

## APPROACHING THE QUESTION OF THE FEMININE\*

In Light of Freud's and Lacan's Teachings

In this text I shall attempt to approach the question of the feminine by way of Lacan's elaboration of Freud's work. I begin with an examination of what I shall call the refusal of the feminine as evinced in Freud's text "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" (1920).<sup>1</sup> I then look at how the feminine is put into question by the appearance of the Other, and finally I develop a contribution to this issue based on a proposed articulation between the feminine and the invocatory drive.

### Freud and the Refusal of the Feminine

Freud agreed to consult with a young woman of eighteen brought to him by her father as a result of a suicide attempt. She had discovered the difference between the sexes, he was told, at four years of age when she first witnessed her older brother's genitals.

When she was fourteen, he then furthers, this young woman developed a significant attachment to a three year old boy whom she frequently saw in a local playground, and also enjoyed a satisfying relationship with her parents. In other words, he points out more specifically, she was already adopting a maternal position. For unexplained reasons however, this attachment disappeared when she was about seventeen years of age, at the same time as a new connection appeared in her life, this time to a thirty-five year old woman Freud labeled her "august beloved," a Viennese woman well-known for her questionable morals.

But then, one fine day, as she was walking arm in arm with this "questionable lady"<sup>2</sup> in the area of her father's office, she crossed paths with him and he gave her a "furious look,"<sup>3</sup> after which she scaled a nearby train overpass and threw herself onto the tracks below. Importantly, Freud's account focuses exclusively on the effect this look had upon the "lady" and the young woman, but specifically does not refer to the father's own intra-subjective experience of the encounter. Clearly what interested Freud here was testing his Oedipal framework in relation to feminine homosexuality.

In this light he remarks that between the disappearance of the attachment to the little boy and the appearance of that to the "lady,"<sup>4</sup> the young homosexual was confronted with the fact that what she was hoping to receive from her father had instead been given to another, her mother, who had conceived her brother with him. Robbed of the aid provided by this crucial fantasmatic support, she was left with no other option but to interpret this deprivation as a betrayal, and this was Freud's point of departure for explaining her homosexual attachment.

On the one hand this betrayal paved the way for her to make a new maternal identification which both improved her previously unsatisfying relationship with her mother and enabled her to accept the hetero- and homosexual advances of the "lady." On the other hand however, it changed her libidinal relationship with her father. In Freud's view, she had no choice but to reject her budding libidinal impulse towards

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<sup>1</sup> S. Freud. "Sur la psychogénèse d'un cas d'homosexualité féminine" (The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman), in *Névrose pshychose et perversion* PUF 1073 pp. 245-270.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

him, as the bearer of the phallus she did not have but which she desired, and instead turn towards a masculine position of veneration towards older women, characteristic of “adolescents.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, the young homosexual sacrificed her own femininity following the institution in her of a “masculine form of love.”<sup>5</sup> As for her hatred for her father, Lacan’s teaching enables us to view it as a result of a transference linking the young girl’s Real to that of her father’s, whose terrible effects suddenly became apparent as a result of what Freud called the “furious” look.

Such is the Freudian explanation based on the girl’s relationship to her father, whose refusal accounts for the refusal of the feminine as such. However I believe Lacan’s teaching sheds further light on these questions, in particular as concerns a possibility of putting the feminine *into question*, rather than refusing it outright.

### **The Putting Into Question of the Feminine, and the Appearance of the Other**

Since the feminine in the context of Freud’s case history consistently *pertained* to the field of the paternal, the question might then be rightly raised as to why he, the inventor of psychoanalysis who clearly observed the importance of the father in this case, was unable to go one step further and explore what the *father himself* faced in this confrontation with his daughter as Other? The elements of the transference in the anamnesis itself enable us to take this additional step.

The comportment of this young woman strolling down the street in the arms of her “lady” may be depicted as an “acting out” which is related to moments in the transference when things are “given to be seen” (*donné à voir*). The suicide attempt, on the other hand, was a “passage to the act” since it was the moment when she exited the scene entirely: *before* analysis it is clearly outside the bounds of transference, but may it sometimes be situated within its symbolic borders *during* one? The question lies therein.

