

Finitude and woman

Finitud y mujer

Sol Pelaez

ABSTRACT

This article explores the connection among woman, sex, and finitude. In studying finitude, the argument follows the articulation of finitude with woman. In a first part, it discusses three “women” writers—Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir, and Hélène Cixous—to establish their thoughts on woman in terms of finitude. The three of them are identified as women and yet they problematized what to be a woman is. In tracing their thoughts on finitude and woman, sexual difference –the body as enjoying emerges as an issue. Thus, in a second part, it discusses two seemingly opposed positions—Lacanian psychoanalysis, with Joan Copjec, and deconstruction, with Derrida—to think further about the question of woman, sexual difference, the “two,” and finitude. This study compares the Lacanian feminine side with the movement of deconstruction and establishes the necessity of thinking a “two” beyond the binary of phallogocentrism. My thesis is that thinking finitude with woman leads us to a non-oppositional two that correlates with sexual difference. The Lacanian feminine side, and Derrida’s deconstruction aim to think these two logics, delineating two sides: a male one (comparable with phallogocentrism) and a feminine side (comparable with the movement of deconstruction). If the male side considers finitude (death) as the limit of life, the feminine side opens to death and life, and the in-finitude of the undetermined and undecidable. In thinking finitude with woman, the knowledge of what to be a woman is, becomes undetermined and undecidable.

Keywords: finitude; philosophy; sex; woman.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la conexión entre mujer, sexo y finitud. Al estudiar la finitud, el argumento sigue la articulación de la finitud con la mujer. En una primera parte, se analizan tres “mujeres” escritoras -Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir y Hélène Cixous- para establecer su pensamiento sobre la mujer en términos de finitud. Las tres se identifican como mujeres y, sin embargo, problematizaron lo que es ser mujer. Al trazar sus reflexiones sobre la finitud y la mujer, la diferencia sexual -el cuerpo como goce- emerge como cuestión. Así, en una segunda parte, se discuten dos posiciones aparentemente opuestas -el psicoanálisis lacaniano, con Joan Copjec, y la deconstrucción, con Derrida- para pensar más a fondo la cuestión de la mujer, la diferencia sexual, el “dos” y la finitud. Este estudio compara la vertiente femenina lacaniana con el movimiento de la deconstrucción y establece la necesidad de pensar un “dos” más allá del binario del fallogocentrismo. Mi tesis es que pensar la finitud con la mujer nos lleva a un dos no oposicional que se correlaciona con la diferencia sexual. El lado femenino lacaniano y la deconstrucción de Derrida apuntan a pensar estas dos lógicas, delineando dos lados: uno masculino (comparable con el fallogocentrismo) y otro femenino (comparable con el movimiento de la deconstrucción). Si el lado masculino considera la finitud (la muerte) como el límite de la vida, el lado femenino se abre a la muerte y a la vida, y a la in-finitud de lo indeterminado e indecible. Al pensar la finitud con la mujer, el conocimiento de lo que es ser mujer se vuelve indeterminado e indecible.

Palabras clave: finitud; filosofía; sexo; mujer.

What are the consequences of thinking finitude alongside Woman? In this title, we seem to be confronted with an opposition: Finitude, on the one side, as what happens to all beings, as what is universal, and Woman as a concrete sexualized being. Finitude would relate to being beyond any difference, beyond its sex. On the other side, a woman is a Being marked by sex, a concrete Being, an embodied one, a Being that is different. However, defining this difference makes us always slip. Following Jacques Derrida, we accept that logocentrism and phallogocentrism were ‘born’ together (*Dissemination*, 143). Therefore, it is crucial to consider how phallogocentrism is implicated in the thought of finitude as a philosophical concept. However, it is also imperative to re-think ‘woman,’ since this is a name that seems to enter always already in the binary system of phallogocentrism.¹ I will provisionally start by positing a general and most accepted definition of finitude as the mark, even certitude, of death, i.e., of mortality. Indeed, there is a primacy of death in the tradition of thinking about finitude as the temporality of being and its end. Sometimes the question of death might be displaced by the problem of limits, that is, finitude as the ultimate limit of knowledge, experience, and thus, life and the human being.

And for Woman, that is to say... well, let me say (for now) that when I say woman, I am not just speaking about a body with breasts, womb, vagina, clitoris, and pierced ears (a woman’s body might have these—by birth or by supplementation—or not). Nevertheless, no woman is without a sexed body (which is not the same as a biological one). A woman’s body is always already marked by sex, but we cannot assume that body. I am not speaking of an essence: motherhood, passivity,

¹ See Derrida (1982, pp. 73, 75, 76). For feminist thinkers criticizing Derrida for erasing woman’s oppression, disembodiment, and transforming her into merely a discursive figure, see Braidotti (1991), and Alcoff (1988).

domesticity, family, and ethics. I am also not speaking about Woman as a gender construct (which supposes either a previous neuter body in which society inscribes womanhood or an original free or polymorphous sexuality oppressed by the social construct of womanhood). I am not just speaking of a Being dominated by patriarchy, ‘Woman as the Second Sex,’ and her daily subordination. I am not speaking of Woman as an exotic dark continent that needs to be explored or the unconscious subject of a penis’ envy and ontologically deprived of the phallus. I am not speaking of Woman as the figure of truth or irony or the figure of what is unsayable beyond the symbolic.

Nevertheless, I will be implicitly speaking about all this. I am keeping the name “woman” as a possible name for a Being, although we could use others. A name that has been given to me and which I use but is not my own. It is and always will be an improper name.² In this name, there is a (mis)identification (not an identity) that has no ground, but (mis)marks my own body, which is not mine somehow, the body with which I am writing and thinking this problem of finitude and woman. While most of the philosophical tradition has thought of finitude concerning Man (or a neuter Being), I consider finitude as the thought of a sexed Being, as the woman I improperly am. Through this path, let me advance that the question of sexual difference and the possibility of a “two” that might not be oppositional or binary will arise. I suggest that finitude is the impossible thinking of a “two” of sexual difference, a “two” that might not be compressed under essentialism, binarism, complementarity, supplementarity, symmetry, or opposition.

Part I. Women thinking finitude. On woolf, beauvoir, and cixous

I am going to go from woman and sex towards finitude. In other words, I will follow something other than what finitude means within a specific philosophical tradition. My axis will be woman.³ Firstly, I will briefly comment on three “women” writers—Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir, and Hélène Cixous—and I will re-consider their thoughts on woman in terms of finitude. I have chosen them since they mark events in the thought of woman within the Western tradition. The three are recognized as women, and their identification is (even when problematized) as women. Moreover, they challenge the accepted concept of woman, making their previous identifications problematic. Secondly, I will discuss two seemingly opposed positions—Lacanian psychoanalysis, with Joan Copjec, and deconstruction, with Derrida—to think further about the question of woman, sexual difference, the “two,” and finitude. These two positions have been thought of often with an oppositional logic to each other—which is significant in my argument to understand sexual difference, the “two,” and their relation to finitude.

