

ANOREXIC DAUGHTERS OF HYSTERICAL MOTHERS. ON THE SHADOWS (AND LIGHTS) OF THE MOTHER AS A SYMBOLIC ORDER

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“The liberation of the truth of the hysteric takes place with feminism, or, rather, with the feminism of difference and the primacy this assigns to the woman-to-woman relationship. This relationship is practiced within relations that are *not* ethically regulated by equality and reciprocity: they are unequal relations, of love and caring; often, they are conflictual relations; at times, they are obscured by the ‘shadow of the mother’” (Muraro, 2018, p. 166).

This quotation by Luisa Muraro contains, in extreme synthesis, the project of a liberation based on the relationship and not on the autonomy that lies at the base of the feminism of the Italian sexual difference, in particular in that expressed by Diotima. A feminism with some peculiar traits, often more cited than studied, that can be found in the volume edited by Cesare Casarino and Andrea Righi, which does a valuable job of collecting texts of the thought of sexual difference. In particular, these are texts related to the philosophical project of thinking a symbolic order of the mother, and reflections on it, which allow to open a dialogue and build a relationship, to approach a thought while maintaining a critical distance. This project is particularly relevant at a time when, as the two curators note, “the fact that the question of the mother is now no longer as central as it was for the last century is one of the many symptoms of the emergence of the

contemporary post-oedipal order – which is no less patriarchal for being post-oedipal” (Casarino and Righi, 2018, p. 2). A contemporary scenario, therefore, characterized by a questioning of Oedipus made possible by feminist struggles and thought, but which, in an ambivalent way, has also led to new forms of subjectivization, based on *jouissance*, which create new oppressive conditions for women. At the same time, although not mentioned in the text, a contemporary moment in which a global feminist movement resurfaces with force, with practices different from those of self-awareness but which, however, builds relationships and communities as fundamental tools for political practice. For this reason, investigating today what gave rise to the need to think about a symbolic order of the mother and what characteristics it has, but also what “shadows” this order carries with it, can allow us to imagine new forms of possible liberation.

The need for a maternal symbolic order arises within the feminist movement understood as a field in which to think and from which to think. It is also an attempt to use psychoanalysis against itself, or at least against its patriarchal approach, offering women a different access to the symbolic. Moreover, this diffraction of the symbolic allows us to illuminate the blind spots of revolutionary theories, anchoring them to a bodily dimension not intended in the biological sense, but as a material starting point for the construction of one’s own experience of the world. If, as Muraro points out, psychoanalysis traces the origin, recognizing that we are generated by a body, but does not modify the production of the symbolic (Muraro, 2018a), the same can be said of the different political theories, which are based on a lack, on a void. As Diana Sartori notes, in fact, “all these analyses concur on the diagnosis: there is a mother kept in the shadow of politics” (Sartori, 2018, p. 169). A shadowing of the mother that had effects on the production and reproduction of the political order, structured on the absence of the maternal. Moreover, the mother herself “has proven to be the most irreducible and resistant core within the issue of the inclusion of women in the public and political spheres” (Sartori, 2018, p. 175).

It is interesting to note that this overshadowing occurs not only in the classically understood patriarchal system, but, as Carole Pateman (1988) notes, also in the contractualism, that system believes it can overcome. Worthy of note, in this sense, are the reflections on maternal power in Hobbes, which he declares in *Leviathan*: “the Amazons contracted with the men [...] that the issue male should be sent back, but the female remain with themselves: so that the dominion of the females was in the mother. If there be no contract, the dominion is in the mother. For in the condition of mere nature, where there are no matrimonial laws, it cannot be known who is the father unless it be

declared by the mother; and therefore the right of dominion over the child dependeth on her will, and is consequently hers” (Hobbes, 1998, p. 133). Hobbes, therefore, recognizes a maternal power, different from the sovereign one because it is not based on the fear caused by equality and the possibility of being killed, but on the choice to feed, to let live, actively, so much so that mother is the one who feeds. In this sense, maternal power, maternal authority, is based on difference, “not on subjective liberty, does not need to be absolute, which in fact would be counterproductive. It is diametrically opposed to sovereignty, where enjoying one’s liberty paradoxically requires establishing an absolute ‘power’” (Rustighi, 2018, p. 9). However, the deletion of this type of authority is not only a removal, but also the very basis of sovereignty, “it is the point zero of the logic of sovereignty, which founds it but cannot in turn be founded through the same logic” (Rustighi, 2018, p. 17).