But what kind of story is really being told here? Is there reason to consider this anamnesis as sufficiently explanatory, or rather, as Freud himself seems to indicate in his own text, does it not also convey something on the order of what might be imagined as the direction of a potential cure to come? The latter hypothesis merits further exploration.

It could be argued for example that the father, powerless in the face of what his daughter was *showing* him, was suddenly confronted with an incapacity to think. Traversed and fixated by what lay before him, the fixity of his own gaze in turn *showed* the extent to which he was unable to turn away from the unthinkable moment when he said “yes” to encountering it, but that he then lacked the metonymic foothold needed to think through whether he was right or wrong to persist in saying so. And yet he clearly had also suddenly discovered in this instant that there exists an other law beyond the written code.<sup>6</sup>

It is reasonable to assume as well that Freud himself turned away from the encounter with what, and whom, he had seen – something other than the Oedipal veneer. Who was he talking to when he evaded things by making use of an egoic

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>6</sup> True to form as magistrate, the father is surpassed here, stripped of his functions, because the law which usually dictates what follows and how to think has been surpassed itself.

argument to the effect that his paternal position in the transference necessarily transfigured him with hatred and defiance? To the ego of the auditor, that is to say to the resistance of the listener. The hallmark of this resistance is that it is affected by something that cannot be heard outright, but is, enigmatically, only heard at the moment when hearing itself falters. This is how I read the meaning of Lacan's teaching, in Freud's wake, concerning the specter of the appearance of the Other or the, as it were, Other scene. Freud misses the point when he tries to explain things from the position of a "Non-dupe" who decided to refer her to a woman analyst.

But it is clear that despite his assertions to the contrary, and despite his belief that he was acting based on a full knowledge of the facts, when he made this decision something was acting in him without his being fully aware of it. After all, what was this "making seen" to the father really seeking to elicit? We appear to have stumbled upon a practical limitation (*limite de fait*) in Freud's approach to the question of the feminine, which must be clearly distinguished from a limitation in principle (*limite de principe*), insofar as, (according to my argument at least), what Freud viewed as the normativity that arises in tandem with the achievement of femininity is radically put into question by the appearance of this domain of the Other from which the feminine apparently originates. One way to shed new light on this point is to view it from the perspective of his explanation for the young homosexual's suicide attempt.

Freud makes use of two different mechanisms in order to account for it:

- 1) "Self-punishment."<sup>7</sup> She was turning back upon herself the aggressivity she would have already felt towards her father and mother as a result of their both having let her down.
- 2) "The Fulfillment of a Wish (*l'accomplissement du désir*)." Because in German the word *niederkommen* means both to "fall down" and to "give birth." By jumping from the overpass and "falling down" on the tracks below, the girl would have also been realizing the wish to "give birth" to a fantasmatic child conceived with her father.

Lacan furnishes an additional interpretation: When she is "found out" by this look from her father, she is fundamentally exposed to the "fury" of the gaze<sup>8</sup> as such, which robs her of her capacity to think and reduces her to being nothing other than "that" which it sees. She falls to the level of a piece of refuse, what Lacan called the object (a) as it registers in the Real. But what is this "fury of the gaze" she is immediately exposed to when it finds her out and she feels transparent beneath it?

Basing myself primarily on Lacan's teaching, I would argue what she encounters is a gaze that prevents her from seeing herself as *lovable* for the Other, her father. In other words, she found herself fallen into the field of the *demand* of the Other as such. In the locus of this gaze, I would further, with Lacan still, the desire of the Other she encountered refused to recognize her as *desiring*, meaning it refused to recognize her in her own being, "as herself." In fact, what she seems to have faced was something akin to the *jouissance* of the Other whose *silence* dragged her down to Earth (*la terre*), (which is why it was so "terr-ible" to begin with).

Thus this gaze was not only "furious," but above all *petrifying*, because it invoked in those who faced it something that was yet to be symbolized, the Real, like the gaze of the Medusa which similarly elicits something related to petrification, beyond Speech. From this perspective the *Niederkommen*, in relation to the facts of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>8</sup> This is how I would label the encounter with what Freud described as the father's "furious look."

the transference, was not so much the fulfillment of a wish to have a baby by the father, but was instead related to the fact that as a being she was unable to escape the way the silent knowledge of the gaze reduced her to the level of this “downfallen” thing. According to my argument this was clearly something that needed to be actualized in the transference in a manner different from the way Freud proceeded, (he also “dropped” her by referring her to a woman analyst), insofar as I believe the invocatory drive, which Lacan called “closest to the experience of the unconscious,”<sup>9</sup> may lead to the existence of a new appeal for life to begin again differently.

