

The Matrixial Borderspace¹: Book Review

Olga Cox Cameron.

Somewhere in *Le plaisir du texte*, Roland Barthes wonderfully describes boredom as 'jouissance viewed from the shores of pleasure'² While certainly not bored by *The Matrixial Borderspace*, I was at times, in the several months of reading and re-reading, mutinous and irked by certain stylistic infelicities, in particular the overuse of the copula, while also recognizing that this has been one of the most influential and important books I have read this year. In fairness, other psychoanalytical writers, notably Melanie Klein and Lacan who have also tackled the topic of pre-subjectivity have had to confront the inadequacy of the kind of binary thinking upon which communicative language is structured, (*this is not that*, is in fact *distinct* from that), and the result is often an unwieldy and rebarbative prose. Creative writers fare better.

Ettinger is a brilliant and brilliantly creative reader of Lacan's late writings. These writings are in themselves extraordinarily difficult - not least because originally they were not writings at all, but improvised lectures based on notes, later collated and assembled by his editors, and because they were delivered in an impossibly polyvalent 'French' which had stenographers resigning in despair and protest. Even one of his most gifted translators, Bruce Fink, admits that the translator himself has to impose his own frame in order to make any sense whatever of the material³. This intimidating density has kept most commentators tethered to the safer outposts of orthodoxy, resulting in a reductive reading of Lacan's late writings on feminine sexuality which does little more than reiterate Tiresias' envious male fantasy: 'If the parts of love-pleasure be counted as ten \ Thrice three go to women, one only to men.'⁴

Ettinger is not thus corralled. Her reading is both courageous and insightful. Essentially she sets out to recognize and extend the later Lacan's attempts to rescue psychoanalysis from the masculinist parameters of some of Freud's thinking. As she herself points out:

Freud did not deny the denial of the womb as a female bodily specificity, nor did he deny its implications. On the contrary, he insisted on the importance of such a denial, on its necessity! The magnitude of the denial gives us the

measure for what is at stake for the male person (MB, p.53).

Ettinger re-balances the debate by focusing on a subjectivizing stratum different and prior to the so-called phallic level, which she calls the matrixial. This is an important and well-argued innovation, but needs to be considered within the current semiotic shift whereby 'the phallus' has absorbed into itself a whole range of meanings, hitherto moored to entirely different concepts. As Marina Warner pointed out in 1985, prior to Lacan's setting up of the phallus as the signifier without a signified, the organizing principle which maintains the Symbolic Order itself in existence, binary with its simple and complex processes of discrimination, was presumed to be a property of thought itself:

The phallus today has absorbed into itself these meanings, but only today. Thought processes themselves, especially during the Aristotelian Christian centuries, were considered to achieve fine discriminations between one thing and another; Aquinas' *Summa*, constructed in question and answer form, represents a perfect model of a binary mode....⁵

Today - and in psychoanalytic circles unquestioningly- the phallus has been gifted with this ability to uphold binarism. Its function is that of ordering, selecting, separating and unifying. (A naïve thinker might come up with a quite different set of 'phallic' adjectives - thrusting, surging, insisting, even perhaps, drooping, but no; these do not figure in the usual descriptions of 'the phallic function'). The fall-out of this semiotic shift is that a kind of outsider status is accorded to all that fails to be caught in this descriptive net, notably woman, creativity, ...and psychosis.

It is of course difficult not to be seduced by the vocabulary of a given era in academic discourse. Derrida with humorous malice recalled how Blanchot, when re-publishing his influential earlier work in the 70s replaced each incidence of 'parole' with the current buzzword 'écriture'⁶.

Notwithstanding this caveat, Ettinger's writing on the matrixial is of the first importance. She sees Lacan's 1975 seminar on the 'sinthome' as the beginning of an undeveloped third theoretical phase on woman and femininity, arguing convincingly that despite himself decrying the one-sidedness of the language of the phallus, Lacan nonetheless continued to be blocked by the parameters of his former theoretical positions:

We have here a vicious circle. On the one hand the jouissance that blocks the woman from giving meaning to any non-phallic feminine difference and by which the woman is trapped is qualified as phallic. On the other, nothing can be conceptualized with regard to her supplementary jouissance, because

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whatever can be conceptualized is qualified as phallic. (MB, p.56)

