

THE EK-STATIC LOVE.
A FEMININE ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In his 1931 and 1932 essays on femininity – which originate from the famous question ‘what do women want?’ – Freud really questions himself on another possible statute of the bond between human beings. These texts are not only a subversion of Freudian coordinates, but also an (aborted) attempt to go beyond the bedrock that delimitates the phallic universe. In them, Freud, who once again succeeds in surprising us, reviews his positions on the Oedipus, the asymmetry now resides in the Freudian discovery of what precedes it – the ‘relics of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilisation concealed by the Greco-Roman’ (Freud 1931: 64). In other words, the passionate obstinate love of the girl child for her mother. A love marked by the hatred due to the overwhelming discovery of a mother without the fundamental attribute – evidently the phallus – that the girl child lacks too, because her mother could not provide her with what she does not have herself. A privation the girl will never cease to blame her for and for which she will ask for compensation indefinitely. Love for the mother is boundless and by definition marked by furious recrimination: you did not give me enough milk, you seduced and abandoned me and, above all, you did not endow me with the most precious of attributes: evidently the phallus. However, Freud, rather than the phallus, with all its conspicuous implications that we will find in Lacan, talks about the penis, the very organ men possess and women lack. The successive tenacious attachment of the girl child to the father is merely the inheritance of an equally strong and long-lasting attachment to the mother. But the Freudian solution – a disappointing one, considering the bold assumptions – is that what makes a woman a woman (‘the tortuous path’, Freud 1931: 67) is being a mother. The lacking phallus can only be replaced with a child donated by the father, and the love for this child should replace and soothe the burning passion for the mother and compensate for the appeal directed at her. An unsatisfactory solution for Freud too, because it leaves in obscurity the dynamics of the exclusive and tenacious love of the girl child for her mother. Freud retreats from the new path he undertook penetrating once again a feminine territory that leads to obscurity; his interrogative on feminine desire and on the possibility of opening a perspective from the

feminine side is destined to remain suspended and frozen. The attempt to come out of the repetition that forces men to place woman in the position of mother, and woman to identify in turn with the same phantasy. The woman/mother remains the only woman possible, the object forever lost and always to find again, the incestuous object to which there is no access if not in the form of the perversion that contemplates its dismemberment: on the one and the idealised love for the mother, on the other a substantially fetishist pleasure. Freud ultimately reaffirms his reply to Ferenczi: the bedrock remains such, the attempt to come out of the phallic universe is vain. Every cure is fated to break on the rocks of anguish that prevents the male from submitting to another male, in other words on the rocks of castration anguish. The feminine position that is rejected is *femininity* as such. He seems resigned to giving up to a type of clinical evidence that would never fail to turn up during an analysis, showing he is irreducible to treatment. The primacy of the phallus Freud identified has laws that regulate psychism, which subjects, however, are not really capable of submitting to: too powerful is the anguish of having to forfeit the pound of meat, and with it the illusion of totality and of regaining the original fullness.

Lacan's step beyond the Freudian perspective is the shift from castration anguish, which Freud presents as insuperable, to the need of undergoing castration, which becomes the stakes of the cure. The resulting lack is what guarantees avoidance of the mortal re-fusion with the Thing, though it is still indefinitely sought. And with it the illusory healing of the old wound that may lead the analyst to responding to the patient's request and indulging in the 'cure through love'. The original and most eminent example of this conception is of course Ferenczi.

The impossibility of accessing castration keeps up the link with the scabrous pleasure on which repetition sustains itself. It holds back the impulse towards opening up to the outside. The risk is foregoing the lost unity and its prospect of absolute pleasure in favour of the radical opening up to the *outside*. But with all the limits and impediments of the case, the question has now been raised: what does woman want? What is her desire? What does it mean to be a woman, or rather, to occupy a feminine position beyond anatomical gender? How does one become the subject whose desire may interrelate with the desire of a man as a *foreign* subject?