Thus Lacan’s distinctions between demand, desire and *jouissance* enable us to more precisely define or name what the young homosexual faced in her experience of the father’s “furious” gaze. It also permits us to envision how it is that the renewal of the signifying chain, which leads to the “passage to the act” when it is too abruptly halted, does not depend on the use of the “already-made” knowledge of the written law. Instead it will only occur via a solicitation of the Other, stumbled upon surreptitiously in a way that makes heard something in it that is beyond hearing, something related to what it becomes when it is reduced to being a voiceless object, the Real of the voice as object as such.

Freud’s retreat from this moment may be likened to the way he depicted the woman in 1926 as a “dark continent for psychology”<sup>10</sup> – the same woman he evoked in his 1932 work on femininity, whose “pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother is so great that it leaves tendencies towards fixations.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus this fundamental putting into question of the feminine clearly does pertain to the phallic law and its Oedipal framework, as Freud notes, but its significance is not related to the refusal of the feminine in the Oedipal sense because, as I have argued here, the repeated insistence of the “making seen” forges a space in which the phallic law is “not all,” as Lacan reminded us in his seminar *Encore*. Otherwise put, this act of *de-monstration*, this abrupt display of the father’s “monstrous” dimension, calls for us to rely on something lodged Elsewhere than the “already-made” knowledge we have of the “masculine type of love”<sup>12</sup> upon which Freud became fixated. This Elsewhere is a place which furnishes us with a new avenue of approach to understanding the most inaugural of all human encounters, the confrontation with the maternal voice.

### **The Invocatory Drive and the Feminine**

There is reason to believe that, as early as the fourth or fifth month of intrauterine life, children begin to hear a song which conveys to them the music of the maternal voice. Like every song, this one is composed of both music and words, but the former, it must be recalled, is what is heard first. The pure sonority of music is what truly transmits a radical element of the Symbolic order as such which eludes signification or meaning. Thus the mother, ordinary nursemaid that she is, unwittingly raises the child on a conflict between the meaning of words and something that eludes the grasp of their signification, a *music* whose presence is

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<sup>9</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XI*. Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Freud, “Psychoanalysis and Medicine: The Question of Lay Analysis” in “Ma vie et la psychanalyse,” Idées-Gallimard 1978, p. 133.

<sup>11</sup> Freud, “*La féminité*” in “*Nouvelle conférence sur la psychoanalyse*,” Idées-Gallimard 1978 p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

crucial because it is what transmits the conditions needed in order for the baby to gain access to the meaning of words in the first place. How does this process unfold?

The history of Opera, as Alain Didier-Weill has pointed out in his most recent book *Invocations*, is shot through with the residues of this same conflict binding the law and the signification of words, that is to say meaning, with its other, a law which enables an escape from meaning into pure music or sonority as such. Operatic history conveys the idea of both rendering music into words in order to better understand its meaning, known as “parlar cantando,” as well as that of “prima la voce” (voice first), a primary emphasis on the notes. In a way therefore, the opera lover is someone seeking the commemoration of this intimate moment when the Diva makes him hear something akin to the originary conflict in the mother’s voice again. What does this conflict’s evolution over the course of operatic history have to teach us?

Approximately one hundred years after the *parlar cantando* period under the aegis of Monteverdi in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the reign of the pure voice appeared, something heard only in those moments when the voice of the Diva suddenly frees itself in the high notes by transgressing the code governing signification, and transforms itself into the pure sound of notes. But why is the Diva’s cry all too frequently killed off once it has transmitted this *jouissance*, especially considering the Operas in question are typically written by men? What *jouissance* at the level of pure sound is being thereby refused once it is made heard? Furthermore, how are we to interpret the fact that the Opera’s writer, its Diva and its lover all agree to this killing?

The first interpretation would contend the Diva is summarily killed off because her voice transmits a *jouissance* deemed unacceptable to its listeners. Is this an adequate resolution? *Yes*, if we ourselves then censor in turn the unbearable *jouissance* we feel when her cry is heard, as evinced by the history of Opera itself. But *no*, if we remain sensitive to the power of the sound of music it makes heard, and the passage this sound undergoes in assuming the specificity of the cry, insofar as the cry reveals itself to us in a way not unlike what unconsciously transpires or passes between the Other and the Subject in the intra-subjective experience of the transference. What does this mean more specifically?

