

## FEMININITY AND THE LIMITS OF THEORY

"Tra un fiore colto e l'altro donato l'inesprimibile nulla" (Between one flower gathered and the other given the inexpressible Null).{Giuseppe Ungaretti,1914}

Ever since Freud's notion of a "dark continent," psychoanalytic theory and theory in general have referred to femininity as an enigmatic domain. While male sexuality is assumed to be inherently intelligible in its sequence and in its articulation, female sexuality remains obscure. With the awareness of sexual asymmetry, theory runs into a difficulty. More precisely, it seems that in approaching the question of femininity, theory comes up against a limit, a point of the unknown. But how much does this limit reveal about the nature of theory itself?

### Sexual Difference and the Supremacy of the Phallus

With the discovery of the "polymorphic perverse"

character of infantile sexuality, Freud indicated how for both

sexes, sexuality is first organized around erotogenic zones, those erogenous "border" of the body where a privileged exchange with the other – the mother or the caretaker – takes place. Only in 1923, when introducing the notion of an infantile genital organization, did Freud resolve the question of the passage from this original undifferentiated polymorphic sexuality to the establishment of a genital supremacy .

For both sexes the infantile genital organization is founded upon the supremacy of the phallus; to have it or not to have it becomes the question. This configuration determines two positions toward castration: on the one hand the belief in having the phallus and the anxiety about losing it; on the other the belief of having lost it and the wish to get it back. Freud discovers that for both sexes the relation to the phallus points to a fundamental loss or lack: Since everyone has to reckon with castration anxiety, the assumption of human sexuality necessarily confronts a loss and loss as such.

If the phallic organization points to a symmetry between genders, the way in which the castration complex relates to the oedipal configuration establishes, according to Freud's late writings, a basic asymmetry between them. "*Whereas in boys the Oedipus complex is destroyed by the castration complex, in girls it is made possible and led to by the castration complex*"(1925, p.256). Freud's point of view is very well known. What I wish to recall here is simply the fact that the complexity revealed by sexual asymmetry is grounded in the recognition that both sexes initially have the same "object," the mother. The veering away from this first object to a new one, to the father, is at the root of the "complication" represented by female sexuality. It is a complication that male sexuality seems to escape , but, as we shall see, only seems to. Nevertheless, it is precisely this complication that calls into question the privileged relationship that infants of both sexes have with the same primordial object, the mother, as well as the status of this object in itself.

Following Freud's remarks, Lacan re-elaborates the oedipal configuration and elucidates the reasons for the mysterious supremacy of the phallus. What the infant, in his helplessness, desires, is his mother's desire, on which the infant's recognition and survival depend. The mother in fact is not a pure "object"; she is a desiring subject, with her power to grant or deny assistance and care, with her moods and her universe. The fact that she is a desiring subject presupposes her "missing" something: Desire presupposes a lack, something missing to be desired. As a desiring subject, then, the mother is lacking something: In this respect, castration is first encountered in the mother. Lacan calls the "phallus" the signifier for this lack in the mother, in this original Other (1956–7). The phallus is not a thing, not an object, not an organ; the phallus is *the signifier of the desire of the Other* (1966). In this respect *men don't have it any more than women*.

Lacan's interpretation of the Oedipus complex is grounded in the notion of the signifier. I will not discuss in this particular context the function of the phallus as signifier in relation to Lacan's theory of language, to his articulation of the dialectic between speech and language in the constitution of human subjectivity. I will simply recall an aspect of Lacan's notion of the signifier in the framework of the oedipal configuration. All human beings are part of a social universe and occupy a precise place in the network of relations that characterize the world of their parents, their substitutes, of the people who wanted them to live and grow. A child is the "effect" of the desire of the Other in so far as his/her coming into being and his/her survival depend upon such a desire; a desire that takes place in a symbolic order (language, culture, traditions, ethical values, etc.) and that is conveyed through language. The child's name, for instance, as well as its position within the family and the social network, come to represent its parents' history and, often, expectations, the signifiers of their desire, marking the destiny and representing the weight of the child's symbolic debt.