² See Bennington for Derrida’s thoughts on sexual difference (pp. 204-228).

³ Some texts specifically about woman and finitude are Ronell (1994), and Copjec (1994), Moi (2004), O’Byrne (2010).

On virginia woolf: finitude as the “as if” of woman

In her by now classical text “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf explores the relationship between woman and fiction, asking, between lines, Can women write? In answering, she makes an intrinsic link between woman and fiction. Woolf starts by inventing a female narrator/speaker named Mary Benton, who could also be called “Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name” (4). Then, she imagines and invents an origin/promise for woman: Judith, the sister of William Shakespeare. Woolf’s female narrator then accounts for all the obstacles that made the existence of such a “gifted sister” impossible. She describes all the hardships and historical constraints she would have faced because of being a woman, leading her to commit suicide (36). Woolf ends her essay by prophesizing that “the opportunity will come, and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born...” (86). Let me note a few things here. First, Woolf affirmed fictionality as constitutive in thinking woman; this fictionality is grounded on repetition, that is, on fiction itself, hence the double fiction of Mary Benton and Judith. Second, there is no genealogical teleology. She did not start from Shakespeare’s mother or daughter who would be related to the brother in a genealogical manner (going backward or upwards), but she invented a sister. Shakespeare and his fictional sister have no relation of generation, inheritance, insemination, or birth. They are side by side, not equals, but perhaps with the promise of equality. Third, Woolf invented this impossible origin, an altogether non-existent origin that opened a future promise of birth, which is always a rebirth, a repetition. This birth is not reproductive and creates no generative teleology. Any inheritance, insemination, and generation pass through women’s writing, through a ‘yes’ to their writing. The bond between this future-rebirth-of-the-never born-Judith creates a chain of forerunner women and a task for this promise to come: to say ‘yes’ to women and writing: let them write... and the sister “shall come” in the indeterminate future of the promise.

In Woolf’s text, it is not evident what to be a woman is (or a man, for that matter). While the text starts with a relatively normative definition of woman (primarily biological and sociohistorical), it ends with an androgynous being.⁴ As Mary Benton, the fictional narrator, claims, “a great mind is androgynous,” and “one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (78). There is an incorporation of the other sex into one’s own; she explains: “In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man’s brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman’s brain the woman predominates over the man” (74). She then portrays the relations between these

4 This questioning of gender parallels the undoing of the text’s genre, which should be a conference presentation but is contaminated by fiction, history, literary criticism, and self-reflection.

two parts as dialogue and marriage (p. 79). While some might argue Woolf retains the normative oppositional binary, I want to stress that by incorporating the other sex in each sex, she splits each sex internally, making them different from themselves, not just from each other. She incorporates the other sex in the self as a dividing part of the self that falls into an abyme and questions the very same binarism that she might still uphold.⁵

How does this woman, as fictional origin and promise, affect or is affected by finitude? Finitude in this reconfiguration of woman cannot be reduced to death; it must be thought of as (fictional) origin and (re)birth. None of these names (finitude, woman, origin, birth) have given meanings. A woman is a finite being; she exists or not, and that can only be because she has a sexed body. Because of finitude—because she could not exist—woman can only be thought of as and through fiction. Because she was never born, she can only be re-born in her promise. As a finite being, her origin—her (re)birth—can *only* be fictional. So, from death, we are displaced to birth, but this birth is not biological but a promise of rebirth which entails neither a desire for eternity nor immortality. The origin—birth—emerges as fiction. There is no grounding beginning, no end, just the promise's indefinite opening and potential infinity. Woman is the fiction of her origin; she is the desire of the promise, which is the promise as the infinite deferral and the undecidability of the to-come of finite beings. Hers is the promise of a fictional rebirth with no presupposed knowledge of what being a woman means. Woman's finitude does not deny death but affirms the “as if” of the origin and its promise; she is always to-come, always undecidable in its arrival or rebirth.⁶

On simone de beauvoir: finitude: between the flesh and the erotic body

Beauvoir presents us with a different perspective. She starts *The Second Sex*, with a question: “What is a woman?” followed by hesitation and “irritation” for having to start with it (1952 xv). First, let us note that, for Beauvoir, woman begins as a question, not a certitude. She explains, “If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through ‘the eternal feminine,’ and if nevertheless we admit, at least provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face a question: what is a woman?” (xvii). Neither anatomy nor historical-sociological determinations nor an eternal essence can define woman. However, women exist, but this existence can only be thought of at the beginning as provisional, hypothetical. As we cannot say what woman is, we must accept their existence conditionally to answer the question. This provisional status irritates Beauvoir: Why cannot she say: “I think, therefore I am” from a feminine position?

5 For an overview of the classical debate about Woolf's feminism and androgyny, see Moi (2002).

6 For an analysis of woman (as a fictional category), the ‘as if,’ and sexual difference, see Birmingham (1997). She reads how Derrida connects fiction, woman, and the law.

Why being a woman is to doubt your own existence as woman without arriving at that certainty of existence? From that question and a “provisional” existence, she starts re-tracing all the manners in which the patriarchal society (through biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism) has defined woman as the “second sex,” so that “he is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other” (xix). For Beauvoir, woman’s Otherness is not ontological but imposed. While she accepts that Otherness and opposition are human thought’s categories, she argues that when the One declares the Other, he does so to control her and all those like her in being subordinated (xix, xxi).

For Beauvoir, the category of a human being is “abstract,” and in its abstraction, it hides that “humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him” (pp. xvi, xviii). The category of humanity (as used by philosophy, politics, and thought) entails not real humanity but a hierarchy where one—the male—takes the lead and represents the universal. Woman only enters as a second negative term defined by its relation to the first. She argues it is a “common use of man to designate human beings in general, whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” (p. xviii). Granted, this is a protest, a “taking sides,” but it is also a profound critique of the categories of philosophy and their neutrality that disguise its binary and hierarchical thought.

Indeed, Beauvoir’s real goal is to make women enter the category of human beings. She declares, “Woman needs to “aspire [to] full membership in the human race” (p. 798). If, as Beauvoir claims, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 301), the problem is that in becoming a woman, she has been denied entry into humanity.⁷ There is no woman’s essence. Biology cannot contain a woman: Being a woman is a social construct (p. 806). In becoming a woman, she has been limited to immanence, never being able to strive for transcendence, which, for Beauvoir, means the infinity of freedom and the future. Humanity, for Beauvoir, is rising above immanence for transcendence; it is going from the body to freedom, passing from mere finitude into transcendence. The human being should equate the experience of man and woman in terms of overcoming finitude and transcendence. The problem is that patriarchy condemned women to the plane of finitude, immanence, and the flesh. Immanence is the realm of the ontic, the body’s decay, death, and finitude. Beauvoir’s ontology is not one of essence but one of existence. She seeks for woman “to emerge into the light of transcendence,” so she can overcome her immanence (p. 798). Let us note that Beauvoir sustains the distinction between the ontic and the ontological as immanence vs. transcendence. As being in immanence, woman is embodied in time, unable to transcend her ontic limits (because of man’s domination): she has been limited to her body. Woman’s problem, reasons Beauvoir, is not what woman is (an ontology, an essence, a body), but what she has become (in her facticity or historical development).⁸

7 This is the crucial statement that eventually led to the distinction between sex as biological and gender as a historical construct, that is hegemonic today, but also is the one that ends with any essentialism related to woman.

