

Unveiling a feminine subjectivity in a men's world or shaping our own? *An aporetic experience*

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1. Climbing the stairs of a woman's self consciousness

1.1 From the gender-blind educated young woman to claiming equality

"The weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully": as an educated girl from an uneducated man, it took me 40 years to catch the power of this sentence of Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.¹ Until then, I strived to build myself as a "naïve educated woman", confident that the claim for equality was the alpha and the omega of a woman's existence. As many other women, I was a good performer in the school and academic environments. I got university degrees in applied physics engineering, in operations research and in economics. I started my professional career in a successful way, as what I can now describe as an archetype of a woman in the denial mode. I was a true "*parvenue*" as remarkably analysed by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin in "*Conformism, Housekeeping, and the Attack of the Blob: The Origins of Hannah Arendt's concept of the Social*".² In this superb text, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin builds on the analysis of Hannah Arendt of the pariah/parvenu divide as applied to the Jews' situation in the XIXth century in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen and subverts it to show how it applies to the man/woman divide.

Hanna Fenichel Pitkin identifies three components to the price paid by a pariah to become and succeed as a *parvenu* :

1. "However well he may fool society, the parvenu must live with the one observer whom he cannot fully fool: himself".
2. "One must deny a part of oneself, establish a permanent division within oneself, declare war on oneself, become a 'battlefield'".
3. "The loss of reality. No more can he afford a stable sense of his own self, can the parvenu independently assess what is real".

This describes perfectly what occurred to me and the reasons why I recognized myself as a *parvenue* in a men's world: lack of internal coherence and loss of reality, in total opposition with the produced appearance of an assertive professional woman, wife and mother.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Penguin Group, 1945). Later referred to as ROO.

² Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Conformism, Housekeeping, and the Attack of the Blob: The Origins of Hannah Arendt's concept of the Social", *Feminist interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, Bonnie Honig, ed. (USA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

Reading Virginia Woolf, and her wonderful analogy of the looking-glasses,³ I realised that despite my academic background and the full exercise of the formal liberties that were available to me, as a woman in the European Union in this late 20th century, this looking-glasses' analogy was still making a lot of sense. Things were tricky because different streams were interconnected: at the beginning of my career, I could not isolate the age variable from the gender's one; seeking recognition, I could not isolate it from the game of seduction. But reading this essay of Virginia Woolf made it crystal clear that I was not a free woman, but rather an educated looking-glass, having put her education and intelligence in performing at her best, ...as a looking-glass! And each little trial to get away from this was severely punished through humiliation or indifference, both from men and women around me. Hence, on the basis of the past feminist struggles articulated on the claim for equality, I had access to civil and political rights, education and employment, but, despite all this *acquis*, and even as a consequence of it, I only managed to outperform...as a looking-glass!

1.2 Reclaiming feminine specificity

It could have stayed like this for years. Being a performing looking-glass is quite efficient and opens some doors, as gatekeepers are keen to be appreciated and granted for opening doors. "*M-A-D⁴ is the filter through which we're pressed to see ourselves — if we don't, we won't get published, sold or exhibited — I blame none of us for not challenging it except not challenging it may drive us mad*". And indeed, there is no other reason to move from this apparently coherent systemic posture of alienation, "...except *not challenging it may drive us mad*; except that it is *at the price of any stable or integrated sense of oneself: one cannot afford to know, yet, one cannot afford to forget*", as put by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin.

From there, my worldview collapsed.

It took me a while to be receptive to Luce Irigaray's work, because of my early suspicion to essentialism. As a "young" feminist, I understood the trap of essentialism and the reasons for not embarking on this route. I measured the need to be cautious with the risks associated to the handling of the supposed differences based on sex, and I recognised that in the past, when these differences were put forward, it has never been at the advantage of women. But, on the other hand, expanding equality considerations beyond their remit, i.e. turning thoughts and rhetoric of differences into a taboo, is equally a mental trap for women and leaves totally open this playing field to our brothers. Isn't it ironic to let men confiscate our own right to define ourselves, by internalising the interdiction to give us a name and a status and by preventing us to think about what it is to be a woman, or even to recognise

³ "*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*": Woolf, ROO, 37.

