

Patterns of Gendered Constructions of the Self - the Narrative of Victorian Lady Novelists

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Abstract—In stories of initiation, any hero has to go through a series of trials that will constantly reshape and broaden his horizons by pouring the light of knowledge and experience accomplishing him as a human being, who ultimately reaches the epiphantic moment of self-discovery. By the end of the journey, the protagonist would have descended deep into the very core of his being, and would have also travelled the world of shadows and lights, of noesis and eikasia. Such is the journey of women during the Victorian time, in their search for self assertion, in their quest for the true light of the sun that would no longer distort the shape and perception of things.

Index Terms—self, otherness, identity, womanhood, Victorianism

I. INTRODUCTION

The moment Victorian women initiated their symbolic, Ulyssean journey of self-discovery, face covered behind some 'kabuki'-like masks, they allegorically embarked on the route towards the 'stage', as the very place for action, existence and creation.

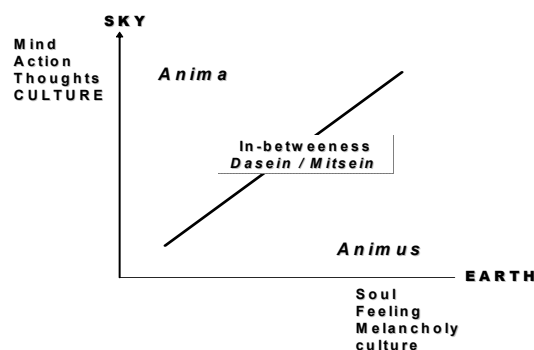
In our representation of the gendered constructions of the self (figure 1), the feminine dimension is symbolized by the horizontal axe, the one that symbolically touches the Earth, metaphorically associating it with the image of the nature goddess Ceres, the one that melts life in every shape, contour, bud or blade of grass. With this axe we worship the miracle of life and all the sacrifices women have made for it, shedding tears, weaving dreams, abandoning themselves for a much greater outcome. Women embody the 'c'-minor concept of *culture*, the one that records neither the great deeds of mankind, nor the profound philosophical legacy, but the vibrant culture of the heart, the vibrant core of the universe that accounts for all forms of creation. CULTURE, in capital letters, accompanies on its audacious, sometimes presumptuous way towards the sky the male story, unstoppable in its verticality, undeniable in its authority. Throughout centuries, men have always been escorted by the symbol of the spear, be it weapon, mast or pen. It is an arrow-shaped axe the one that stands for masculinity in our figure, pointing towards the broad horizons men set sail to conquer. If women were creators, men were forgers; if women were the guards of the family hearth, men were the guardians of lands and waters. The two axes, as different as they are, merge in a single point, and when they do meet, '[...] the animus draws his sword of power and the anima ejects her

poison of illusion and seduction.' [1].

Jung considered Anima to be the archetypal feminine symbolism within a man's unconscious, whereas the archetypal masculine symbolism within a woman's unconscious is known as Animus. 'The whole nature of man presupposes woman, both physically and spiritually. His system is tuned into woman from the start, just as it is prepared for a quite definite world where there is water, light, air, salt, carbohydrates etc.' [2].

It is precisely the same idea of escape, though this time associated with the image of women, that voices Victorian women's taste for *beyondness*. Women can no longer swallow their words and let men's words express themselves and their dreams. Their Animus part unchained the bolts of their mind and they surprised themselves too when they dared, 'spears' in hand, to fight for themselves.

Women emerged from the cocoon of their confinement, challenging time (Zeit) to acknowledge their being (Sein). 'Time' and 'Being' pariahs, women built their way into the world, stepped onto the 'stage' and started to conjugate their 'being there' status, that we should interpret in terms of Heidegger's Dasein concept.



It was the sacred dimension that melted together Heidegger's concepts of Sein and Zeit, two dramatical horizons within whose limits women wove the delicate and tragic fabric of their destiny. By using the word Dasein, Heidegger called attention to the fact that a human being cannot be taken into account except as being an existent in the middle of a world amongst other things [3], and this is precisely what Victorianism means for women, a way of asserting their true self, not within the secluded dimension that would accommodate their humble stories, but within the larger, more rewarding realm of men. Heidegger described the self of everyday Dasein as the 'they-self', which we distinguish from the authentic Self – that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way [eigens ergriffenen]. As they-self, the particular Dasein has been dispersed into the 'they', and must first find itself. [...] If

Manuscript received April 2, 2011.