The courtly love tradition celebrates unhappy impracticable passionate love: The obstacle prevents the fulfilment of love. This conception arises from the Christian heresy, the prototype of which is the Cathars, who rejected incarnation as redemption and salvation for human beings, who are finite, material and impure. Courtly love is the way out that allows us to

elegantly scrape through the inaccessibility to the Other in relationships – ‘There is no sexual intercourse’, Lacan would say – by pretending an impediment exists. In short, the important thing is the obstacle. Women cannot be reached, we analysts would say, because they are the mothers, i.e., they can be reached only insofar as they are mothers. The encounter between man and woman does not only not occur in an atmosphere of harmony and symmetry, but it is also a non-encounter, a non-relationship between the sexes. Becoming one in love is an imaginary myth, or it takes on the form repetition. This position clearly distances itself from the model of a mature genital love acquired through the ‘natural processes’ of development. The phantasy of specularity, of reunification in love, tends illusorily towards a return to the One, and it is this very One that it is necessary to come out of in order to meet the Other. Enjoying pleasure is not enough; sexual intercourse is not enough if we are not satisfied with a love as illustrated in *Contributions to the Psychology of Love*, which sees the shadow of the phantasy of the mother, divided between ideal and fetish, falling on the woman. There is no relationship, therefore, but only the enjoyment of the pleasure of the body in the phallic register; an autistic pleasure that excludes the Other, that leaves you in solitude. Lacan’s statement of the early 70s, ‘the woman does not exist’, marks a decisive step. The woman does not exist because she only exists in the unconscious *quoad matrem*. This is where the man places her and where she ‘begins to function in sexual intercourse only insofar as she is a mother’ (Lacan 1975: 36). The unconscious of the mother, therefore, is where she offers herself to the man as just that, entirely within the structure. The woman, on the other hand, is not just that (in Lacanian terms we would say ‘not-all’). A woman is not just *The* mother and cannot be *The* woman, but only *The* women, because what escapes and makes her *not-just (that)* is not generalisable but can exist only in the detail. The mother is *The* mother, inscribed as a *phantasy* in the structure, she is universal. The woman is *The Women*, each one unique in her own way. There is something more in the woman, something that exceeds her and is not satisfied by the child as substitute for the phallus, which would be the hoped for Freudian solution. The woman is not (just) a mother. The excess that characterises the feminine position, precisely because it is outside the laws of the structure, introduces a new register and places the woman in the position of radical Other with respect to the one. She is the carrier of all the uncanny – *unheimlich* – strength of the arriver who does not cross a threshold, but remains suspended and extraneous, in any case unassimilable, and who commits us to the infinite tightrope walking of love, to an encounter with the Other that takes place in contingency and needs to be invented moment after moment. Precisely this excess of hers, this non-codified position, allows the woman to experiment and make herself the object of true and pure love, in this way creating a bond. It would be naïve to consider this a romantic idea.

What makes the woman produces her elusiveness, something about her that embarrasses, that *perturbs* and exposes her to the limitless. It makes her radically Other for the man and for herself, exposed to a real that exceeds the signifier. Every day we can observe the effects of the rejection of the lack, which always comes back in the phantasy, and of the loss of coordinates it causes – the *Hilfflosigkeit*. All we have to do is look around: the woman to save, to mould, the woman to despise, sometimes the woman to kill. The feminine position becomes the paradigm not only of lack, but also, precisely because it is placed beyond the coordinates of the structure, of an *ek-static* opening to the Other, with no pre-established codes and no guarantees.