⁴ From Honor Moore. M-A-Dness is Male Approval Desire. Cited by Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology*: 68.

and even define femininity in our own terms? The claim for equality, although efficient as a political strategy, acts as a trap for building a feminine subjectivity. Words are indeed slippery and thinking is inherently dangerous, as pointed by Hannah Arendt. This is why we need to think collectively, share doubts in inclusive and confident environments and explore inner visions to test if they make sense for others. This is exactly what I am doing here: searching for an environment where fragile ideas can be tested in confidence.

If reading Virginia Woolf made me discover that I was not mad when feeling the split of my Self, reading Luce Irigaray's *Etre Deux* provided me with the keys to understand why I had the feeling of being a stranger to this world: I internalised the posture of the other, *as seen from the men's perspective*. In *Etre Deux*, Luce Irigaray sets out very clearly the polarity of how men and women tend to engage in relationships: women privilege relationship between subjects, where the other remains a "Tu", a mystery in the sense that there is room for his own alterity to himself in the relationship; for men, the other is approached as an object, as something to master, to dominate, to possess, to crack. In the men's perspective, heavily irrigated by the quest for control, understanding the other or knowing it is somehow to reduce it to a machine that could be reproduced, to see it from the point of view of its creator. Understanding means being able to duplicate or predict. This must be why the discovery of general laws seems to be so exciting to a man's mind, and also why necessity is loaded with this ontological supremacy over contingency, as unveiled by Hannah Arendt in the *Thinking* part of her *Life of the Mind*.

To date, as a thinking woman, and thanks to all these women's thinkers before and around me, after having been blind to the gender issue, I have been able to go as far as touching with my mind the fact that the world is the signature, or the secretion, of the men's approach to otherness, as put forward by Luce Irigaray in *Etre Deux*. This approach to otherness underlies scientific knowledge as a quest for stealing the secrets of nature, nations as a deceptive quest for identity, and moral principles to mitigate and counterbalance this compulsive way to instrumentalise the other. In this world's view, women play an important role of looking-glass and caretaker: but this role is assigned to them. So to speak, this recognition of the world as a man's world in which women are assigned a place is a key that allows coming to terms with the puzzle of feeling a stranger to this world.

The power of Hannah Arendt political thought is obviously due to the fact that she analysed the political game from an outsider perspective. She applies Woolf's advice "*to give [our] brothers neither the white feather of cowardice nor the red feather of courage, but no feather at all; to shut the bright eyes that rain influence, or let those eyes look elsewhere when war is discussed*"... Woolf and Arendt both produce a thought that allows acquiring selfconsciousness about the role we are asked to play in this men's world, and its consequent strangeness for us.

1.3 Falling short of performativity

However, this falls short of shaping the world at our image. When visiting the exhibition “*Elles*”⁵ in Beaubourg, Paris, I felt to what extent the women’s artistic expression provided me with a skin. For the first time, I experienced the pleasure of a public space — this exhibition — where I was directly addressed, and not indirectly, i.e. as if I was a Man,⁶ or a woman-as-seen-by-a-man. I draw from this that we, women, need other women’s thoughts, deeds and expressions in order to experience an inscription in a world which resembles us, i.e. in which we do not feel alien, which can be seen as the fruit of our genius.

From there, we wonder: “Is there a common ground where men and women’s perspectives can meet?” I fully acknowledge the *Etre Deux*’s developments of how women engage in relationships and how they deal with otherness, but I can’t escape from experiencing this aspiration as something unreal. Can I — could we — by the force of redescription, make our own vision of the world a reality? Or are we bound, by realism, to cope with this men-centred vision? Is there a choice, and if yes, what is the most efficient strategy?