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Dasein discovers the world in its own way [eigens] and brings it close, if it discloses to itself its own authentic Being, then this discovery of the 'world' and this disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished as a clearing-away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars its own way [4].

We translate Dasein as *in-betweenness*, for women's new position in the world is somewhere in between seclusion and spotlights, caught as it is in between the gynaeceum-*agora* dichotomy that in social terms, not only for the nineteenth century, spelled women and men. This *in-betweenness*, Dasein, articulates a positioning of women in the universe, a statement of their self and intellect. *In-betweenness* is a gnoseological projection of women's hidden self. Coming back to Martin Heidegger, we can draw another parallel between women's emergence onto the stage and his concept of 'thrownness' [Geworfenheit]. 'This characteristic of Dasein's Being – this 'that it is' – is veiled in its 'whence' and 'whither', yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the 'thrownness' of this entity into its 'there'; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the 'there'. The expression 'thrownness' is meant to suggest the facticity of its being delivered over' [5].

It is this over, this void that women had to fill with their presence, wits and feelings. Disguised as a man, under allegoric masks, the Victorian woman writer felt that, wrapped in the cloak of maleness, sheltered by her male pseudonym, she could roam about the forbidden realms of words. She has swapped sword for pen, but she still preserves the same majestic attitude of her warrior 'counterpart'. Before turning into women of letters, women trespassed the kingdom of maleness dressed as one, combating in open battles and thus, breaking down the walls of her confinement. Quite a few Penelopes decided to set sail, abandoning the imprisoning weaving machine, and once they assumed Ulysses' identity, the world had no other alternative but to recognize them.

It was Elaine Showalter who suggested that women writers participate in a quite different literary subculture form inhabited by male writers, a subculture which has its own distinctive literary traditions, even – though it defines itself in relation to the main, male-dominated literary culture. Until the end of the nineteenth century the woman writer, as Showalter shows, was supposed to take second place to her literary brothers and fathers [6]. And she took that secondary place in almost every other aspect of her life, and how could it be otherwise if the first two epithets that best describe her socially acknowledged status are isolation and imprisonment.

Once again, we return to the same *gynaeceum-*agora** dichotomy that in social terms, not only for the nineteenth century, spelled women – men. But the women, while still victims of proprietary rights, also found themselves by some compensation mechanism raised high, idealised and transformed into an ethereal being. Their dependence and physical inferiority to men were exalted. Worshipped as 'priestesses of the hearth', they were venerated as inspirers and counsellors, while being at the same time the personification of innocence and purity. Shadow-like actors on a male-dominated scene, too absorbed in its self-centred phalocracy, women's chance to personal fulfilment had

everything to do with the idea of becoming more intellectually endowed and accomplished.

Simone de Beauvoir explains that a woman, 'was no fellow creature in man's eyes; it was beyond the human realm that her power was affirmed, and she was therefore outside of that realm. Society has always been male; political power has always been in the hands of men' [7].

Patriarchal perceptions of women as 'gender'-pariahs, overlook women's humanity and their essential role in the perpetuation of society. The idea of *in-betweenness* associated with women's destiny and their place within the patriarchal society tends to articulately define itself within a dominant dimension of time, when ladies were perceived as beyond and outside the human status. A clearly stated point of view belongs to Sherry B. Ortner, who describes culture as a 'small clearing within the forest of the larger natural system. From this point of view, that which is intermediate between culture and nature is located on the continuous periphery of culture's clearing; and though it may thus appear to stand both above and below (and beside) culture, it is simply outside and around it' [8].

Excluded, marginalised, considered less than human beings, denied any social and ontological role, women had to act, to do something, to mark their presence and gain acknowledgement first of all as humans and then as gnoseologically endowed beings; most importantly, they had to voice their 'silence'. In England, the revolutionary platform of liberty, equality and fraternity vibrated in the voice of an exceptional woman, Mary Wollstonecraft. 'Give us freedom', she wrote flamingly in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* [9].