If the signifier of the desire of the mother is the phallus, the child wants to be the phallus in order to fulfill that desire (Lacan, 1966). In a first structuring moment of the oedipal articulation the child experiences itself as the phallus, as the object of the mother's desire. As Freud remarks, "children like expressing an object-relation by an identification: 'I am the object'. 'Having' is the later of the two" (1941, p.299). In the next structuring moment of the oedipal configuration, the child acknowledges the presence of a third term in the scene of this privileged, dual relation with the mother: Through her own speech and manner, she indicates the presence of something else that she desires. Before being embodied in a real person, the *function of the father* is represented by a signifier that comes to substitute for the signifier of the mother's desire. This signifier is what Lacan calls the Name of the Father. Linguistics designates the outcome of a substitution between signifiers as "metaphor"; accordingly, Lacan refers to the specific substitution taking place in the oedipal configuration as the "paternal metaphor" (1956–1957). It is interesting to recall here that, prior to genetic mapping, that in and of itself is organized thanks to a system of signs, the only means of "knowing" the father was by the mother naming him. This emphasizes her subjection to language as well as the general inscription of human identity in a symbolic order.

Let's observe that natural languages imply a ternary structure inherent in the action of speaking. In an exchange between two people, a third party can be evoked by deploying a third person pronoun (he/she/it/they), to bring absence in the field of presence. The space of symbolisation is only possible through the designation of what is absent; which is why death is a constitutive part of such a space.

The function of the father is first introduced by speech. In its dual relation with the mother, the child's life is subject to her will, to her whims; in a word, the infant is subject to her "law." With the acknowledgment of a third term in the scene, a new law is introduced: The signifier of the Name of the Father comes to represent what makes up the law of the mother's desire. It grounds the symbolic law that regulates the relation between the mother and her child through interdiction: not only does it come to rescue the child from the mother's whims, but also sets up the premises of the incest prohibition and consequently of the threat of castration.

In a third structural moment of the oedipal configuration, the father appears as the one who "has" the phallus, who has the signifier of the mother's desire. At this point his function is represented by a real person (the real father or his substitute in relation to the mother's desire) and the phallus, then, seems to

coincide with the male organ, the paternal penis. The attribution of the phallus to the father forces children of both sexes to face a fundamental inadequacy: not only is he/she not the phallus, the signifier of the mother's desire, he/she doesn't even have it. The child is faced with castration, and the outcome of this oedipal crisis will decide its sexuality. In short, one could say that the boy will generally solve the problem of castration by identifying with his father, with the only one who seems to have

escaped such a danger, and, in becoming a male by proxy, he will play with the illusion of having what he doesn't have. By reproaching her mother for being castrated, on the other hand, the little girl will generally confront her own lack, her own impossibility to fulfill her mother's desire. Identifying with her mother and turning toward a new object, she will encounter the phallus through a substitution, in keeping with the famous "symbolic equivalence" Freud describes (1931). If, according to this equivalence, the penis of the father takes on such a symbolic value, it is precisely because it substitutes the imaginary phallus of which the girl feels her mother deprived her.

I won't elaborate here on all the possible resolutions of the oedipal configuration, those resolutions that in fact define the sexual identity of a person (independently from their gender), and the different structures of neurosis – hysteria, obsession, phobia – as well as the structures of perversion and psychosis. What I want to stress here is a simple point, often misunderstood (for instance by certain feminist criticism): If the phallus is a pure signifier, the symbol for the lack in the Other, nobody "has" it, but anyone might have access to it, independently from its gender.

