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SIMPÓSIO - LIMINAL SPACES: NARRATIVES BY CONTEMPORARY WOMEN
WRITERS

CRISTINA M.T.STEVENS
UNIVERSIDADE DE BRASILIA

THE WRITER ALWAYS PLAYS WITH THE BODY OF THE MOTHER¹

The present text is part of the research project which I have been developing about images of the mother and motherhood created by contemporary English women novelists. From a psychoanalytical and feminist perspective, we try to understand the relative absence of this theme in English fiction, and its increasing exploration by contemporary women writers who have been challenging the patriarchal constructions of the experience of mothering and also exposing the fragilities of the Oedipian paradigm. Written from the woman's point of view, these contemporary novels display the complexity of this experience, which transcends the biological determinism of the traditional and 'scientific' ideas about motherhood; they also refuse to see motherhood in the limited, discriminating roles that have always been prescribed by the apostles of matrophobia and mariology. We believe that literature plays a vital role in proposing creative possibilities to deal with this single undeniable fact of life: its origin in the womb.

When analysing this theme in novels written by nineteenth century and contemporary women writers, and also by some contemporary male novelists, *The White Hotel*, by D.M.Thomas (1984) struck me as puzzling: the novel not only creates a fictional Freud in its criticism of the psychoanalytic metanarrative, but it also gives a central, if ambivalent, treatment to the 'metaphysical presence' of the body of the mother. This revealing interplay of narrative absence/presence of the mother/matter well illustrates the feminist critical contribution to psychoanalysis and motherhood, and for this reason, it was selected for this brief analysis.

In *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, Dorothy Dinnerstein argues that the reproduction of the traditional patterns of bringing up children centered around the figure of the mother –

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which played a defining role in the first sexual division of labour based on woman's immanent reproduction and man's transcendent production, and its corollary of male domination over female² - is the cause of what she describes as the "human malaise":

One basis for our species' fundamental ambivalence toward its female members lies in the fact that the early mother, monolithic representative of nature, is a source, like nature, of ultimate distress as well as ultimate joy. Like nature, she is both nourishing and disappointing, both alluring and threatening, both comforting and unreliable. (...) The early mother's apparent omnipotence, then, her ambivalent role as ultimate source of good and evil, is a central source of human malaise: our species' uneasy, unstable stance toward nature, and its uneasy, unstable sexual arrangements, are inseparable aspects of this malaise. (DINNERSTEIN, 1977: 95-100)

According to Freud's theory of sexuality, the mother is the child's most desired sexual object, because it is utterly helpless, utterly dependent on mother care; as a consequence, the mother is idealized, feared, controlled, 'anatomized', both biologically and psychologically, by science and art. However, she is always the object, never the subject of these intellectual, rational, or creative processes. The body of the mother is the scapegoat for the pleasures and fears of the flesh, associated with the mortality of the body – never with the transcendence of the spirit; it is the 'dark continent', the idol of our repressed desires, the ideal sensation of fusional oneness we leave behind, repressed as it must be, on our journey toward the formation of the self. However, this separation is completed at the price of an indefinite longing – a 'lack-in being', as Lacan defines the subject; as a consequence, the subject tries to compensate this irretrievable loss in the symbolic world, which is ruled by the law of the father. This repressed loss of our first love object reappears in sublimated forms also in the fantasy world, a process which Roland Barthes well illustrates in the statement taken from his book *The Pleasure of the Text*, which we chose as a title for this paper: the writer is the one who plays with the body of the mother.

In his essay *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud reinforces a major point of his theory: the process that every child undergoes of abandoning his mother and turning toward the father; he describes this movement as a victory of the intellect over the body, the first step to overcome the simple stage of perception through the senses, in order to develop more complex mental

² See Engels' *The origin of family, property and the state*, and Beauvoir's *The second sex*, among others.