If the basis of sovereign power is the cancellation of the mother, the gesture of claiming her as the origin can only be a gesture that calls into question the very foundation of power, and it is no coincidence that Diotima in this sense speaks of authority. The symbolic order of the mother, thus, is a different order because it is metonymic and not metaphorical, which works by combinations and not by selections, which recognizes the proximity with the body, with the bodies, and which describes a subject dependent and in relation. An order that speaks another language not as a formal choice, but because, as Ida Dominijanni recalls, it is about “a metonymic symbolic order that doesn’t split body and language, experience and word apart, but holds them together, and does not imprison the social text in the selective synthesis of the metaphoric chain, but keeps it open to ‘anything we want to say’, especially for what it concerns, the wild social body” (Dominijanni, 2018, p. 50). For this reason, the difference that this feminism proposes is an open difference, to be built in the relationship, in the choice to allow, *hobbesianly*, to recognize ourselves as daughters of the mother and thus open access to another symbolic. It is, therefore, a question of building transformative genealogies which, as Sartori notes, are nourished by a reconciliation with the mother, a “symbolic reconciliation, [that] if it is truly reconciliation, is not the presumption of the closure of the circle on itself but a returning that twists the circle in an evolving spiral” (Sartori, 2018, p. 185).

As Dominijanni rightly points out, though, “after forty years of feminism, the mother is not behind us: as far as the social imaginary is concerned, we are the mothers. The real or phantasmatic perception of the mother directly concerns the real or phantasmatic perception of what we have said or done within feminism” (Dominijanni,

2018a, p. 226). This is a notation not only in temporal terms, that as a reader and “daughter” of that feminism I can only appreciate, but it can also be the starting point of a theoretical reflection that deals with the shadows of the mother. As Angela Putino already noted in 1998, in fact, the symbolic maternal order, if subversive to sovereignty, finds some forms of complicity with biopower, through the centrality accorded to care, gratitude and dual relationship. Moreover, despite the claim of always open relationships, the maternal relationship risks crystallizing in the hysterical reproduction of the identical: “through the love for the mother every woman give a value to herself [...]. However, for being precise, it is not maternal love – could be useful so questioning [...] if is so necessary, for a woman, come back to this dimension – but hysterical attachment to the mother” (Putino, 1998, pp. 7-8), a form of attachment that leaves no room for differences, since “the hysterical [...] cannot unleash herself from the vicinity, from the fear of the loss [...] in so far as she is not able to hypothesize a feminine otherness” (Putino, 1998, p. 48). The presence of the mother, therefore, risks being not only an opening to another genealogy and another symbolic one, but also a closing in that genealogy and that symbolic one.

Dominijanni again offers an interesting key to interpretation, pointing out how, in the contemporary world, there is a transition from hysteria to anorexia as symptoms of the female condition and asking: “if hysteria is the symptom that accompanied women’s entry into modernity and which feminism responded to politically, anorexia can then be seen as not only the symptom of a female resistance to a hedonistic and consumerist postmodernity, but also as an unforeseen and paradoxical effect of female change, of the female knowledge of woman, of the feminist symbolic revolution. From the neurotic symptom of female oppression to the perverse symptom of female freedom?” (Dominijanni, 2018a, p. 221). The anorexic daughters can be the reaction to a biopolitical seizure of power that paradoxically feeds on both the hedonistic dimension of the imperative of *jouissance*, and on the freedom of women won thanks to the break with sovereignty, and, it may be suggested, on the progressive dissolution of female sexuality in the symbolic order of the mother: Dominijanni writes: “within the order of the mother female sexuality has been gradually dissolving” (Dominijanni, 2018a, p. 217). In this sense the anorexic daughter would be a subject who tries to differentiate herself from the mother, where the hysterics were looking for continuity, a subject who aspires to desexualisation as much as the hysteric staged symptoms of hypersexualisation, a subject who tries to escape the imperative of *jouissance*, even with respect to gender and sexuality (see Young-Bruehl, 1993; Briody Mahowald, 1992; Ferreday, 2012). Dominijanni’s question,

therefore, seems to me to push us to rethink our relationship with the feminism of sexual difference, recognizing a genealogy but asking what gesture we can make to give space to our freedom in the context of the contemporary, not through a generational conflict – too often invoked – but through a relationship that, as this feminism teaches, knows how to overcome the symbiosis and the identical hysteric in a different order, always back to build.

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