As its name implies, the matrix is the non-separation of intra-uterine existence, or rather a jointness in separation, a borderlinking which escapes the distinctions of binary thinking, - what Ettinger calls a severalization, and which is in fact well captured in *Finnegans Wake*⁷. Ettinger's stated project is to apprehend in the now - not with regard to the past - events that are metabolized and create traces by way of this non-phallic apparatus. In 1972, Lacan too announced his search for that which is not included in the phallic function, yet which is not its negation⁸. Ettinger's most inspired move is to situate this possibility in what she calls artworking, or writing art. She does this via one of Lacan's most innovative and influential concepts, that of the o-object, object cause of desire, defining it in her very first sentence as 'the trace of the part-object and... of the archaic Other/mother both of which are linked to pre-Oedipal impulses and are considered *forever unattainable*' (MB, p.41). Over the several years of Lacan's Seminar, this o-object undergoes accretions and sheddings of meaning that render comprehensive summary impossible, but he first introduced it by way of the work of Melanie Klein. Klein emphasises a whole series of first relationships between the baby and the body of the mother which she theorises under the term part-objects, and which Lacan engages with as pre-narcissistic surges that eventually become locked to elective 'objects' characterised by their intermediate status. Neither writer attends to the stratum recognized by Ettinger, the matrixial. The so-called 'objects' Lacan lists as the breast, the shit, the voice, the nothing, without indicating that this list is necessarily exhaustive, but what is actually in question is more the turbulent emotion locked to certain elective objects than the object itself. Lacan says as much in the Seminar on Anxiety: 'to designate the little o by the term object is a metaphorical usage, since it is borrowed precisely from the subject-object relationship from which the term object is constituted, but this object of which we speak under the term o-object is precisely outside any possible definition of objectivity'⁹. Furthermore what is in question is not something which could be an object *of* desire, but rather that which functions as cause, as the specific tonality of *how* we desire, of what constitutes our desiringness.

The subsequent processes by which the small pre-subject accedes to subjectivity, theorised variously, all involve a renunciation of those earliest unowned intensities, but the return of the repressed undoes this renunciation and disrupts the contours of both

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the self and the world as we know it. As Ettinger puts it, it is as if the subject and this o-object are like the front and back of the same piece of fabric, the recto and verso of the same sheet of paper. ‘When the subject appears (as in everyday life) the o-object disappears, and when the o-object finds a way to penetrate to the other side...signifying meaning (symbolic and imaginary, exchangeable through discourse) disappears and goes into hiding’ (MB, p. 41). As an artist Ettinger’s primary focus is the gaze as o-object. Going further than either Klein or Lacan she distinguishes three different incidences of its presence: ‘At least three kinds of gaze should be differentiated: (a) a phallic, post-oedipal gaze, which recuperates the object in an imaginary way, through domination and control; (b) a phallic *objet a* tracing loss or archaic lack through castration; and (c) a matrixial object/*objet a*’ (MB, p.50) suggesting that the work of art may offer access to this third level. Ordinarily when this renounced o-object which is the underside of the symbolic subject does break through, it displaces the big Other and as a result causes a temporary fade out of the subject. Ettinger points us in the direction of a less fractured, more oceanic (to use Freud’s term) way of being with great art, ‘a trembling experience of oscillation between *I* and *non-I*’ (MB, p.196), an insight shared by the poet Wallace Stevens:

I know that timid breathing. Where
Do I begin and end? And where,

As I strum the thing, do I pick up
That which momentarily declares

Itself not to be I and yet
Must be. It could be nothing else.¹⁰

The Matrixial Borderspace represents a creative and valuable contribution to psychoanalytic theory.

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¹ Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*. (Minneapolis and London. University of Minneapolis Press. 2006). Subsequently referred to in the text as MB.

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- ² Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*. (Paris. Ed. du Seuil. 1973), p.43.
- ³ Bruce Fink, *Translation of Seminar 20. Encore*. (Norton. New York and London.1998), p.vii.
- ⁴ Cited in: Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*. (London: Picador. 1985), p.320.
- ⁵ Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*. (London: Picador. 1985), p.160.
- ⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Pour l'amour de Lacan', in: *Lacan avec les philosophes* (colloque Paris: Albin Michel 1991), p.414.
- ⁷ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London, Faber and Faber,1975)
- ⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Ou pire* 1971-2, private translation Dr. Cormac Gallagher. (Held in St. Vincent's University Hospital, Elm Park, Dublin), p.13.
- ⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar on Anxiety*, 1962-3, private translation Dr. Cormac Gallagher. (Held in St. Vincent's University Hospital, Elm Park, Dublin), p.12
- ¹⁰ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber 2006), p.149