processes which will get increasingly more sophisticated. However, the feminists have pointed out that Freud puts too much emphasis on the oedipian stage of the child's development, at the cost of neglecting the importance of the pre-oedipian phase, which, for him, is inextinguishably repressed. The psychoanalyst Karen Horney, although a former disciple of Freud, was not much influenced as he had been by the atmosphere of biologism/positivism of the nineteenth century; she moves radically away from Freud, and incorporates moral, aesthetic, mystical perspectives in her research and analytical practices. In her more holistic notions about the psyche, Horney also acknowledges the contribution of anthropology in her analysis of the role of women in primeval matrilinear societies³. Horney analyses the problem – for her not yet satisfactorily understood – of the child's total dependence on the mother; she believes that the possibility of a physiological superiority of women has been (probably) conveniently ignored, with consequences that we can only glimpse at. Horney – herself a mother of three children - then reflects that, perhaps, some defense mechanisms have been developed as a form of compensation, of even denial, of this frightening dependence; one can only bring to mind the concepts of Eros and Thanatos which Freud developed. She believes that Freud ignored the crucial importance of maternity – or rather, he interpreted it from nineteenth-century European society's patriarchal perspective; she also reminds us that Freudian theory does not develop the possibility of men's envy of women's bodily functions like pregnancy and lactation, because he developed his theory of the feminine as the 'other' of the masculine paradigm:

What about motherhood? And the blissful consciousness of bearing a new life within oneself, the ineffable happiness of the increasing expectations of the appearance of this new being? And the joy when it finally makes its appearance? (...) The penis envy concept attempts to deny and detract from all this, possibly because of the male fear and envy (...) Woman envy on the part of man ... is psychogenetically older and therefore more fundamental than penis envy (HORNEY, 1993: 19-20).

In the process of questioning universalizing and normative descriptions about the mother, it is worth briefly mentioning the contribution of the French feminists Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, who developed insightful theories to explain the relation

³ There is much discussion about the controversial existence of matriarchal societies; anthropological research points towards the unlikelihood of these systems, but they identify matrilinearity in some ancient social structures. See Bachofen, Robert Briffault, Margareth Mead, Zimbardo & Rosaldo, among others.

woman=mother/child. They analyze this complex equation/relation from the perspective of psychoanalysis, but, contrary to Freud's emphasis on the oedipian phase, they study the pre-oedipian stages of human development, when the child's emotional and cognitive efforts are almost exclusively directed towards the mother. They explain that, although irrevocably repressed – and, as such, an 'absent presence', or 'a present absence' – these unconscious experiences irrefutably subvert the oedipian phase, thus revealing the conveniently neglected 'matriarchal' substratum of our psychological development, as poetically explained by Irigaray:

The relation to the mother is a mad desire, because it is the 'dark continent' *par excellence*. It remains in the shadow of our culture, it is night and hell. (...) This primary experience is very unpopular with psychoanalysts - in fact, they refuse to see it: the danger of fusion, death, lethal sleep, if the father did not intervene to sever this uncomfortably close link to the original matrix. Does the father replace the womb with the matrix of his language? But the exclusivity of his law refuses all representation to that first body, that first home, that first love. These are sacrificed and provide matter for an empire of language that so privileges the male sex so as to confuse it with the human race. (IRIGARAY, 93, p. 10-14)

The pre-oedipian stage has no history, no language to describe it – thus, it can only be reached retrospectively, after it has been abandoned; and the attempts at reaching it are not conscious processes; they reappear in sublimated forms through myths, fantasies, and artistic, poetic representations. As Barthes well reminds us, desire, for psychoanalysis, is an intransitive verb – without a direct object, since the child's first object of desire (the body of the mother) can never be recovered again.

According to psychoanalysis, the repression of this original connection with the mother can be identified precisely at the child's entrance into the symbolic stage, in the same way that a problematic situation which gives rise to narrative's development is often the death or other ways of eliminating the figure of the main character's mother. However, feminist psychoanalysts have been exploring the poetic ways of trying to reach this pre-oedipian, pre-verbal stage, emphasizing the possibility of a disruptive writing practice to reach this 'dark continent', not through memory but through fantasy, as Tereza Brennan remarks in her book *Between Psychoanalysis and Feminism*,: "the literary text has an uncanny capacity to reveal the unsaid, and let the mother and the maternal speak" (BRENNAN, 1989:145).