After the discourse on ‘pure love’ was banned from theological contexts as a result of the 1699 papal bull against Fénelon’s text *Explication des maximes des saints*, interrogations on pure love reappeared in other contexts: literary, philosophical and lastly psychoanalytical. Pure love, intended as a love that asks nothing, with no interest in any reward or reciprocity, love as such, which pushed to the extreme limit expresses the aspiration of being towards ‘not being’ in an abandonment to God, thus revealing all its ecstatic character. This is the love practiced and theorised by the mystics, which theologians have never been able to conceive or justify, of which a distinguished master is Meister Eckhart and for which Marguerite Porete was burnt on the stake in 1310. In the latter’s *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Reason, dialoguing with Soul and Love, represents recognised morals, current thought, alien to any problems and anxieties. The latter, according to Marguerite, is what we should free ourselves from so that we may cross a threshold and access the non-belonging to ourselves, an indifference to our fate, a sort of *apathy* that will allow free men to experience the Love of God in God. Fénelon, in the *Explication*, attempted the bold operation of making this type of love intelligible and explainable. In the writings of mystics such as Marguerite Porete, Hadewijch of Antwerp and Angela of Foligno, a central theme is subjective experience to talk about the relationship with God. The 14th century Beguines, each in their own way, beyond Marguerite, Hadewijch, and Angela, crossed a limit, experimenting excesses of which they have left enlightening accounts. This *sub-limen* pleasure, whether achieved through the mortification of the body and the Franciscan practice of radical poverty (as for Angela), or through an active ‘non-belonging’ of the soul to oneself (as for Marguerite), always tends towards absolute abandonment, towards non-being. The experience of the ‘dark night’ and the exercise of the ‘peace of the spirit’ and the detachment that marked 16th century mysticism, attain the same abandoned devotion to God with different means. The mystics’ tension towards *nothingness* would then be a condition of pursued and practiced *forsaking*, of a push beyond a limit, of self-annihilation.

Human desire is consecrated to the Thing that guides it 'like a magnet' towards what in the Other is most intimate and extraneous, most inassimilable. The field of *das Ding* is stripped of any imaginary, affective or psychologistic trimmings and pertains instead to the field of ethics, of necessity. It is the area where desire is uncontaminated and can express itself in the form of pure love; interested only in exercising what it is consecrated to, whether this be love for God or for a brother, as in the case of Antigone. Singular, exclusive Love: There isn't another Polynices.

The concept of *dépense*, according to Bataille, characterises what is not useful, what is ordinary but also 'in surplus': unproductive, in excess and therefore absolute, 'sacred'. Whether expressed in *potlatch*, in an orgy or in the sacrifice of a designated victim, the extreme gesture of sacrifice as dilapidation is oriented towards destruction and loss, towards the loss of power and the power to lose. The transfiguration through sacrifice of what is common reveals in what and with what is sacrificed, according to Bataille, an absolute intimacy, a divine one; it is in itself access to God. It leads to a loss of common coordinates that allows us to see the world from a different perspective, consigning us to *Atopia*. Here the limit is surpassed through what Bataille calls 'evil', the means to find what man has sought from the beginning: a lost intimacy. Unlimited consumption with no concern for tomorrow reveals what the subject is intimately, here and now, beyond the order of reality and reason. For Fachinelli, the possibility to go outside oneself, the *ek-static* condition to which he has dedicated a large part of his research, is marked by an excess, in this case one of joy. 'Excessive joy' is the excess that, beyond pleasure, makes it possible to experience an authentic opening towards the Other. All these paradigms, at once distant and close to each other, have in common the active search for an excess that cannot be subjectivised, for the crossing of a limit in the form of a radical opening to the Other, in the deepest *intimacy*. Even the 'jewel set within the human being', which is bare animal life, is a boundary point where a being experiences pure abandonment, the power of no-power, in this even closer to the absolute disorientation represented by the condition of *Hilflosigkeit*. Love in the feminine is steered more towards the dizziness of decentralisation from the self. This verges on expropriation which can be the path to access an opening to life without reserves, to the foreign Other that always preserves something of the irreducible, which is in the order of the Thing, but which perhaps makes it possible to come out of a self-referential, incestuous, thrifty pleasure?

A woman, not exactly a patient, with an identity always in slightly precarious balance, endowed with that extra share of precariousness compared to so-called healthy subjects – and which