The Diva’s pure sound actualizes something other than the typical operatic listener because it no longer transpires through words – the cry *pierces* us instead. Before it, the listener believed he was listening to the sound “egoically.” But then the horror of the cry overturned this position because in its aftermath he heard that he was no longer the listener he believed he was – the cry instead *heard something in him* he hadn’t realized he was harboring until that moment. According to Lacan’s conception, this represents a crucial reversal (in the drive) whereby the listener is turned into the “listened to,” a separation of the ego from the listener that enables, in the aftermath, a listened-to, the subject, the good listener, to enter into existence as such. But a good listener for what? For the enigmatic, the unintelligible, the Real which is suffering, as we say in “Lacanian,” for a lack of symbolization that may then enter into existence because it has at last been heard. This process does not go without saying...

It is hardly surprising therefore, as the history of Opera seems designed to evince, that this moment, intolerable insofar as it stages the appearance of the dimension of the *Nagträlichkeit* as such, is so often subject to summary condemnation. What is in fact being condemned? What Lacan called “jouie-sens,” which stems from sounds rather than words.<sup>13</sup> At stake here is the aforementioned

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<sup>13</sup> TR: Insofar as it literally means “I hear sense (or meaning),” but *sounds* the same as *jouissance* when spoken aloud.

opposition between the written law, the law of words, and the oral law of sound.

At this point it becomes clear that what the Opera lover is really looking for is to receive a transmission of something he had forgotten, the pure signifyingness of sound that erupts out of the cry which authenticates the purity of its presence – fleeting though it may be. According to my argument, this presence, pure signifyingness itself, is related to the signifying presence of the feminine<sup>14</sup> which Lacan elaborated in his seminar *Encore*, particularly when he argued for the existence of a feminine part of every speaking being, a part that is “not all” in the phallic function.

We remain in this sense forever in the voice of the Diva’s debt, because it enables us to enter into familiar terms with the strangeness of the feminine, usually forgotten along with the invocatory drive which conveys it.

### **In Conclusion**

I have sought in this essay to convey the idea that the reason why the feminine has so often been refused in the moment of its appearance is because it harbors a presence that is alien to the written law and established meaning. At least one analyzand made progress in this direction when he realized, though not without anxiety, that the law which had granted him his various titles, diplomas and even his profession, suddenly felt as if it were all make-believe, a semblance, because it failed to grant him the *enjoyment (jouissance)* of these things which the Civil Code nonetheless told him he possessed. How to interpret the meaning of this loss of legitimacy he had once had, and would fail to find once more so long as he continued to understand things purely intellectually?

As evidence of the fact that he had stumbled upon the revelation of a law more originary than the Civil Code and its instructions concerning which rules to follow. The Talmudists labeled this oft-forgotten law as *oral*, because it arises from the act of hearing as such, rather than from the specifics of what is heard, which they classified in terms of a law they called *written*.

From the standpoint of this *hearing* which I have been arguing is related to the horizon of the feminine share of every speaking being, Psychoanalysis is unique in its ability to actualize, in the transference, both types of these laws which are originally transmitted, at the dawn of our lives, by the maternal voice. Why? Because human beings learn, during the course of their Oedipal development and its concomitant normatization, to sustain themselves on the basis of a written law with supereogic overtones, and to forget the presence of the oral law as such. In other words, at root human beings sustain themselves on the basis of a conflict which they have structured into a binary mode that excludes the possibility of this originary law because it is unable to enter into this register. The source of the transference’s efficacy therefore stems from the fact that it is able to actualize this binary conflict in a way that transmutes it into a *dialectical* one, in which the two types of laws become intertwined. In structural terms, this is the only possible interpretation to be given for the fact that the Other, A, is divided by a bar, which is not the mark of an opposition, but the hallmark of an originary failing point from which unheard things may henceforth emerge.

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<sup>14</sup> Ever-elusive, in that it is both a pure absence within presence, and the pure presence of absence. A presence that is crucial to enabling the Real of the drive to enter into existence through Symbolic recognition.

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