Helene Cixous emphasises the subversive potential of repressed desire which, according to her, can reappear criptogafically in poetic creation: “if my desire is possible, it means the system is already letting something else through. All the poets know that; whatever is thinkable is real, as Blake suggests” (CIXOUS, 1987: 78). According to Cixous, the essence of femininity is in the womb; she then transforms the body in fetiche in relation to language, thus creating the concept of *écriture féminine*, which she well develops in her poetical theory, brilliantly shown in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, among other writings. This position risks the idealization and mystification of the experience of mothering, reinforcing the limiting equation between woman and mother which for so many centuries represented a serious drawback for the emancipation of women. However, when she creates an extremely liberating discourse in this complex discussion about the body – not as immanent matter, but as transcendent metaphor, Cixous shows us the power – not the illusion of it - of the pre-oedipian imaginary:

Let’s de-mater/paternalize. Let’s defetishize. (...) We are not going to refuse ourselves the delights of a pregnancy which, moreover, is always dramatized or evaded or cursed in classical texts. For if there is a specific thing repressed, that is where it is found: the taboo of the pregnant woman (which says a lot about the power that seems invested in her) (CIXOUS, 1987: 89)

Cixous’ theoretical-poetic contribution points towards an *écriture* which is excessive, fluid, which reintroduces the materiality of voice and re-explores the body. With deconstructionist exercises, she ‘plays’ with language and discursively recreates the figure of the mother as both phallic and castrated, absent and present, powerful and impotent. Inarticulate – since it can only be expressed through the mediation of the symbolic, the body of the mother is reappropriated by Cixous as a privileged metaphor with an amazing power for the development of a subversive femininity.

Cixous’ theoretical contribution has been received with much criticism by the feminists who follow the anglo-american more pragmatic tradition; they believe that Cixous’s position is much ‘ex-centric’ in relation to the symbolic, where society and power are defined and exercised. As a consequence of being in a position (which Cixous felt to be inevitable) of outsiders, our simbolic praxis would be limited to a poetic-maternal sphere which would reinforce, by not contesting, the patriarchal hegemony of the symbolic.

Cixous’ contribution is connectd with the concept of the *semiotic* created by Kristeva,

who develops this theoretical supposition in her attempt to recover the ‘primeval narrative’ of the supreme power of the mother, and the consequent fear of this mysterious, inexpressible power, from which life and the formation of the self evolves. According to Kristeva, the semiotic exists in the primary processes that characterize the pre-oedipian phase. They are pulsations that originate in the *chora* (from the Greek, meaning enclosed space, womb) and they precede, underlie the symbolic. Once the subject has entered the symbolic order, which is completed in the oedipian phase, the *chora* will have been more or less successfully repressed and will be perceived only as pulsional pressure on/within the symbolic; this pulsation is an heterogenic, disruptive dimension of language, but never fully apprehended by it. Like Cixous, Kristeva acknowledges the difficulties in identifying maternity as experience, since it is mediated through symbolic representation. However, we agree with her that it is possible to work with contradiction, to depend on the law=language and subvert it, to use the symbolic to deconstruct its structure and thus create new discursive possibilities about the maternal which go much further than this image of the body before/beyond representation, absent/present.

We feel that this poetic sublimation of the power of the womb is the main subject of D.M. Thomas’ novel *The White Hotel*. In this novel, there is no distinction between the fictional, historical and psychological dimensions that it explores, in narrating Lisa Erdman’s (also named Ana G) hysteria. The novel is constructed through an amazing multiplicity of narrative voices and genres, in an overt refusal of any ‘grands recits’ to provide coherent explanations about life. In the epistolar *Prologue*, the correspondence exchanged between Freud and Jung shows not only the historical rivalry between the two; the *Prologue* already anticipates, although not clearly, the novel’s end – when we finally realize that the hysterical symptoms Anna G. (Dr. Freud’s patient) suffered, are actually premonitory of the horrors of the holocaust which victimizes her. Her acute pains cannot be explained by any repressed oedipian crisis which Freud believes he has identified and cured. In an insightful parody of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic, the next chapter (*Don Giovanni*) describes Lisa’s lyric-erotic-pornographic dream, which show a sado-masochist sexuality which Freud describes as “Eden before the Fall”. He then advises his patient to give the dream an intelligible structure to be reproduced, recreated by her consciousness (*The Gastein Journal*), so that he can collect more elements in order to diagnose her illness, whose symptoms are: breathlessness and acute pains in her breasts and womb. In the following chapter (*Frau Anna G*), the narrator-psychoanalyst Dr. Freud quite dogmatically interprets the two preceding narratives that his patient has produced - from her repressed unconscious and its conscious, structured

representation. He firmly believes he has ‘solved’ Anna’s problem, identifying its cause in traumatic experiences during childhood and in her relationship with the mother:

The “white hotel” ... is the body of their mother. It is a place without sin (...) The overall feeling of the white hotel, its wholehearted commitment to orality – sucking, biting, eating, gorging, taking in, with all the blissful narcissism of a baby at the breast. Here is the oceanic oneness of the child’s first years, the auto-erotic paradise, the map of our first country of love – thrown off with all the *belle indifférence* of an hysteric. (...) I now had the ludicrous sensation that I knew absolutely all there was to know about Frau Anna (105-6)

According to Freud’s narrative, the rude and cold behaviour of Anna’s father had, as a consequence, Anna’s idealization of her dead mother; still according to Dr. Freud, her attachment to other maternal figures had led Anna to develop homosexual tendencies which she represses and, as a consequence, experiences the physical pain. He identifies in Anna’s dreams the pre-oedipian “yearning to return to the haven of security, the original white hotel – we all have stayed there – the mother’s womb”(129)

However, as the novel develops, Freud’s orthodox diagnosis are impotent to solve Lisa’s problem; *The Health Resort* is a chaotic chapter and very rich in freudian symbols which function in the novel as a kind of leitmotif which somehow structure the novel’s fragmented narrative, such as petrified embryos, flying wombs, and Anna’s lactating breasts, which are suckled by all the guests in this mysterious white hotel. Here, Freud asks Lisa’s permission to publish her “case history”; she then reveals that she has consciously manipulated the report/representation of her dreams, upon which Freud had based his diagnosis, whose validity she questions: “You saw what I allowed you to see”(163). Our confidence in Freud is increasingly undermined in the following chapter (*The Sleeping Carriage*), because Lisa’s clairvoyance about her death explains the symptoms she felt. When she denies identification with her Catholic mother, and identifies instead with her Jewish father, she is then taken to the concentration camp at Babi Yar, where she suffers a most violent death: she is thrown in a ravine and is almost buried alive in a sea of blood and dead bodies; when they notice that she is still alive, a soldier crushes her breasts with his heavy boots, after which she is raped with the blade of a rifle.

The last chapter (*The Camp*) takes place in a kind of limbo, a phase/space where she finds herself after death, which is also described as Israel; here, all the characters, symbols,

events, and other elements which recur in the novel acquire a mysterious, spiritual quality. It is here that finally Lisa is reunited with the mother, who comments on her betrayal of her husband and her active sexual life, without any embarrassment or feelings of guilt, in sharp contrast with the idealized images of traditional motherhood:⁴ “It’s always hard for us women to admit it’s mainly sexual desire. You’d probably find it more forgivable if it had been an immortal love; but I honestly can’t say it was” (236).

When the mother confesses having betrayed her husband, the reader cannot help imagining that Lisa’s identification with her Jewish father – an identification which caused her death – might have been the identification with the wrong father, since the hypothetical certainty of paternity which has haunted patriarchal societies is also glimpsed at in the book.

Mother and daughter finally engage in mutual breastfeeding, each nourishing the other. When trying to understand the past events of their lives, they realize that, contrary to Freud’s teachings, “it’s the future that counts, not the past” (237).

I would close this brief analysis of such a complex theme in such a poliphonic novel by recollecting Adrienne Rich’s pointing towards the need for further study, away from the much explored father-son scenario, into the mother’s relation to his daughter:

This cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten history. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement (RICH, 1981:225).

In the mysterious, metaphysical space that the novel creates in the end, the absent physicality of the mother is transformed into presence, and the mother’s body is the source of nourishment not only for the daughter, but to other “guests of the hotel” again, Freud included. The mother, womb/tomb, Eros and Thanatos, is thus the final source of pleasure that, in Freudian terms, is only reached before birth or in the total absence of tension reached in death.

⁴ To illustrate this idealization of the maternal function, let me briefly write about my visit to the National Gallery in London. I counted (in the rooms exhibiting medieval paintings), approximately 210 paintings, of which 63 represented the Madonna and Child – the most emblematic construction of idealized motherhood in Western society; only later, in the Renaissance period, we find two paintings representing her breastfeeding, and another one (by Michelangelo) had the breast of the Virgin on show.

We can't say that D.M.Thomas is a feminist; however, his fictional Freud in this novel problematize the fragile foundations of the patriarchal notions of psychoanalysis in relation to feminine subjectivity; Lisa's malady had more complex causes, related to cultural history, and to her ethnic identity. The novel's polysemic nature and structure illustrates the impossibility of accepting 'grands recits', of which psychoanalysis is one:

The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored. ... If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person. And this was only the first day. (220)

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