8 See Fabijancic (2001), Bergoffen (1990), and Moi (2002) for different readings.

For Beauvoir, man is also affected by finitude but can transcend it through freedom. Thus, the flesh is equal in its finitude—decay, death—to both sexes, but the access to transcendence is unequal and denied to a woman. So, as a woman shares the same flesh as a man, she too should achieve transcendence and freedom (p. 809). Beauvoir explains:

In both sexes is played out the same drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence; both are gnawed away by time and laid in wait for by death; they have the same essential need for one another; and they can gain from their liberty the same glory. If they were to taste it, they would no longer be tempted to dispute fallacious privileges, and fraternity between them could then come into existence. (p. 810)

So, in her terms, there should be no difference between man and woman concerning finitude. On the contrary, their shared finitude should push towards a horizontal bond. The problem is that the Othering of woman has condemned her to immanence and finitude exclusively. The becoming human of woman entails woman as equal to man concerning transcendence, insofar both are “flesh” in a world in which passivity (and activity) belongs to both sexes (p. 810).

In this freedom, women and men will be equals but different only in the erotic auto-affection of their bodies (p. 813). Man and woman are both finite Beings insofar as their flesh. However, they are different in their erotic experience.⁹ Beauvoir argues that woman’s “eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a special form of [her] own, and therefore cannot fail to engender a sensuality, a sensitivity, of a special nature. This means that her relation to her own body, to that of the male, to that of the child,... will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body...” (p. 813). I want to note the difference she makes between the neutral flesh (as mortal and previous to the erogenous) and a woman’s body marked by pleasure affecting itself and its relation to other bodies. The erotic body keeps the difference between man and woman but also splits the body since the erotic body is different from the flesh, which is neutral and connected to finitude and death. Woman (and man) are split between the flesh and the erotic body. Eroticism is here a mark of sexual difference and is crucial for her to think about how a woman (auto)affects herself and others. This erotic auto-affection is never direct since it needs to pass through the flesh. So, while keeping sexual difference concerning the erotic and the body, Beauvoir needs to think of a shared neutral flesh to allow woman the entrance to the universal of humanity.¹⁰ To transcend her finitude and become human, to arrive to the infinitude of freedom and the future, paradoxically, a woman needs to have next to her sexed body a neutral flesh.

⁹ Beauvoir oscillates from the most biological answer (to be a woman is to have a womb and to be able to reproduce) to destabilizing every definition (historicizing the different definitions of woman, her desires, her relations to her bodies, and while assuming a binary biological base between man and woman this is destabilized with eroticism).

¹⁰ In her book about her mother’s death (1965), Beauvoir ends with a reflection that passes from her death (and how it was affected by her becoming a woman as society expected and her silent resistance) to death, to a reflection on man’s death as universal.

ON HÉLÈNE CIXOUS: DEATH NOT AS FINITUDE

For Hélène Cixous, by contrast, the question of woman, is one of place. For her, the ontological question is displaced by a topological one:

Where is she?

Activity/Passivity,

Sun/Moon,

Culture/Nature,

Day/Night //

Father/Mother... Logos/Pathos.

Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress/ Matter, concave, ground, where steps are taken, holding-and dumping-ground

Man

Woman. ...

Speaking/Writing...

Through dual, hierarchical oppositions.

Superior/Inferior. ("Sorties", pp. 63-64)

The question of location is answered through a binary hierarchical opposition, woman and her attributes are always positioned by "reason" in the subordinated place. Cixous lays out the (op)positional logic that locates woman as the secondary lesser term in Western thought. For Cixous, there is a "solidarity between logocentrism and phallogentrism" (p. 65) that sets woman always in a binary oppositional hierarchy under man (p. 64). Western thought relies on a dual oppositional logic "where law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatale, dialectical). And all these pairs of oppositions are couples" (p. 64). Logocentrism is the ground of phallogentrism, the connivance between a masculine order and a rational one that equates to history and progress (p. 65). Within this logic, the very idea of sexual difference is, for Cixous, oppositional, hierarchical, and binary (p. 64). She explains, "either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left for her is unthinkable, unthought" (p. 64).

Similarly to Woolf, Cixous threatens phallogocentrism through the fictionality of origins, a “Once upon a time...” of the origins (p. 65). Nevertheless, this time, the fictionality of origins is the one of phallogocentrism that has been telling one story (repeating itself in monotonous sameness). Man’s stories have tried to locate woman and, in doing so, to castrate her. Cixous explains, “They say that there are two things that cannot be represented: death and the female sex. Because they need femininity to be associated with death” (p. 69). So, mortality, finitude, and the female sex are equated by logocentrism as what cannot be represented (p. 69). However, that very gesture of expulsion aims to appropriate woman, and it is from here that the question “Where she is” arises for man. Man searches for her; aims to locate her even at the very gesture of declaring her un-locatable (pp. 67-68). Cixous claims, “History, history of phallogocentrism, history of propiation, a single story. History of an identity: that of man’s becoming recognized by the other (son or woman), reminding him that, as Hegel says, death is his master” (p. 79). The threat of death, of castration, of finitude, is logically parallel by phallogocentrism with the threat of woman. Male subjectivity is “structured around loss” (p. 80), death, and castration. Thinking of finitude as death takes the form of castration, of phallic primacy, and its anxious binarism that places man over woman. Cixous fiercely criticizes the “phallic primacy” that imposes upon everyone the male law of “loss”: This “is not the case with femininity” (p. 79).

By contrast, she places woman in writing as “writing is woman’s” (p. 85) insofar that “practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist” (p. 92). It is writing, not biology, at the end where woman is. That is why some “biological” men, such as Kleist, Shakespeare, Joyce, and Jean Genet, are examples of feminine writing (pp. 84-99). Pushing forward, we can say that woman, as feminine writing, is constitutively undetermined. For Cixous sexual difference (now not as binary) is not the distinction between “socially determined sexes” (p. 81) or a “a fantasized relation to anatomy” (p. 82). Similarly to Woolf, “the difference ... becomes perceived at the level of jouissance,” insofar as feminine jouissance is not castrated (p. 82). Cixous embraces the feminine body and her enjoyment: “Woman is body more than man... More body, hence more writing” (p. 95). While Cixous has been accused of remaining within a biological frame as she positions woman in writing, that same biologism gets interrupted.¹¹ The female body is never just biology in that context. Cixous stresses that there is no coupling of, no identity between, woman and femininity or man and masculinity, and thus, she privileges the “qualifiers of sexual difference,” masculinity and femininity, over the names of their identities (p. 81). The question is not what woman is but *where* she is. It is not an ontological question but a topological one that matters.