The phallus is the symbol of an unattainable jouissance. Lacan introduces the term jouissance, in place of pleasure, in order to designate the complexity of the phenomenon of sexual fulfillment and the enjoyment related to it, an enjoyment that involves, as Freud indicates (1920), not only pleasure but also its "beyond." As symbol of unattainable jouissance, the phallus indicates the relation between law and desire. In *Totem and Taboo*, in fact, Freud shows how the barrier against incest and the Oedipal complex are two sides of the same coin. The emergence of desire is of a piece with the appearance of a prohibition. Through his myth of the murder of the primordial father Freud shows how the relation between law and desire sets up the interdiction (and consequently loss or sacrifice) as the condition for symbolization, for civilization. Although the father is an obstacle to the attainment of jouissance (of the fulfilment of desire, of the enjoyment of the mother's body) murdering him doesn't open the way to jouissance but rather strengthens its prohibition. As Freud states, the result of such a murder is a totem, that is, a symbol which through language has the function to regulate sexual and social relationships. The creation of the totem coincides with the establishment of interdiction : The very fact of belonging to a certain totemic, prohibition-bound tribe regulates sexual choices, according to the universal assumption of the prohibition against maternal incest. As a substitute for the murdered father, as a symbol of authority, the totem represents the founding of a moral and ethical law that is the basis of civilization. Its function, however, is rooted on the very structure of language. Only thanks to a linguistic system of signs, for instance, is it possible to establish the social identity of a person: whether one belongs to a certain tribe, or a certain family. From this standpoint, the totem is not just a symbol; it also acquires the function of a signifier which orders the network of social relationships.

If a certain jouissance is radically prohibited, lost together with its object (the mother's body), a structural gap will be created by "the difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is demanded and that which is actually achieved", as Freud states in 1920 (p.42). This difference defines what I would term as the path of the messianic quality of desire, providing "the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained"(p.42) in human life. Lacan calls "phallic jouissance" the limited satisfaction that it can be achieved, that is allowed by the symbolic order, by the interdiction of the primordial object: "une jouissance 'apÉritive'", Lacan says (1974–1975) – "a`-pÉre-itive", an appetizer– a jouissance that is "never it" (ca n'est pas ca). A jouissance that as it occurs evokes what is missing.

### Theory as an Answer

In *Totem and Taboo* Freud remarks that the birth of civilization implies not only the birth of moral law, but also the birth of theory. Representing the passage from the unconscious to preconsciousness, the myth of

the primordial father represents at once the division of the subject and the invention of theory. By theory Freud means a construction of thought, the fruit of the same psychic activity at work in the secondary elaboration of dreams or in the creation of systems. Its characteristic is to "create order," to create coherent relationship between things, to such a degree that thought, as Freud puts it, doesn't hesitate to produce a false coherence for its own sake (1900 a). Starting with the stage of the formation of systems "two sets of reasons can be assigned for every psychical act that is consciously judged – one set belonging to the system and the other set real but unconscious" (Freud,1913,p. 65). The necessity for coherence at any cost, for rational explanations, according to Freud, is the result of repression, and functions both as relief from an emotional conflict ( for instance the ambivalence toward – the death of – the father) and as its concealment. Even phobias, obsessions, delusions, Freud observes, are examples of this activity of thought. From this point of view, Freud is well aware that every production of theory, including his own, is informed by repression and censorship.

Freud suggests a succession of three systems of thought: the animistic, the religious, the scientific. The passage from one theory to the other marks the passage from a more complete vision of the world to one considerably less so. A movement away from the original omnipotence of thought toward incompleteness, loss, and a progressive renunciation of narcissistic drives. It is a movement away from the illusion of the perfect explanation of the world to the acceptance of the unknown, to the acceptance of the provisory, flawed nature of every construction of thought. In this framework, Freud deems scientific the advent of a system of thought that is well aware of the limit in which thought itself is grounded, and in so doing maintains a dialectical relation with its own productions.

If, on the one hand, the tendency of theory to construct answers is the result of repression, on the other this tendency responds to the nature itself of conscious thought as a "surrogate of desire" ("der Ersatz des halluzinatorischen Wunsches", Freud,1900 b,p.572 ). Thought "inherits" its messianic quality from desire and its search for solutions, for answers, will move toward refinding a mythical lost completeness. From this point of view, every construction of thought reveals its symptomatic or mythic quality.