However, feminism did not start in the factories, nor down the mines, but in middle-class Victorian drawing rooms [10]. It was in those chambers, around the fireplace, where women spun the thread that was to bridge their own, sheltered horizon with the far broader ones of the outer world. Women started to spin the fabric of their freedom and self-assertion; the force of these Arachne-like creatures was all the more amazing since they initiated their symbolic journey from within the very limits of their world, at the same time continuing to do what they knew best – to embellish, to adorn, to create.

The Woman Question heightens more than any other single issue the problematic functioning of the dualistic narrative of the social fabric. The question was, how such marginals could be assimilated in the social order that the historical perspective unfolds, or whether they could be assimilated at all. Camus' idea of equalling rebellion with existence, sums up the sense of the liberal mid-century, so clear in Mill's writings. It is the English philosopher who explains to the nineteenth-century audience that gender inequality is the single most pervasive obstacle to the construction of the society as an entity. It is a monopoly that institutionalises inequality. 'a man has not a profession to exempt him from such demands, still, if he has a pursuit, he offends nobody by devoting his time to it; occupation is received as a valid excuse for his not answering to every casual demand which may be made on him'. Women's occupations, however, can always be interrupted by 'what are termed the calls of society. [...] She must always be at the

beck and call of somebody, generally of everybody. If she has a study or a pursuit, she must snatch any short interval, which accidentally occurs to be employed in it. A celebrated woman, in a work, which I hope will some day be published, remarks truly that everything a woman does is done at odd times' [11].

Mill's point tangles the same idea that Julia Kristeva will echo a century later, namely that the renewal of social code depends upon the power to undertake both one identity and the other. A system that segregates these powers, cripples not only individual women and men, but it also cripples the entire social endeavour.

Nevertheless, for most militant women the major objective remained to place women everywhere on an equal footing with men and to give them full possessions of their rights. This sounds almost like the existentialist advice of Camus, 'We rebel, therefore we exist', for women seemed to have engaged in a *Them* versus *Us* kind of game. Women started to pull down the barriers that separated their world, *The Other Side*, from men's world, the place where the real action was taking place. Their voices refused to play the mere part of the antic chorus; they wanted to gain a role in the play, for they wanted to act, not just to echo the lines of the actors. They wanted to stand out as individualities, to be perceived as unique entities, unrepeatable in their miracle of being, and not as a mass of blurry shapes, hiding out in the shadows and embracing the most passive attitude ever. The condition of women in the nineteenth century is a litmus test of the idea that society is a self-sustaining and inclusive entity, and consequently their condition requires public attention. In nineteenth-century novels, fictional women act out the conflict between their ideological preparation for inclusion in the social project, and their actual experience.

It could be said that it was the Victorian woman novelist, the one that assumed a fictional male identity in order to be able to voice her self, and the one that played the part of this *I* we have brought into discussion, whereas the question of the self came with the portrayal, in artistic terms, of their inner thoughts and turmoil.

It is as if the authoress herself, this 'audacious' being who defied the common laws of a heavily male oriented society, gained the right to be more than an *I*. She pours her self through her writing, immortalising the female soul of the time, and in her doing so we must find the incipient, although firm roots of a coherent, socially acknowledged identity of what used to be considered a nonessential dimension of the world.

It is this artistic enterprise that probably made women themselves more aware than men of their immense inner richness, of their extremely complex and complicated self, and urged them to voice it to the world, and thus, to voice themselves and urge the others not only to listen to it, but also to start the journey towards discovering it, men and women alike.

It is an epiphany of the self, that simply restores a state of peace with oneself and brings about the chance to live in identity with the verb *to be*, that has long surpassed its mere ontologic dimension, and has stepped onto another stage, one that stays under the sign of voicing, intellectually uttering the sign of being. And this is what echoes women's encounter

with their true self, beyond name, false assumed identities and appearances.

There is a symbolic overlapping of meanings when we refer to the previously mentioned concept of epiphany and we relate it to the question of women during the past nineteenth century, if we link it with the connotation Buddha gives to the concept, for he used to say that epiphany is the end of suffering.

By starting to write, by challenging their own limits and by tearing down the stifling enclosures society has imposed upon them, women have put an end to their wailing, and have embarked upon the road towards initiation.