Woman is in writing, a place “not obliged to reproduce the system” (p. 72). For Cixous, the feminine side is not negativity, but, as Woolf might say, positivity, a “yes”, and indeed “what is feminine... affirms” (p. 85). Negativity is the ground of men. Finitude as death within phallogocentrism is men’s, not woman’s experience. Woman and femininity are on the side of life, not of death,

11 For a critique of Cixous’ biologism see Moi (2002 112)

even if the experience of woman is “not without danger, without pain, without lost” (p. 86). Cixous accepts the “negative” but not as opposed to affirmation. Woman aims to all as living, a living that would not be in opposition to death or have a limit but would be only affirmative. “Living means wanting everything that it is, everything that lives, and wanting it alive. Castration? Let others toy with it” (Cixous, “The Laugh”, p. 891). Castration is men’s anxiety. Woman is the “power to be errant” (Cixous, “Sorties”, p. 91), to wander and to err; therefore, she is incalculable.

Cixous will keep using woman as a name, recognizing its limitations (p. 83) but after all, what is to be a woman is undecidable. She stresses the body, its enjoyment, the voice, the gift, and the capability to hold another (through pregnancy) (p. 90). Pregnancy is the experience of hosting “the not-me within me” (p. 90) as writing is the place of “the other in me” (p. 86). That woman is in writing entails that she welcomes the other (in all its variety) even if that is dangerous, distressing, and threatening (pp. 86-90). She emphasizes the body, pregnancy, and a new experience of motherhood; however, the body does not define woman, as there are men who “are capable of becoming woman” (p. 98). Like Woolf, Cixous proposes a constitutive bisexuality, but she distinguishes two logics of thinking about it (p. 85). One puts the sexes together, dreaming with the unity of identity. This bisexuality is connected with phallogocentrism and its binary system. Phallogocentrism aims to ground identities based on opposition and Otherness—death, woman— so they are appropriated by male/logos in the gesture of exclusion. The mere inclusion of the excluded confirming unity keeps the binarism. Following Cixous, I will call this the masculine side. Differently, the feminine side is a side of “non-exclusion of difference” (p. 85). Bisexuality here allows for the not-me, the other, in a relationship that keeps their difference and is not based on exclusion or inclusion. On this side, what to be a woman is, is incalculable.

Let us recapitulate these three women’s thoughts and their relation to finitude. So far, by thinking about finitude through woman, we have seen different forms of facing finitude. However, beyond the differences, they all bring the question of the body (one that is never certain, never simply biological, but that cannot be ignored). The body is not just the site of death and decay but is constituted as a sexed and enjoying body (which makes it different, never transparent or identical to itself). All of which brings finitude as the question of birth as questioned/fictional origin, and life (as not as opposed to death). All noted the male dominance as one of a dual oppositional/complementary logic. Finally, the three suspended the accepted definitions of woman. In sum, thinking woman and finitude has brought the question of *sexual difference*, and, indeed, I suggest that *thinking about finitude is nothing but the thinking of sexual difference and the body, a thinking bringing, perhaps, no knowledge*.

Part II. Psychoanalysis and deconstruction

So, in the second part of this article, I will focus on the relation between sexual difference and finitude. For that, I want to transition first to Copjec, who comes from Lacanian psychoanalysis, and then to Derrida and deconstruction. These two thinkers, a “woman” and a “man,” have delved into the question of sexual difference, have questioned the concepts of Woman (and Man), and have thought about these issues concerning finitude. I analyze Copjec’s position and not Lacan’s (who is the supposed master) because her reading of him distances from metaphysical—and even sometimes misogynist—positions and because she addresses the relationship among woman, finitude, and sexual difference explicitly. Lacanian thought is often presented as opposed to discourse from deconstruction (even against Derrida’s own protests) (Derrida, *Resistances* 46). In pairing these two discourses or positions, I aim to deconstruct the supposed “oppositional” relation, opening the possibility of a “two” that would not be oppositional.

Finitude and the sexed being: copjec’s reading of lacan

For psychoanalysis, Copjec argues, Being is sexed. For her, Freud’s and Lacan’s intervention was that sex is an “ontological” trait, not a predicate that can be applied to a neutral being. “Male and female, like being, are not predicates, which means that rather than increasing our knowledge of the subject, they qualify the mode of the failure of our knowledge” (Copjec, *Sex* 212). Being is sexed not because of “biology” but because sexual difference is linked with the finitude—failure—of our knowledge (p. 212). Sexual difference does not follow a topology of opposed “biological” sexual organs identifying the male body with the one which has a penis, testicles, semen, and sperm and the female body with the one that has a clitoris, womb, breast, milk, and eggs. Following such a binary logic based on opposition and complementarity repeats the binary logic opposing the places of fertilizer, penetrator, father, active, and death to fertilized, penetrated, mother, passive case, and birth. Elaborating on Lacan’s injunction that “there is no sexual relation,” Copjec argues that there is no logical manner to conceive the relation between man and woman and *leaves in suspension the meaning of what man and woman are*.

Nevertheless, while the meaning is suspended, Copjec insists on the existence of two: “There are two mutually exclusive classes: male *and* female” (so this is not an either/or situation) (p. 213, my emphasis). No specific logic relates them; they are not connected by a binary oppositional logic in which one subordinates the other. She explains, “Our sexed being, [Lacan] maintains, is not a biological phenomenon; it does not pass through the body, but ‘results from the logical demands of speech.’ These logical demands lead us to an encounter with a fundamental bedrock or impas-

se when we inevitably stumble on the fact that ‘saying it all’ is literary impossible: words fail” (p. 213).¹² Sexual difference de-constitutes the “body” through speech, insofar speech fails. Sexual difference, thus, is not attached to the body *as* biology but as constituted by speech and enjoyment, insofar it is impossible to say it all. This failure is because of finitude concerning language. Finitude here is not about mortality but about the limits of speech that cannot say it all.

For Copjec, in saying all, there are two ways of failing: a “male” and a “female” one. How one fails to say it all, and not biology or sexuality, is what it means to be sexed. The Lacanian formula is not based on dictating norms to be a man or a woman and to have a functional relationship with each other. For Copjec, what Lacan denominates sexual relation (as impossible), and the “male” and “female” sides of it, is just a manner of understanding the failure of language insofar as we are speaking beings. No logical relation (neither oppositional nor complimentary or supplementary) gives reason to our Being and our encountering with others. Here we must ask why sex is the absence of a logical oppositional/complementary relation.

