes up and facilitates by beginning with such ordinary experiences as walking, bodily gestures, and psychoanalytical tools. With a great surplus of intelligence and erudition, Mieli also makes use of literature and arts, including the very architecture of Vienna, the “mother city” of psychoanalysis. She follows what Freud stated and Lacan reiterated: there are things that only writers, poets and artists, with their specific means, can offer us. In this sense, the author’s reading of the essay *Survival in Auschwitz [If This is a Man]*, Primo Levi’s testimony to the unspeakable horror of the extermination camps, is exquisitely apt. Levi conveys the story of tortured men, stripped of all “subjective singularity,” in an effort, by means of language, to express the nameless, the unassimilable in the trauma of his own people

and generation. It is from Levi's writing that Mieli extracts the necessary elements to demonstrate that the Nazi project for obliterating "the modesty that sustains human dignity" and the subject's libidinal landscape, met with resistance in the camps, where some prisoners recomposed, albeit temporarily, a place, the vestige of a place, in a site built precisely for murdering them.

Mieli's work gets to the heart of the current psychoanalytic debate on the body and the requirements for confronting the real. Both Freud and Lacan insist that even when the subject denies it or refutes it, the body never ceases to make language misfire. Mieli proposes learning this structural fact by following out Lacan's final teachings, which present the trauma of the body through a tongue prior to language itself: *lalangue*. A baby is plunged, on its entry into this world, in a "*lalangue* bath," the tongue of the Other who fulfills its first needs and introduces it into the realm of language. The Neighbor or *Nebenmensch*, in Freudian theory, is an ambiguous object par excellence, as it will establish itself, for the baby, as the sole object able to provide it with help and, at the same time, as a hostile object impregnating it with language. From this Freudian matrix – the Complex of the *Nebenmensch* – and from *lalangue*, the author will draw consequences for the Lacanian signifier *parlêtre*, which designates the relationship between subject and body, and the constitution of the psychic transmission space between generations. We are thus led again toward reflecting on the space of psychic transmission beyond what each branch of the science of our own times insists on declaring: the world resides in extremely subtle entities – the DNA messages and those wandering neural impulses which have drifted through space since the dawn of time. A meeting between body and speech, Mieli reminds us, is a peculiarity of the human being, whereby "it embodies the *jouissance* that forms an unconscious knowledge which causes it, but which remains inaccessible" - a way of reaffirming that psychoanalysis makes an absolutely singular contribution in our thinking about the origins of the subject and of culture.

There are several important clinical and theoretical teachings in *Figures of Space*, as well as generous references to works by several authors, something rare in contemporary psychoanalytical writing. Three cases are presented at the end of the book, each of them pertaining to a different historical moment, buttressing the author's conviction that, whatever an analysis may say about subjects in their particularities, this private history, being connected to language, is a part of History with a capital H, public history. This holds true for anyone's intimate life, whatever his or her biography is, as

there is no inner space that is not affected by the place. On this point, Mieli returns to the problem of transmission, this time to reiterate the fact that psychoanalysis has so glorious a grasp of time it makes past and present coexist in the same place, ensuring that humans are impregnated by the “symbolic debt” of preceding generations. Mieli’s defense of the Freudian notions of temporality and of historical truth in the presentation of the three cases summarizes, in a final form, her adherence to the maxim from Goethe that Freud quoted in *Totem and Taboo*: “What we inherit from our fathers should/ Be ours to have and hold, to use it as we would”<sup>1</sup> [“Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,/ Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.”] Thus, however obliquely, the book comes to portray the author’s desire to combine psychoanalytic complexity with the rewriting of what becomes space and place, and to turn them into a powerful tool for psychoanalysts’ clinical work, as well as for their criticism of the culture they witness.

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *Faust. The First Part of the Tragedy*. Translated by John R, Williams. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1999.