This is what such extraordinary women as the Brontës or George Eliot have taught an entire age, the right to discover what lies beyond the mere conventionalism of an almost 'inexistent' existence, the shallowest form of 'breathing', women's genuine soul and their true identity, a concept almost impossible to match up to women's condition at the time.

It is as if Catherine Earnshaw's most famous cry '*I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!*', transcends the conventionalism of the literary work and reveals itself for what it really is, for it really stands for, the wail that marks the beginning of an articulate female self-consciousness.

It marks one of those magical moments of illumination, that reshapes the horizons, and this time the core dimension resides somewhere deep within women's soul and consciousness. Thoughts are uttered, echoed, symbolically projected into vibrant energies that break the narrow patterns of a time that seemed to obstinate themselves into shaping a totally different dimension for women.

In times that broke conventions and expanded limits beyond the power of prediction, women were still kept prisoners, doomed to bear a confinement whose burden and dramatism reached its climax in its inner, rather than outer facet.

The volcano comes to meet its lava; it seems to be aware for the first time in a long run of its own incandescence, troubled self springing from the entrails of the earth engaged as it is in one of the most spectacular, breathtaking and powerful display of forces and vital energies that shape the world from within.

Should we project these two gender dimensions upon the two fundamental elements – time and space, we might approach 'Chronos' to the male side and space, the 'realm of life and death' to the Other Side. By making this connection, we conceived time as an arrow, caught with its sharp point upwards, in a typical aggressive, conquering attitude; this column of the infinite that has symbolically turned into man's instrument of defining his leadership position, his status-quo; it is the professional's time, common time, universal time, the time of public affairs, and wars. Attached to the masculine tradition, time is perceived through its outer dimension, the public time of history and deed. This outer time has reached the status of universalism. It is the time of open and clearly articulated utterance; the time that compels dynamism and that requires constant change and mobility. This is another facet of the rather complex gender problem, since so much of women's experience does not circumscribe

itself to this exterior, commonly shared time; and because of that, almost their entire life fails to exist. Women's time conforms to local and private, secluded, confined conditions; women can never master time, since their time is nothing but the palest echo of the masculine time, of 'andro-time'. Women's time is flexible, for it is others, and their needs, ambitions and desires that define it.

In much the same manner like Catherine Earnshaw who came to identify herself with Heathcliff, Jane Eyre, once reunited with the man she loved, admitted that, 'I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. We talk, I believe, all day long, to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him; all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character, perfect concord is the result' [12].

Susan VanZanten Gallagher suggests that although the Christianity professed by the powerful males in the novel is destructive to, and exploitative of, women, the novel might embody a Christian feminism that sees God as both masculine and feminine and advocates the values of love, sexuality and a marriage of partnership [13].

Once again we run into the same Ying and Yang game of completion and rejection, a permanent balance between masculinity and femininity, with a peculiar stress on the fight for self-assertion of the feminine facet. Interesting enough, Jane's 'right' to hope for and finally reach self-fulfilment is restored, in a kind of divine justice, by the patriarchal symbol, thus offering her a social status, a rank and identity.

'Socially rescued' by the male element, she rescued the man she loved, in an allegoric closing of the circle that melts both Ying and Yang. No longer spiritually dependent on Jane, Rochester is finally ready to meet Jane on equal terms; no longer financially dependent on Rochester, Jane is at last his equal, as well. These changes are necessary, even though Jane and Rochester both affirm their essential equality when they are first engaged, 'I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even or mortal flesh, It is my spirit that addresses your spirit, just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal — 'as we are!' 'As we are!' repeated Mr. Rochester' [14].

Starting from Jung's classification of anima development, we have associated Jane Eyre with the idea of Up-Spirituality, approaching the Mary model. Indeed, Jane breathes an air of calm, peace, devotion, self-sacrifice, humbleness, forgiveness, but she conjugates it all on earth, for it is on earth where she consumes all her passions and bestows her gifts.

Jane learnt to become 'Mary', she was taught the meaning of humility, she was offered the bliss of a warm, human touch even in the harshest of times, and she started her journey into the world with this mission, of healing, of offering her unconditional, loving touch. Even her relationship with Edward Rochester dawned in the same keynote, for when they first met, Jane put her body into service for him, as a prop for his lameness, thus initiating their bond.