To think of sexual difference, Copjec reads the Lacanian formula of sexuation through the Kantian antinomies and how reason deals (and fails) with cosmological ideas, which Emmanuel Kant developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. She makes clear that her reading entails a translation, and we should add that, as with any translation, it entails a displacement of discourse, which in its very faithfulness is unfaithful.¹³ Copjec correlates the female side with the mathematical antinomy, and the male side with the dynamic one. The antinomies then will be reformulated by Copjec into the female and male side of Lacan’s sexuation formula: “Each side is defined by an affirmation or negation of the phallic function, an inclusion, and exclusion of absolute (non-phallic) jouissance” (p. 215). For her, the phallic function organizes the antinomies, i.e., the relation of each side with the phallus (p. 215). Of course, this is not to say that the male side gathers all the ones who have a penis and the feminine side all those who do not. Male and female do not describe the members of each set based on anatomical differences or on secondary traits that have been later acquired. To be on one side or another is “an enunciative position,” Copjec clarifies (p. 215). The phallic function, indeed, is “the source of all ... indecidability” in terms of the sexual relation since it produces “conflicting statements” (pp. 213-216). The phallus does not exist, and thus it pertains to neither of the sides.

12 The main problem with this definition is that it upholds the distinction between body and language. In more recent texts, Copjec will move from this. I interpret Copjec’s “rejection” of the body as the dismissal of the biological as neutral objective reproductive organs, that is, of sexual bodies as being defined by different—reproductive—organs.

13 For a critique of Copjec’s position on Kant see Ziarek (1997).

Copjec argues,

Sex is the impossibility of completing meaning... not a meaning that is incomplete, unstable. ...The point is that sex is the structural incompleteness of language, not that sex is itself incomplete. ...Sex is disjointed from the signifier, it becomes that which does not communicate itself, that which marks the subject as unknowable. *To say that the subject is sexed is to say that is no longer possible to have any knowledge of him or her.* Sex serves no other function than to limit reason, to remove the subject from the real of possible experience or pure understanding... sex in opposing itself to sense, is also, by definition opposed to relation, to communication. ... sexual difference ... is a real and not a symbolic one. (Sex, pp. 206-207, my emphasis)

The real of sexual difference neither implies the body's full presence as matter (materialism) nor its absence or its being beyond symbolization. Sexual difference is real insofar as it is the name of an impossible traumatic experience. Sex (as sexual difference) delivers no knowledge about the subject and marks (by missing the mark constantly) the impossibility as a limit.

The phallic function, Copjec explains, is related to how we enter into language as we relate to the signifier and the impossibility of being able to say it all (p. 216). The phallus works as a transcendental signifier. Indeed, there is no master signifier from which to think of sexual difference. The phallus is the inscription of that which cannot be inscribed in language, that is to say, the inscription of a failure on both sides. Here the phallic function produces two different results that are not symmetrically opposed. Inclusion and exclusion from the phallic function are at stake on both sides. Both sides exclude and include the possibility of a (non) phallic jouissance (p. 213). In that sense, for Copjec, the phallic function organizes two different manners of language's failure concerning jouissance. It is not that the real is outside the symbolic, but that the real interrupts the symbolic and makes it not coincide with itself, not to become total. For Copjec, "sex is the stumbling block of sense. This is not to say that sex is pre-discursive ... human sexuality is a product of signification, but we intend to refine this position by arguing that sex is produced by the internal limit, the failure of signification" (204). The limit—finitude as limit—marks not beyond but an internal/external one. Copjec concludes, "A universe of men and women is inconceivable, one category does not complement the other, make up for what is lacking in the other." (p. 234). For Copjec, nothing outside these two sides can connect them as a whole. There is no transcendental point excluded from both, allowing them to enclose both sides into one all-encompassing logic. Sex de-limits by failing to demarcate the limits. Sex as sexual difference is successful in undoing all systems of totalization. Nevertheless, if sex is the internal limit of reason, language, and the impossibility of totalizing, do we still need the names phallus, man, or woman to explain this failure? Or are there other signifiers that might work?

I argue that Copjec connects the phallic function with two manners of dealing with finitude. Following Toril Moi's criticism of the phallus, I translate phallic function as finitude ("From Femininity", p. 871).¹⁴ In my reading, finitude, thus, becomes the mark of a failure in language and knowledge. Language stumbles with itself, and reason cannot think totality without entering into contradictory statements. **For Copjec, sexuation is ontological; there** is no being outside or before it and no neutral universal subject. Sexuation entails a division into *two* sexes: two logics of failure concerning the phallic function (to the signifier) and two logics of finitude. It is also a division within each sex. Next, I will concentrate on the so-called feminine side.

Let us remember that the mathematical antinomy in Kant's first critique deals with the World, which in Copjec's terms, will become (sexed) Being and/or Woman. The first proposition claims that "The world has a beginning in time, and in space, it is also enclosed in boundaries pace," that is, "every phenomenon is in time and space" (Kant 470). Copjec translates this as: "There is not one *x* that is not submitted to the phallic function" (Sex, p. 214). This *x* would be woman. My translation regarding finitude renders it as: *there is not one x not submitted to finitude*. Not one is outside the world (or language) or outside time and space. There is absolute finitude in this first statement; every one is born and dies. However, this is impossible to think of as there is no possibility to grasp this totality. There is no outside from which to look at the world as a whole. From the inside, there is no possibility to grasp this totality as we all are bound by birth and death. This grasping would entail total simultaneity, ergo, the absence of time, and absolute presence, both of which are impossible to think from within. That is why reason is led to think the antinomy: "the world has no beginning and no bounds in space, but is infinite with regards both time and space" (Kant 471), that is, the world is infinite. Copjec translates this as "Not all (not every) *x* is submitted to the phallic function" (Sex, p. 214). I translate, *not all (not every) x encounters finitude*. Not-all, not every one is enclosed by the limit.

The point here is not merely the opposition between a finite and infinite world contradicting and annulling each other. *Ultimately, the point is the impossibility of determining the world's existence, that is, its indeterminacy.* Copjec explains the mathematical antinomy:

...oblige us to recognize the basic finitude of all phenomena, the fact that they are inescapably subject to conditions of time and space, and must therefore be encountered one by one, indefinitely, without the possibility of reaching an end, a point where all phenomena would be known. The status of the world is not infinite but indeterminate. Not-all phenomena are a possible object of experience. (Sex, p. 221)

¹⁴ Moi argues: "Castration is simply too sexist a term to be useful as a general term for human limitation or lack. I want to propose that on this general level we speak of *finitude* instead." (From Femininity 871). I do not share all of Moi's arguments against Lacan, yet I agree that we avoid sexist bias by moving from castration and the phallus to finitude.

So, because all phenomena are finite and within time and space, we cannot encounter them all in their finitude. We—who are also finite beings—must meet them one by one in their singularity. These encounters cannot reach a determinate limit (a moment when we say we have finished encountering all the finite beings). Every limit is indeterminate since it can never be settled as a definite limit. Copjec's point is not that the world is limitless, which would be a transcendental illusion, but that "at least one phenomenon escapes our experience" (p. 221). This possible escape from our finitude—the openness of the set—is *because of*, not *despite of* our finitude. The failure of knowledge here is that we cannot close the system of signification. At least one phenomenon escapes the world, which as totalized concept cannot be said to exist. The system's existence is indeterminate since we cannot close the system to affirm it.