Confronted with the discovery of sexual difference children encounter a difficulty of thought. Little Hans's "philosophical" assumption, when faced with the sex of his little sister – "the widdler will get bigger"(Freud,1908 a) – rests on his faith in the theory that all living creatures have a phallus. Children's sexual theories – the phallic theory, the cloacal theory and the sadistic theory of coitus, each of them responding to the mysteries of origin and of sexual difference – are analogous, Freud observes, to the adult's attempt to solve theoretical "problems of the universe which are too hard for human comprehension"(1908,a p. 215). Children's sexual theories emerge as a response to something *unthinkable* about sexual difference.

According to Freud the desire for knowledge does not awaken spontaneously: It is the result of "die Not des Lebens," the exigencies of life (1908a, p213; 1908b,p175). When the child's position within the family is shaken, for instance by the oedipal prohibition or by the arrival of a newborn baby , the desire for knowledge is aroused. Marked by libidinal development and the psychosexual stages, the desire for knowledge connects actual eroticism with a danger, with a threat for the child .This danger reflects the acknowledgment of an interdiction in response to the urgency of erotic drives.

In the framework of Lacan's oedipal configuration, this desire to know relates also to the mother's desire: in so far as the child acknowledges that he/she is not the phallus, is not the signifier of the mother's desire, a privileged dual relation is broken and the question of knowing how to fulfill the mother's desire remains open. This question is complementary to the enigma of the mother's sex. The mother's body , as Freud remarks, is the object "of the most intense sexual curiosity"(1909a,p239).

Nevertheless, children's investigations constantly reach the same "dead end": the theory according to which the mother has a phallus. The castration of the mother induces a *difficulty of thought*, a denial, a rejection (Verwerfung,1908 ). Freud notes that even when the psychosexual constitution of the child suggests the presence of the vagina, for instance through the wish to break or the aggressiveness related to genital eroticization, the theory of the phallus still arises in response to an impossibility of thought. If

the mother's sex is unthinkable it is not only because its acknowledgment involves the threat constituted by castration, but also because it "locates"(Chatel,1986) the place of a jouissance the child supposes the mother experiences. These two principles – the threat of castration and the mystery of the mother's jouissance – are dialectically interdependent. The jouissance of the mother's body is unknowable: it belongs to the domain of a Real, out of symbolization. Lacan's category of the Real, as distinguished from "reality," designates the domain of what exists but is outside symbolization. To say that the impossibility of knowing the jouissance of the mother's body is the implicit consequence of the incest prohibition is to equate such an impossibility with the law of desire, the law that establishes interdiction as the condition for desire per se. This very impossibility reflects the existence of the symbolic order. The function of the *third*, the function of the father, comes to sustain the void which separates the child from the mother. In its position as original Other, the body of the mother is the "unforgettable thing," *das Ding*, which constitutes the first external loving but potentially hostile "unknown", and toward which the subject is oriented ( Freud 1896; Lacan 1959–60). It is precisely by virtue of the distance from *das Ding*, from this "thing" that lies outside symbolization, that the universe of the subject's desire and signification can emerge and symbolization thereby take place.

In keeping with Freud's idea that danger is what provokes the need for knowledge, Lacan suggests that is horror, and not desire, that "presides" over knowledge (Lacan 1973–74). I will not discuss in this particular context the various implications of Lacan's remark. Let us simply observe here that the horror provoked by the jouissance of the mother's body marks the proximity to this original Other, which is threatening insofar as the distance from it is what allows the subject's desire – and thus the subject's very being – to exist. At the same time this horror is a response to the encounter with something unknown and unknowable, to the encounter with a void, with a limit of symbolization. Taking the form of horror of castration, the horror of the mother's jouissance *represents as absence the impossibility of knowledge* . The impossibility of knowledge is shaped into an imaginary absence, that *translates* the encounter with a limit of symbolization into a threat to the body, into the fear of a real injury or loss.