This is where we may set up the idea of circularity of the novel in what Jane and Edward's relationship is concerned. Charlotte Brontë introduces the image of the circle as the epitome of the idea of love, reunion, family, and it is within

this circle where Jane develops and comes to share love. The circle is the one that accommodates Jane's soul, offering it fulfilment, bestowing peace and tranquillity, but also challenging it, forcing it to pass beyond its limits, and calling it within it once again and for always.

This circle is the womb of love for Jane, the place where all her dormant, love-lusting cells have started to flourish, for we think that it is within this circle where Jane asserted her status as a woman, loving and being loved back. But the circle completes both Ying and Yang, animus and anima, angel and demon. Leaving it breaks the delicate equilibrium; unlashng destroying forces that burn to ashes, cripples souls and bodies, and brings death as an allegorical restoration of the world order.

There are voices supporting the idea that Jane's return to Rochester and her total and unconditional acceptance of the part she had to play thereupon is not much a rebellion against the previous condition as a humble Victorian woman. Freedom, an independent self, symbols of a time when women started to rediscover the path towards their inner world, and most importantly, began their fight for recognition, as part of this world, as vital element of this universe's most sensitive core. And if women fought for freedom, it was because of their almost 'desperate' need to share – to share their love, thorough healing and education, to share their love as equals of their husbands, no longer perceived as mere 'life-companions' of their wives, and, essentially, to share their life in utmost resonance with the society of their time. Women wanted to show to themselves, and to the others, that they can be more, they can actually achieve something, and in doing so they put a lot of effort, energy and passion; if the game in itself was complicated the only way to master it was by simply pulling down the masks.

Victorianism, especially when it comes to women, can be described as a time that initiated the demolition of prejudices, of arbitrary conventions and rigid frame of mind. No matter how presumptuous it may sound, the age touches in terms of resonance and significance, the idea of the Renaissance, for it does take women from the shadows and introduce them gently to the dawning lights of self-assertion.

Women re-invented themselves; they metamorphose from 'silences' into 'utterances', from 'absences' into 'presences', they begin 'to be' and not merely 'to exist'.

This is what Jane did. She 'allowed' herself the privilege to be herself, to follow the call of love, the only thing that could take her from the confined realm of an inarticulate existence to the summit of feeling and emotional commitment.

Love offered her freedom, love was her freedom, as much as the voice of her true self, the one that she discovered the moment she had that 'epiphany' of the heart. This is why we do not consider that Jane, by returning to Edward Rochester, condemned herself to the same fate of subordination and 'conjugal appendix', like the one experienced by almost all the women of those years.

For how can love turn anyone into a mere 'prop' one may need in order to be able to build his steps, if these steps lead towards more love in return? How can love advocate the idea of master and servant, when love is almost an endless competition for a deliberately and whole-heartedly, self-imposed second place?

Jane is, no doubt about it, in our opinion, the little, fragile servant who came to master her master through the prevailing and unwavering command of her true self – love itself. Jane is nothing but love, endless, unconditional, purifying love. It is her love, nothing else but her true self and nature that stands for Edward Rochester's epiphanic moment of self-redemption. Analysing things symbolically, this purifying love was itself purified by the cathartic flames of the big fire that burnt Thornfield Hall to ashes, and with it, the whole gloomy past of the master of the place. Huge flames with hungry tongues of incandescent light melt the secrets of a former, shallow and carnal passion in the dense fabric of the night. Thick as the night was the mystery behind a long-consumed love affair, and fresh as the coming dawn was the almost invisible thread of hope that 'embraced' place and protagonists altogether. Thorns died, perished forever, allowing roses were to bloom. And bloomed they have. Jane's love bloomed roses and mastered what seemed, at that time, almost impossible – the heart of a governess' master, causing the downfall of the common order of things and social conventions. This makes us believe that *Jane Eyre* is not at all the story of a woman who accepted the same condition of inferiority, as all the women of her time and rank did, for we do think that she overthrew the status-quo of the age and proved that women's self is a land of unexplored emotions. Jane found the way towards her inner, hidden self through love, just like Dorothea Brooke did through wits and Lucy Snow through determination. Ironic enough, of all the Victorian heroines, *Jane Eyre* is one of the few who succeeds in defeating one of the most rigid and strict social orders, by simply allowing herself to be herself, by not doing anything special and still, at the same time, performing the miracle of love.