Copjec's correlates the world with woman (p. 221) and argues, "Woman... as the world, does not exist" (p. 221). We can neither open nor close the system because of finitude. She insists: "Lacan is undoubtedly arguing that a concept of woman cannot be constructed because the task of fully unfolding her conditions is one that cannot be carried out" (p. 222). Knowing woman is impossible to be entirely done by us because we are finite. We are in space and time; we are 'historical, in that sense, bound to the conditions imposed by time and space, yet we cannot fully grasp these conditions by reason (p. 222). We cannot regress to the origin, not only because we were not present at the origin (even our origin), but because we cannot determine that origin as fully present to itself. Also, we cannot put ourselves in a position in the future or pre-figure the future. We cannot escape time and space, which is a present that is not coincidental with itself, that is split between a past and a future that cannot be delimited, and that cannot offer a point of perspective from which to grasp a totality. "Our conceptions of woman cannot 'rush ahead' of these limits and thus cannot construct a concept of whole of woman" (p. 222). Here, it might seem that Copjec conceives a knowledge limited by an unknown future, as if "what limits reason is a lack of limit" (p. 223). However, she warns us that the problem is not an extensive infinite temporal logic; a time outside us, developing independently from us and secretly hiding infinitely new beings to come. In other words, it is not that an infinite number of "women" needs to be taken one by one in a movement of infinite, endless inclusion or that "they" are outside (beyond our present presence). This would entail a limit, an inside/outside, and a present/future clear-cut, which is not the case. Time is not an external condition from reason; the internal limit of reason is this impossibility of thinking what we might call futurity (and the origin, I want to add) (p. 223).¹⁵

15 The "male" side of the Lacanian formula, for Copjec, is related to the dynamic Kantian antinomy. This one is about freedom and nature, and its first proposition declares that while causality is a law of nature it cannot account for all the appearances in the world, so there is also the need to think of a first cause (transcendental freedom) that is not caused by any cause (Kant 484). Here, Copjec translated, "there is at least one who is not submitted to the phallic function" (Euthanasia, p. 229). The antinomy declares that "there is no freedom, but everything in the world happens solely in accordance with laws of nature" (Kant, p. 485). Everything has a cause and is submitted to the laws of nature, and transcendental freedom is contrary to this. Copjec translates here, "all x's are submitted to the phallic function" (Euthanasia, p. 229). To consider the first proposition on causation in its regressive mode, we need to assume an end of the regressive causal chain, a beginning, an origin, and postulate a cause that is not caused by another. In terms of finitude, we could say that there is one outside finitude (time and space), the exception to the rule, which grounds the

“Woman is not-all” for Copjec because of an “indefinite judgement” in the sense that we cannot say Woman exists, but we cannot also contradict within reason her existence. (We hear Beauvoir’s echoes). Copjec distances from a naïf and reductive reading of the Lacanian dictum “Woman does not exist” and goes instead for an indeterminacy of her existence. She explains, “a concept of woman cannot exist” (p. 223). Woman’s concept cannot exist, because there is no unifying operation of the understanding that can synthesize woman. Counting them all or making an “all” as a closed set or concept is impossible. The set remains open, cracked from the inside because we cannot make it an object of knowledge as a whole, not because this concept has no limit and woman becomes an infinite open-ended concept always in the making. The concept is fractured internally by reason’s own limits. There is no universe, no possible universal as Woman. Here impossibility keeps the set open, which in my reading means that it is the undecidability in terms of existence (which emerges because of finitude) and not the lack of limits that keeps woman as not totalizable (p. 235).

This impossibility entails the possibility of a non-phallic jouissance that cannot be expressed by the symbolic. Nevertheless, this is not an exception, which belongs to the male side. It is not that woman is an exception beyond the symbolic, but that the symbolic does not close as a system. Not-all are contained by the symbolic because the symbolic does not close. The limit here is impossible to set. It is not that woman is outside of language, but that language does not close as a system. Thus, Copjec’s argument sets up a responsibility: to count woman one by one, in their singularity. This undertaking is indefinite precisely because of finitude and the failure that entails concerning totality. This task opens the possibility for an ethics of open counting. We count not in an infinite inclusion but in an indefinite movement which is not any more inclusion per se since there is no set to be included into, no concept to be incorporated into.

Let me return to Woolf and Beauvoir. Woolf seems closer to what Copjec has called the female side, and Beauvoir closer to the male one. Woolf starts by acknowledging that all sexed beings are subjected to time (no exceptions), and from there, she imagines a ‘woman’ who undergoes these conditions: her origin can only be fictional, and she has no end: she keeps coming in promise as an indeterminate possibility. Woolf does not imagine a woman who escapes time and is an exception. Woolf does not imagine a woman who becomes the model of a new universality. Woman as conceptual totalization is undone. Woolf “fails” (but can we still speak about failure here?) in saying all about woman because she cannot totalize the concept. She can only promise an

possibility of thinking of a causal system. It could be God, the primal father, the Sovereign. The antinomy closes the system, and in terms of finitude, this will entail: every one is a finite being; there are no exceptions to this. In the first thesis, the one not subjected to the phallic function is excluded to limit the set in its origin. In the second thesis, the set closes by excluding freedom, that is, by excluding the one who is not subjected to the phallic function. There seems to be the possibility of certainty and knowledge. In both cases, there is an “all” (a totality) only insofar as there is an exclusion. Both thesis and antithesis work in different realms, one on the intelligible realm, the other on the sensuous. Existence (as freedom, as being) is excluded in both. The symbolic works as a closed system that limits itself by positing an outside. The failure here—what cannot be said—is part of the system’s constitution. The whole, the all, is an illusion (p. 235).

indeterminate ‘yes’ to the ones to come. The concept of woman is not “incomplete” or “unfinished” but cannot be completed or finished. In Woolf’s essay, sex opens the system because it marks the failure of totalization regarding indetermination, undecidability, and its promise. Departing from a sexed body, the system—what woman is –becomes undecidable.

Beauvoir, by contrast, aims to achieve complete human universality. She delineates the binary system of male domination and its inclusive exclusion of woman. Man can become the model for humanity insofar as it excludes woman, and if not woman, it will be another Other. Man can be the freedom’s existential Being insofar as it excludes woman as the inessential, the negative ground of his positivity. Beauvoir aims to solve this by (re)integrating woman into a more inclusive universal, the human. However, in doing so, she has to exclude woman as sexed Being. A woman can enter only insofar she leaves outside her sexuality, her eroticism, i.e., her enjoying body for the neutral flesh that opens transcendence. In order to be free, woman must be human and leave behind anything that singularizes her sexed body. Here, humanity’s freedom is too small (only male) at the beginning, and later while more extensive (including both fleshed beings) it functions still by exclusion. Beauvoir remains in the same logic she critiques; she ‘fails’ by again putting aside difference and striving for a totality. A woman, as sexed Being, needs to leave her sex outside to become a member of humanity. The system only closes because it fails to include her as sexed Being.