Children's sexual theories emerge as the "phallic form" in response to a lack, that is, a lack of symbolization. They emerge to rescue the subject from the Real of unthinkable jouissance, filling with desire the gap opened by coming up against the unknown. Oedipus, he who knows how to answer the riddle of the Sphinx, is ignorant of the truth of his own history. Among many other things, his tragedy marks a certain relation between knowledge and interdiction. Oedipus' knowledge frees him and the Thebans from the horror of the Sphinx: It cuts off her devouring jouissance. If he solves the riddle with what I would call a "dream," the *dream of theory*, it is only to be awakened by the risk he takes in his own desire to know. Having challenged the limit of knowledge, having crossed the threshold of interdiction and transgressed the secret of the jouissance of the mother's body, Oedipus' theory collapses in horror. His self-induced blindness is a plea for ignorance, the re-establishment, through castration, of the limit of symbolization.

As a "surrogate" of desire the movement of thought is implicitly characterized by a search for a solution: The encounter with the Real, however, the surfacing of the enigma and the vertigo of the impossible resolution, opposes its messianic quality. The more theory provides responses to the unknown, the more these answers appear as objects by which desire halts the emergence of a lack. Being inexhaustible by definition, these theoretical objects offer a solution that favors and reawakens the movement of desire itself.

### Femininity and Theory

As Piera Aulagnier Spairani has remarked, femininity is the name given by the subject of desire to the object when this object "cannot be named because it is lacking"(1967,p.69). In this respect femininity represents both the outcome of the law of desire and the encounter with a limit of signification. If in common parlance the word *lacking* acquires a negative connotation – with all the debasement and misrepresentation that traditionally accompanies its connection with the notion of femininity – this very fact reveals the symptomatic quality of the prejudice that it stages. This prejudice, however, is structurally rooted in thought's messianic quality. Why, in fact, would lack have inevitable negative connotations, if it

weren't for the illusion of an existing wholeness?

In being associated with the lack of the object, femininity is not the prerogative of a gender but the necessary correlative of the very nature of desire, which in order to exist presupposes a missing object. As the various vicissitudes of the oedipal configuration show, the privileged object of desire is by definition subjected to a lack. Independent of gender, then, the assumption of one's own femininity implies, along with the recognition of sexual difference, the acknowledgment of the loss of a mythical completeness, the assumption of that symbolic castration which, according to Freud, marks the culmination of the analytical treatment. In representing the law of desire, femininity points to the illusory quality of any position –let's call it "phallic"– that presents itself as whole, as whole without loss.

From this point of view it is not surprising that theory meets with a difficulty in considering the question of femininity. If theory tends to find answers in order to oppose or to fill the lack – the lack of symbolization– emerging through the encounter with the Real (the real of jouissance, for instance, as well as the real of life and death, of the uncertainty of the human being in the universe), in considering the question of femininity theory comes up against its own limit, the point where, since something cannot be named because it is lacking, theory manifests its own structural incompleteness. From this perspective, one could say that the question of femininity appears to be fundamentally anti-theoretical, or the fundamental point that makes a dialectical use of theory possible and desirable.

We cannot take a single step forward without theorizing, as Freud puts it (1937), since theory is the product of thought, as surrogate of desire, in its relation to the world, to the reality principle, since theory guides the human relation to the universe. The acknowledgment of the limit of theory doesn't imply its negation – which would constitute a new mythology – but rather, a functional use of it, that is to say the assumption of the provisory, partial character of every system of thought as well as the abandonment of the illusion of finding a final, or exhaustive, vision of the world. By welcoming the advent of science (in *Totem and Taboo* or in his late writings), Freud meant to welcome the end of religion, the end of both a transcendent and a full explanatory conception of the world; he meant to welcome the advent of a relation to theory characterized by the acceptance of error, by the awareness of the division introduced by the unconscious in human subjectivity and the consequent relativity of every production of conscious thought. After half a century, we may wonder how much Freud's belief in this sublime and humble definition of science (as well as his wish to place psychoanalysis among the sciences) wasn't idealistic, another dream of theory. In fact we saw and see science often becoming a new religion, with its project to master the world, to manipulate sex, death, and life, with its "fetishization" of the possibility to find adequate answers. We have seen and see science, especially thanks to dizzy technological developments, often supporting the human illusion that symbolic castration (the inaccessibility of the object of desire, deterioration, death) can be avoided.