We shall not see Jane now as Mrs Rochester, for we shall see her as the little governess, the fragile young woman who found her true self and nature, who consequently found love and turned into one of the most extraordinary and fascinating female figures of world literature.

The concept of self-abandonment is to be conjugated differently by the Brontës, and George Eliot, a woman of too complex and idiosyncratic an intellect, whose self is but refined thinking, whereas the Yorkshire ladies' is more inner feeling, only to add a touch of collective empathy, a socially-shared perception of the world, permeated by the eccentricities of the heart in the writings of Elizabeth Gaskell. Soul and mind symbolically and invisibly connected through the concept of the self, the only and very core that melts time and being into its very essence. A multifaceted concept, the self was but naturally destined to gain a plurality of sparklings, that suffused the writings of some extraordinary ladies, whose hyperactive intellect and sensitiveness were nothing but inner vibrations, resonating either from thoughts, feelings or brethren sympathy.

We witness a double inner diving, first into the idea of self itself, as expression of the most vibrant fibre of every being, second, when the notion is taken downwards further still, with the idea of self-abandonment, as expression of total fusion with the fluid of the universe that melts both logic and feeling.

This is part of the peculiarities of Victorian ladies' écriture,

for they succeed to skilfully blend these two sides, intellectual and imaginative, the id and the ego. And they were inextricably connected. Should we be allowed to bring a comparison with one of the epitomes of the industrial dimension, the engine with all the power and force it entangles, we may say that women's écriture during the reign of Queen Victoria was a constant interchange of power forces, relentlessly alternating the shift of supremacy, for there are écritures in which the engine, as represented by the intellect seems to be far too powerful for the machine that 'carries' the soul (George Eliot), whereas the situation is reversed when one comes across pages written by the Brontës ladies, whose engine of deeply-sprung emotions come to overshadow the somewhat cold, more intellectually refined world of thought. The engine never stays the same, and this is what makes the machinery ever more fascinating. The train may have never reached the station of perfection, but it is not the destination per se that seems to count, but the loveliness of the landscape it travels through and the music of the engine itself, roaring, sighing, mourning or dreaming in the sounds of a beating heart.

This is where lies the outstandingness of these ladies, in the deep and most profound melting of their life and soul into their words, words infused with memories and fragranced with some of the most intimate and 'feeling-provoking' recollections.

The Victorian age comes thus to add invaluable gems of complexity and greatness, trailed as an epic journey of becoming – not only in terms of political and economic power but also in terms of spiritual and moral recalibration. Without the endeavours of these special ladies, who outlined the missing portrait of their time, adding the Ying pieces to the yang-dominating puzzle of the time, the Victorian mightiness would have failed to reach the splendour and uniqueness it enjoys today.

This is one of the clues that should be used in interpreting Victorianism and its atemporality, for this is what rounds it up, in a kind of symbolic reunion of the age with its very self. Without this 'encounter', the prominence of the age would have been incomplete, a splendid body with no soul, a glorious existence with no life of its own, though.

Who else could have endowed Victorianism with this symbolic self, so full of infinite connotations if not the expression of self itself, women, special women, whose most sensitive self, a peculiar blend of unique proportions between frailness and firmness, shaped the intimate identity of a whole time and, most importantly, infused the age with their self.

The image that would best describe this is that of rippling circles, of diffused sensitivity that wraps up in fine laces and embroideries of introspection, a time that otherwise would have been described as a time of science, breakthrough, territorial extension of the British dream of power and glory.

Thus, embroidering a female psychology always conditional and opposed to the patriarchal male culture women come to claim the right to the identity in an almost violation attitude of a deeply-rooted taboo that would grant stability and a 'persona' status to men, and men alone.

Thus, the metaphysical dimension of dichotomous oppositions of Presence/Absence, Being/Nothingness,

Truth/Error, Same/Other, Identity/Difference, Reason/Feeling, Speech/Silence coincides with the polarity Masculinity/Femininity, further deepening the abyss that widely breaks open between the two, as ultimate expression of the mastery of difference as such.