I have focused on Woolf and Beauvoir, both “recognized” women and feminists, to show how in thinking about sexual difference and distinguishing two positions, what matters is not what we call biological bodies or even sociological gender identifications. There is no essentialism of bodies (or minds and spirits) for the sake. However, the body matters even when it is impossible to conceptualize it fully: enjoying-bodies are crucial. We can conceptualize our body through biological, sociological, and historicist knowledge, but these leave enjoyment out. Sex, in this case, would be biological or a gender construct that rests in a neutral flesh or a biological destination that society imprints. By putting Woolf’s discourse closer to the female side, we are not “locating” woman somewhere on the left; but we are dis-locating her: that is, we cannot map or locate her through Judith or her narrator. We believe we have located her by putting Beauvoir’s discourse on the flesh and sexed body. We have given it a possible female identity. However, that identity only closes by being excluded from a neutral human flesh. The male side works by building identities that work on the pair “exclusion-inclusion” (whereas each exclusion includes the outside, and every inclusion confirms the outside as exclusion). The female side, however, is not symmetrical to this logic. It does not work on building identities. There is no woman’s identity to build upon this logic, but only indeterminacy, undecidability of the limits through which an idea of inclusion or exclusion might work.

So, sex (as sexual difference) delivers no knowledge about the subject but indeed seems to mark (by missing the mark constantly) this impossibility as a limit and it undoes all systems of totalization. I want to note that within Copjec's reading, many certainties (or commonplaces) concerning Lacan's thought, the signifier, the letter, and the real must be understood otherwise. Sex is the impossibility of a master signifier; sex marks the not arrival of the letter, or what is the same, it marks the constitutive out-of-jointness of the letter and its destination. Sex is not the knowledge of what it is to be a boy or a girl, a mother or a father, but the not-knowledge of them. Sex is where communication fails. It is the interruption of sense, of coherence, of knowledge.

Copjec emphasizes the "two" and the impossibility of relation as such. Sex is, exactly (but an exactly that is always misfiring) where communication and relation fail. However, this non-communication or non-relation is not just with an "other" being but with ourselves. Sex is an impossible relationship with ourselves. It is the confrontation of the impossibility, the limit, of our bodies in their auto-hetero-affection. In this sense, this might explain why when these two logics are disjunctives and mark the impossibility of relation, they are to be found in the same subject/discourse. For example, Woolf's discourse gets closer to the 'male' side when it advocates for the androgynous as balance, as the "marriage" of the male and feminine within the androgynous Being. Conversely, Beauvoir gets closer to the female side when she discusses feminine enjoyment or does not avoid her philosophical questioning of the body's affection.

The question of location insists with Cixous, who had mapped logocentrism as a dual topography. She would ask: why only 2 "sexes" (that is, only two modes of "failure")? If failure within the female side shows the impossibility of closing the system, why insist on these two? In my reading of Copjec, the two comes before the One (Copjec, p. 34). That is, the One is only an imaginary non-symmetrical (internally split) response to the real of the two. This entails the impossibility of any possible full (exceptional) origin and, thus, of a progressive sequence per se and not an inversion of order or sequence. On the side of One, we have a one plus one plus, which constructs a progressive chain of equivalences (one, two, three...) held—as illusion/fantasy—by an exception outside it. On the side of "two" we cannot count in that sense, as Copjec warns us, "You are mistaken if you think that 1+1 will give you the two of sex" (p. 34). This additive logic, I believe, upsets Copjec when she is asked about why she insists on two sexes, and with irritation, she answers, "how many do you want to have?" (The Fable, p. 68). For her, the question of sexes is not numerical; sex interrupts the possibility of counting in a progressive, serial manner. On the feminine side, we count too, but not by adding progressively in a series, but by counting one by one, in their singularity, without ente-

ring into a series, interrupting the chain of equivalences. There is no universal that makes a whole, a totality, a set even of infinite differences—different sexes, different sexualities and/or genders. Some might insist: if the not-all is structural/ontological, then one cannot necessarily hold to the two since the two, as the one, is open in itself. That is, two is always already more than two, but most importantly, the whole delimitation of sides becomes blurred. Nevertheless, we must think two beyond the oppositional or complementary binary. If we cannot think that, then we remain under the male side's hegemony and the two as hierarchical complements.

Derrida and cixous: death and life

Indeed, the very concept of twoness, of duality, has been the target of Cixous' and Derrida's critique of phallogocentrism. We can hear in Derrida's thought the echoes of Beauvoir's critique of philosophy, not in a genealogical manner, but (openly or not) he takes seriously her claim that man has framed the philosophical tradition and its "universal" neutral concepts and that this is a philosophical problem (and not just a problem *for* women). Accordingly, Derrida puts an "emphasis... on resexualizing a philosophical or theoretical discourse, which has been too "neutralizing"" (Choreographies, p. 75) since "the classical interpretation gives a masculine sexual marking to what is presented either as neutral originariness, or at least, as prior and superior to all sexual marking" (p. 73). For him, logocentrism and phallogocentrism are intertwined, and to deconstruct one is to deconstruct the other. Phallogocentrism's critique is not incidental but consubstantial with the one of logocentrism. When Derrida deconstructs the logocentric metaphysical concepts, he is closer—although not the same—to Copjec's logic in reading sexual difference. He recognizes two logics, one that organizes thought in a binary totalizing manner and another that traces the dissemination of meaning and is non-totalizable. In doing this, he delineates two systems of thought and thinks beyond the two as binary as complementary/oppositional relation. I parallel what Lacan calls the male side with the phallogocentric tradition, and the feminine side with deconstruction's movement. This is not to say that woman is deconstruction, but that Derrida's logic is comparable to Copjec's. In other words, Derrida is also confronted with thinking two in a non-oppositional, complementary, or supplementary manner.

In tracing woman's place in Nietzsche's discourse, Derrida argues that the very limit between metaphysics and non-metaphysics is at stake: "the opposition between metaphysics and non-metaphysics encounters its limit here, the very limit of that opposition and of opposition's form.... if the form of opposition and the oppositional structure are themselves metaphysical, then the relation of metaphysics to its other can no longer be one of opposition" (Spurs 119). The challenge for Derrida, is how to think the limit, the two, not in oppositional terms. Is it possible to think of a relationship that is not oppositional/complementary? I re-read this question, not through *Spurs*, but through Derrida's reading of Cixous' texts, in *H.C. for life, that is to say...* This whole text is

about finitude and the deconstruction of sides. This text explores the side of life and death; of her and him; of the mother and the father; the side between sides; the side with no side; a side with no me; a side always open to the other; a side with no limit; and the inscription of a side within a side, the creation of a distance from the side with no side; a distance marked by the subjunctive, and omni(im)potense (H.C., p. 75). I argue that this exploration of sides is also a veiled consideration of finitude and the “two” of sexual difference and an exploration of “two” not in an oppositional, binary, complementary manner. I would not be able to go slowly through this text. It is an undecidable book that follows no rule of genre/gender.