With the assumption of femininity, men and women have the power to unmask the imposture of every discourse that claims to be absolute and universal, the power to relate to theory dialectically. Let us note, then, that it is precisely in their complaints about what they are lacking, that women are caught in a "male logic," that they embrace a phallic discourse of wholeness, by which somebody exists who has what they don't have. Demands and complaints about their "difference" (often expressed by a sense of inadequacy, physical or intellectual, a sense of inferiority, as well as by a need for revenge) define women's so-called "penis envy"; an envy that in fact appears to be symmetrical with the male illusion of having the phallus. In complaints of this kind, women remain anchored to a phallic position and a phallic jouissance, often manifested by a neurotic symptomatology, unaware of the universe of the supplementary jouissance opened up by femininity. If, on the one hand, women have every right to demand political, economical and ideological equality with men, putting an end to endless, vicious discrimination, on the other, in so doing, they often endorse a phallic discourse. Sometimes they confuse the issue of their rightful political equality with the denial of sexual difference; denying the Real and supporting an imaginary discourse of wholeness, women support the phallic illusion of avoiding symbolic castration. This is what prevents some of them from fostering an alternative ethic and an alternative vision of the world.

The fixation on complaint that translates anatomical evidence into an imaginary inferiority or infirmity,

deprives women of their privileged access to femininity. The very fact that girls share an anatomical similarity to their mothers, inscribes them in the oedipal configuration in a different way than boys, precipitating their confrontation with the loss of the primordial object and loss in general. Whereas men are prone to perpetuate an illusion of wholeness attributing to their penis the symbolic value of the phallus and imposing their phallic illusion as a remedy for their endless castration anxiety, women generally are faced with their being "a non-whole" early on. In this respect they are favored in unveiling the illusory premises of every discourse of wholeness. A woman's imaginary proximity to the body of her mother facilitates a captivating relationship that grounds, together with a process of identification, a primordial jealousy. If this is the source of a structural love/hate relation that determines a perennial demand for love as well as a fundamental rivalry – subsequently displaced onto various objects – the very proximity with the mother's body also makes for a special access to femininity. Being faced with their relation to their mother, to the imaginary Other, on the one hand, and with their wish for the phallus on the other, women are exposed to sexuality and jouissance in a way that is structurally double, that is fundamentally "non-whole."

Whereas, in supporting their illusion of having what they don't have, men sustain a direct relation to the phallus, women relate to the phallus as something exterior, which could be received from the outside world. This very relation of exteriority toward the phallic symbol creates a sense of exteriority toward the symbolic in general (Chatel 1989). Femininity indicates how a part of oneself can be experienced as escaping symbolization.

It is precisely the jouissance that exists but cannot be spoken, that cannot be expressed through language, that Lacan calls "feminine jouissance" (1972–1973). In the constitution of a social and symbolic order the jouissance of the mother's body – of this original Other – is radically interdicted. The term *phallic* designates the limited, partial jouissance of the organ that can be experienced due to such interdiction, due to the human dependence from the symbolic order, a jouissance that constantly shows the difference between its limited satisfaction and the fulfillment that aims to be achieved. Feminine jouissance is not the jouissance of the Other. It is not the interdicted jouissance one mythically expects to complement the phallic one, its necessary correlative for the longed for fulfillment. Feminine jouissance, on the contrary, is the jouissance of the Real of the body supplementing phallic jouissance: a "surplus" and not a complement, pointing beyond the phallus. Existing and escaping from symbolization, feminine jouissance expresses the limit of language and its beyond. We call it "feminine," despite the fact that it can be experienced by both sexes, since it is only through the coming-into-being of one's femininity, only from a position of "non-wholeness," that its universe opens up. Its existence doesn't eliminate the phallic jouissance, but supplements it.

Femininity shares in and animates the project of the poet, this "bearer" of the historical truth, as Freud terms him (1937), when in challenging the limit of language, he evokes through language what cannot be said.

c Paola Mieli

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