The woman is otherwise, the woman is difference, for she is *The Other*, different from the world as long as the world as long as the world is wrongfully and exclusively represented only by the archetypal, dominant, overwhelming male element. If so, woman is simply an outsider, an already 'discarded' entity, since she is the other polarity that is not considered to add value to the whole, but to merely perform a decorative, auxiliary part.

Moreover, the European culture has long legitimated the idea of womanhood as absence, incompleteness, deficiency, failure even, when none of the fundamental attributes manhood has come to embody is characteristic and emblematic to the other side. This balanced conception of *otherness* is a kind of symbolic blindness to the woman's real difference, enriching, ennobling, that actually asserts itself and its claim to a new kind of logic and logos.

The French philosopher Luce Irigaray, in her book *Speculum de l'autre femme*, raises the problem of 'utterance' when female voices are involved [15]. We can continue the enquiry and relate it to the literature signed by the extraordinary ladies of the Victorian era and we can ask ourselves who is 'speaking' in their novels and who is asserting the otherness of the woman? As Luce Irigaray suggests, women's silence, or the repression of their capacity to speak are constitutive of the philosophy and of theoretical discourse. The puzzling issue is whether she, the lady author, comes to speak the logos of men, or if it is the silence of women that utters the language and music of the female self. Is she speaking as a woman, or is she just echoing the silence for others women to hear? Does she do it to reach the others, the world, or does she do it in the name of the woman? Is 'speaking as a woman' a fact determined by a series of biological predetermination, by social impositions, culture? Allow us to quote Freud and his famous verdict on women, 'Anatomy is destiny', in order to highlight the perception of the time when the problem of womanhood was approached. And even so, the very idea of speaking in the name of, or speaking for women opens the same perspective towards appropriation and further silence. The discourse would thus lack thoroughness, depth and success. It is true that women speak for themselves, but not exclusively for their own selves, that they want to shape and bring to light.

Furthermore, it is of importance the very substance of women's *écriture* that Christiane Makward, one of the most important commentators and translators of French feminism, describes as being 'open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body i.e., the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriented, masterly or 'didactic' languages'[16].

Victorian women writers speak and write in the name of their self, for women to dare and men to understand. Manhood is, in fact, what conditions womanhood as its universal equivalent, as what determines and measures its

value, the *axis mundi* against which all aspects of feminine identity are projected and carefully scrutinised and dramatically reduced to a zero. What seems to be the quest of men's pursuit in women is not a correspondent individual, an interlocutor, a face, but a mirror that would reflect back his own image and his self-absorbed ego along with it.

Virginia Woolf writes that 'women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.' If men desired not knowledge of women themselves but their acknowledgement of them, pushing them into the direction of recognition, of their almighty recognition, women started, through writing as well, to fight for cognition, of their own self, for themselves [17].

It is much more than a simple quest; it is a dramatically assumed quest of a world, of the world itself that can never be complete without its Ying and Yang, dawn and dusk, trails and roads, voices and murmurs, steps and dances, for it is always the dawn that blooms the colours of dusk, the trail that leads its way into the road, the murmur that echoes its song into a voice, the step that blends its rhythm into a dance; the dance of life, the voice of the consciousness, the road towards the real self, the dawn of a new dimension, one in which the mere acceptance is no longer sufficient, for a woman's self, in order to be complete, needs not only to be acknowledged, but also to be understood and accepted. And this acknowledgement, understanding and acceptance must come, first and foremost, from women themselves, for it is they who need to find the path first towards themselves in order to be able to later point the others in the direction of the road that reaches their soul and essence.

Women can no longer afford to be Penelopes, they have to start sail in search not of Ulysses but of that magic mirror that would not only reflect their image but would dare to push the horizons of perceptions a self further. Sumptuous, richly adorned, massive mirrors are known to embellish and decorate the Victorian lodge, but such a mirror would only reflect the sheer materiality of the female outer lining, whereas the inner one is to be reflected by this magic mirror Penelopes have to search for. The entrails of the female world will be reflected by the very eyes of those Victorian women who dared to replace the conventional mirrors, nothing but false, shallow friends of centuries of mere contemplation, with the need to search for the genuine image, the real thing, the true self, the one and only identity.

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