To come back to the vision of relationship, I wonder: can I engage in a relation on the feminine’s mode, i.e. based on intersubjectivity bearing with the fact that the other subject takes me as an object? Can I be *indifferent* to the status that he gives me and stay firmly anchored in my own subjectivity, on my vision of me as a subject and the other as another subject, when this other is denying the subject’s status to me? Can we imagine that there is a device, a sort of mental transponder that allows overcoming this essential difference in the way we engage in relationships? Or is all our energy dedicated to both complying and resisting to occupying our assigned place? Now that I realised to what extent our common world is a men’s world, I wish I could get out of it and opt for a women’s world, in the same way that one can choose to get out of a room to enter another one, but there is only one world ...unless the power of redescription is such that it can create other worlds. Can it?

2. The pressing need for a world's redescription by women's minds

This calls to shifting from a deconstructive attitude to a mode of redescription. Isn’t there a window of opportunity for doing so, in these moments where I feel that the public space is in danger of collapse?

⁵<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/Pompidou/Manifs.nsf/AllExpositions/44638F832F0AFABFC12575290030CF0D?OpenDocument&sessionM=2.2.1&L=1>

⁶ This refers to the French way of writing *Homme* with a capital H to include both men and women.

2.1 Confidence in the — invisible — hand or blindness?

The Shoah and the recourse by the US to the nuclear bomb in Japan are two events which dramatically unveiled the fact that technology was axiologically neutral and could be badly used, to say the least (the little girl inside me considers this as so obvious that she wonders why so many great men feel the need to repeat this again and again). Later in the 20th century, concerns regarding the availability of resources became more and more pregnant, firstly regarding oil with the first oil crisis in the 70's. Waking up from the illusion of the endless pursuit of progress, we realised that the earth itself is the limit, ...well before the sky! The idea that economic growth in itself was not only unsustainable but also meaningless as an exclusive political objective gained more and more acceptance. Let's remember the resonance given to the famous sentence of André Malraux: "*Le 21ème siècle sera religieux ou ne sera pas*", which expresses the fact that economic goals in themselves do not suffice to shape the public space. In the meantime, the USSR collapsed and the capitalist system lost its challenger, and with this collapse, a profound side effect: the systematic and radical suspicion of any policy approach based on planning and regulation. Capitalism, based on the invisible hand's principle, defeated communism, based on planification. In a Darwinian perspective, this supposedly demonstrated the superiority of the invisible hand over planification. This have reinstated liberty — understood in its childish meaning as *laissez-faire* or "no limit, no constraint" — as a false divinity in our societies, a degenerated understanding of progress. This reactivated a dynamic of denial of *phronesis* as one of the basic virtues. In a subtle way, under the cover of the economic science, we shifted from the confidence in Mill's invisible hand to a blind faith in the market forces. But blindness and invisibility are to be distinguished ...and action, in its Arendtian meaning, cannot be confined to economic goals.

2.2 Climate change as the signature of the need for phronesis

It is in this polarised context, characterised both by the end of confidence in progress and by the collapse of communism, with the corollary of the suspicion against any form of planification, that the climate change issue gained momentum. The threat of climate change seems to be the only *point d'appui* from which our development mode can be questioned. It is the only perspective from which the blind faith in the market forces can be challenged. Climate change comes *à point nommé* to introduce the notion of limits and measures in the political discourse. The problem is that the rhetoric of climate change is structured around what can be called "catastrophism". Catastrophism aims at mobilising through fear, thereby being totally incompatible with nurturing a public space and inducing wisdom, *phronesis* and love of the world. I feel deeply uncomfortable with the catastrophist attitude and can only conjecture that it may be useful, if it ever is, to men's minds. I could not express it better than Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*:

“It was absurd to blame any class or any sex, as a whole. ... They too, the patriarchs, the professors, had endless difficulties, terrible drawbacks to contend with. ... True, they had money and power, but only at the cost of harbouring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture, for ever tearing the liver out and plucking the lungs — the instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition which drives them to desire other people’s fields and goods perpetually; to make frontiers and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up their own lives and their children’s lives. ... These are unpleasant instincts to harbour, I reflected. ... And, as I realized these drawbacks, by degrees, fear and bitterness modified themselves into pity and toleration;..”.