makes the difference – tells me a story, and tells me about herself. During her wanderings in a foreign city, being an authentic *flâneuse*, always in a precarious balance between the desire to find a familiarity, a *Heim*, and the desire to lose it, she finds herself in the following situation. Venturing into the inner suburbs, where several other languages are spoken in addition to the native and to her foreign tongue – obviously a ‘multi-ethnic’ neighbourhood, one of those non-places we easily come across in our metropolises – she suddenly experiences what psychiatrists would call a fugacious and intense derealisation. The curious and remarkable aspect is that, together with the experience of unreality and distressing *disorientation*, she also experiences a condition of absolute joy, of exaltation and freedom, as if for a moment she had touched or seen something that is not always there to be perceived. Something endowed with the character of exceptionality and essentiality, as she would tell me *a posteriori* in describing what seems to me another variation of the *Unheimliches*: the possibility of a paramount opening, of an *ek-static* opening up to the world that precedes any possible subjectification of it. The *disorienting* anguish accompanied by an elating feeling of losing one’s borders, of *opening up* to the infinite (meant as an opening the cipher of which is the infinite) is the distinctive feature of this episode. The *Unheimlichkeit* experience, together with that of an extreme instability of any borders, make up an ‘other’ psychic register that opens up to extreme perceptive possibilities capable of capturing something beyond the coordinates that define what is domestic and recognisable, or at least of renewing the construction of these coordinates and of the ‘given’. This ‘extreme closeness’ (in the words of Agamben) becomes an equally extreme form of knowledge; one that takes unusual paths. The register of *ecstatic opening* without an unveiling permits an access to the real that precedes any reintegration or signification of it. Bare *derelict* life that suffers the real and bears its mark, the imprint of the inassimilable, of the original *Fremde* Freud had formalised in the *Project* and which, without mentioning it anymore, he would turn into a core of his theorisation. And if in some existences the result of this mark is the experience of the deepest dread for a radically alien world, the other front resides in that opening that precedes any possibility of the word and that places whoever experiences it in a position of ecstatic centrifugal opening. It would seem necessary to venture all the way to the borders of that limitlessness the woman is so much closer to in order to find a way out from the non-relationship, in order for the Other to function at once as a fellow and as a trespasser, as a real and irreducibly disorienting Other. Freud had already implicitly observed that the woman is more loosely fastened to the laws of the structure because of the indefiniteness of her Oedipus, in terms of its insurgence, duration and solution. Of course, being outside the structure involves an encounter with an Other who is unable to preserve, and Freud does not look favourably at this ‘fluidity’ of the feminine position. If we

interpret the Acropolis episode as an anxiety due to finding oneself in the surroundings of the Thing and of its abysmal call, from which Freud kept well away, we also find there the opportunity – which Freud missed – to venture into territories that open up to non-codified solutions, open to the contingency and to the inventions of the moment. An opportunity that can be seized by exposing oneself to a real that does not only capture the horrific alien side of the *Unheimlich*, but also that of its supreme opening to the *new*. Because in the unconscious the woman does not exist as an articulated signifier, or as one that can be articulated according to all the elements of the structure, the passage from mother to woman requires the effort and venture of finding new solutions and alternative balances. A change of perspective that invokes the courage of the man who wants to be involved and of any who want to place themselves on that front. Some personalities, such as Marguerite Duras or Clarice Lispector, have managed to bring across the idea of an erotic love that opens up to the Other overthrowing all subjective coordinates. But the theme of ‘ecstatic’ opening pervades the entire 20th century.

The ‘evaporation of the name of the father’ Lacan already talked about as early as the 40s evidently also carries a *supplementary* order beyond the phallus, one where subjectivities transform themselves and new ones emerge. The main risk consists in the temptation to try to regain what was there before, looking back and feeling nostalgic about the symbolic order, becoming conservative. Love re-opens the doors to perversion, Freud had stated with his usual priceless disenchantment. If the human condition of polymorphous perversion, regardless of the well-to-do primacy of geniality, renews itself in love, can this opening up in love become something *other*? The border between taking a fragmented Other, with the reassuring distance this may offer, as long as one will not see him too close as a subject, and the *intimacy* of contact with any part of his body, if we do not forget the being to which those parts belong, is very thin. Yet it makes the *difference*, a substantial difference. It is the impalpable yet decisive border between the policy of *pars pro toto*; between taking *one part* and taking *the very part* you may enjoy in its infinite uniqueness because you are fully aware of who it belongs to. *Beyond* the phallic register, in the open register of female pleasure, what do we find? Certainly, an asymmetry in the relationship, which will disappoint those who look for harmony, but which is something that forces you to invent, beyond the solutions set by a pleasure that becomes saturated in the phallic order, along with a bond with an Other who is finally exotic, finally *foreign, a stranger*.

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