Hence, yes, catastrophism is only understandable to me if I consider that it is not aimed at me, but tailored by men for their own minds and hearts. Catastrophism is not part of the solution but instead an additional hurdle preventing the sense of the future to emerge. It needs to be circumvented and counterbalanced with positive visions. It is my intuition and my hope that women thoughts and voices could be main contributors in providing these positive visions and shaping the path between catastrophism and denial.

3. Risks associated with performative feminism and women's liberty of thought

Virginia Woolf goes on:

“...and then in a year or two, pity and toleration went, and the greatest release of all came, which is freedom to think of things in themselves”.

This is exactly where I’d like to stand, but when I try to engage on this path, I feel something she did not mention, and which is: “danger”! As if these own feminine thoughts were dangerous in that, apart from being meaningful for us women, they would be totally inefficient to contain “*the unpleasant instincts they [the men] harbour*”, and even counterproductive in that they would unleash these instincts, in a way that could impact us women in a dramatic way.

It is interesting to note how Hannah Arendt is going close to these danger zones, for example, in her way to approach the banality of evil. When the whole tradition of moral philosophy tries to identify the nature or the roots of the evil and the bad, with — I suppose — the hope of eradicating it once and for all, she takes a radically different posture: for her, it is hopeless to try to eradicate the evil forever. It can only be contained, and it is indeed contained in most circumstances. The best way she found to qualify evil, is

not the presence of some characteristics, apart from its *banality*, but the *absence* of thought. This way to think provoked scandal. Similarly, Virginia Woolf provoked scandal when she wrote in 1938 in *Three Guineas*, this book she wrote to answer a man's question posed to her: "How, in your opinion are we to prevent war?":

"The words are the same as yours; the claim is the same as yours. The daughters of educated men who were called, to their resentment, 'feminists' were in fact the advance guard of your own movement. They were fighting the same enemy that you are fighting and for the same reasons. They were fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state as you are fighting the tyranny of the Fascist state".⁷

In these two instances, both Arendt and Woolf touched a very sensitive zone. I conjecture that this could be because thinking that way took away yardsticks that fulfil a critical function for helping men dealing with "*the unpleasant instincts they harbour*", as if it could be interpreted as encouraging the evil. We know that this was not at all the intention of Hannah Arendt. Her condemnation of the Shoah has been unequivocal, but she has put it in the register of the judgment, and not in the register of knowledge. No knowledge will ever guarantee mankind against evil: this seems to me both corroborated by facts and a basic wisdom, and it cuts short this desperate quest that seems to be pursued by so many men to render the good necessary, and make the bad impossible. Saying that may be seen by men as a provocation. "You consider this quest stupid? Let me show you the consequences of not pursuing it!" Hence, we may consider that for men it is needed to pursue this quest to deal with *the unpleasant instincts they harbour*, while for women it makes no sense.

4. Amor mundi: Frailty of human affairs and robustness of the earth

The more I think about these things, the more I realise how high the price paid for coping with masculinity, at the expense of my own subjectivity. Maybe, I am too close to the looking-glass experience, maybe I am still too wounded by my trials to think as a woman. I need time and protected space among women — and those men who can think with us and not against us- to cultivate ideas and visions and have them grown and robust enough to get a chance to be heard and seen out there.

My fragile intuition is that seeking certainties and guarantees beyond what is certain and what can be guaranteed leads more surely to the precipitation of what is to be avoided than to the expected security. It is not without irony that Arendt qualified human affairs as inherently fragile. She

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (USA: A Harbinger Book, 1938).

described politics in the very terms applying to women's thoughts and visions of the world. Her vision of politics is about coping with the frailty of human affairs, being able to face the void, endorsing full responsibility for the civilisation that we have inherited and that we transmit to our children, and abstaining "to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us".⁸ The co-existence of frailty and confidence in her vision of the world resonates with the matriarchal figure of the earth, as opposed to the patriarchal figure of God. And it is from this very nexus of frailty and confidence that one can nurture the positive visions that are so badly needed to regenerate the sense of the future.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between past and future, the crisis in education* (USA: Viking Press, 1961).