“Derrida” delineates a dual topology concerning him and “she” (H.C., Hélène Cixous),¹⁶ death and life:

I keep forever reminding her each time, on my side, that we die in the end, too quickly. And I always have to begin again. // For she—because she loves to live—does not believe me. She, on her side, knows well that one dies in the end, too quickly; she knows it and writes about it better than anyone; she has the knowledge of it but believes none of it. (p. 2)

He distinguishes between the side of death (and he seems to be there, or at least at the threshold), and the side of life, where she locates herself, according to him. “I will not be on her side” he insists (p. 20). On her side, there is knowledge of death without believing in it. For her, the fact of death does not act as life’s “opposite” or “end.”

Sexual difference structures Derrida’s discourse insofar as we can hear the echoes of the feminine side and the mathematical antinomy in the two sides of him and her. For him, on his side, we can say, “there is no x that is not submitted to finitude, death;” there is no exception. Yet this knowledge does not lead him into the “male” side (as we have defined it). It takes him to H.C.’s threshold, to the threshold of her books, of language and her side. On her side, she knows about death but does not believe in it; that is, “not-all, are submitted to finitude” (even when everyone dies), even when there is no exception.

Derrida distinguishes between a knowledge of death, and a belief in it: H.C. knows that death happens, yet she does not believe in it, and this belief is linked with a love of living. There is in him a wish to believe her. He says, “I wish I might what I cannot... I wish I might believe her” (2). Therefore, throughout the text, he wishes he might believe her (take her at her word), which he

¹⁶ In this text, the names Cixous and Derrida do not mark merely the authors, but also their writing and their (fictional) autobiographical stance, hence these first quotation marks to illuminate this.

can only do in the double subjunctive: a wish that he might, a hope in potentiality, in what might be possible (pp. 60, 70, 159). To believe cannot be sustained in the possible, in the calculation of probabilities (pp. 3-4). To believe needs to be a belief in the impossible. This impossibility is understandable on his side. He knows that he cannot not die, yet he wants to believe her that he might what he can't. On her side, however, it is more complex. H.C. knows death, yet she does not believe in it or him. She does not believe in the impossible per se—she knows perfectly about death. This means that indeed, “for her, there is only one side and not two, and this side is that of life. Death, which she knows and understands as well as anyone, is never denied certainly; it haunts and blows everything away... but is not a side, it is a non-side” (p. 36). On her side, according to Derrida, H.C. does not oppose death to life. She does not think death as the limit of life. On her side, death is not a side, which entails life is the only side. Death happens, but it does not mark life's limit.

Derrida protests: “This is why I—and this is probably more than a difference, a big disagreement between us... I, who always feel turned toward death, I am not on her side, while she would like to turn everything and to make me come around to the side of life” (36). Derrida's problem is that while Cixous affirms life's side, she makes this side the only one, forcing him there. H.C.'s work “names the side with only one side, a side without another side” (36). Derrida marks some problems while still trying to believe her. First, if there is only one side, there is an erasure of distance. It even erases the distance of closeness: “one has to be on the other side, on the other side of the other, in order to be close. When one is on the same side, paradoxically one is not close, there is no distance or proximity; neither speed nor slowness” (38). At this moment, Derrida is alarmed since if life is the only side (a side that does not deny death, but does not believe in it as a limit), there is no possible connection with the other. One is neither close nor far. There is no tempo, no possible movement. (Is there any life? Yet he does not ask this).

Second, if there is only one side, there is no threshold, and no one can arrive (or leave, for that matter). The questions of the “arrivant” or the “to-come” become arrested. They have no place if there is only one side. There is no passage, no threshold, no gift, no other, no responsibility.

Nevertheless, Derrida keeps trying to believe. If there is only the side of living, which is not opposed to another, and which does not derive its existence from the oppositional logic, this side can only be the one of the undecidable. He continues:

...if, as I suggest, life has no other side, if there is only one side, the one of life, then the latter remains undecidable, certainly, since one does not have to decide and can no longer decide between two opposable edges or sides, but this undecidability is the place of decision which, however serious it may be, can only be for life. Because it is undecidable, one can decide and settle only for life. But life, which is undecidable, is also, in its very finitude infinite. What has only one side—a single edge without an opposite edge is in-finite. Finite because it has an edge on one side, but infinite because it has no opposable edge. (p. 48)

He connects the undecidable with a finite infinity. Life as not oppositional affirmation to death is in-finite, that is, undecidable. The side of life has one side but no opposite edge/side. It would be finite and infinite, that is, undecidable. Or perhaps, echoing Copjec, we could say finite and indeterminate. This undecidability remains but is always already decided for life. Nevertheless, this decision cannot be a program, a positive calculation for life. At this moment, Derrida expresses dizziness since: “she had simply taken away all the sides of me, all my sides being removed from all sides. No more edge [bord] for me. No more death, may be, since life has no opposite edge, but no more edge at all, on no side, more exposed than ever” (p. 48). The side of life interrupts the logic of sides, the opposite, the Other, and death.

And yet, at the very end of the book, Derrida takes sides again and insists on death. Death here is unavoidable; there are no exceptions. Finitude is a truth. Death is on his side; on hers, there is life for life, and erasure of sides. On her side, life is a truth. We must note that Derrida holds both as truth. We can hear the echoes here of the mathematical antinomy. The world has a beginning and an end, on one side, and the world has no beginning and no end on the other. Every x is submitted to finitude, on one side, and not- all x is submitted to finitude (even if death exists). That leaves Derrida with the undecidable; the world is undecidable, a space where the double subjunctive breaks the normative ontology of indicative and commanding phrases. This is the space of the “as if.” He finishes by saying:

Between her and me, it is *as if* it were a question of life and death. Death would be on my side and life of hers. I would attempt to be convinced of life by her, preparing myself to receive grace instead of the coup the grace, but I am and remain for life *convainçu* de mort (both convicted and convinced of death); convicted, that is to say, at fault and accused, found guilty, imprisoned or jailed after a verdict, here a death sentence, but also convinced by the truth of death, of a true speech (*veridictum*), of a verdict as regards death. She, on her Side (*de son Cote avec a grand C*) it is for life she is convinced of life for life. // Death counts for her, certainly, on every page, but she herself does not count. For me, death counts, it counts, and my days, my hours, and my seconds are numbered. (pp. 158-159, my emphasis)

Death reappears here as the absolute singularity of death, of a singular account of an absolutely finite life that will end. Death counts and temporalizes existence. Life and death reappear, under a constitutive “as if.” Fictionality, echoing Woolf, is at the origins and the ends. Both “sides” are necessary for Derrida, even if their distance is fictional or has to be supposed. She does not believe in his side; he tries to believe in hers. But death imposes its sentence and truth upon him.

He cannot escape death even if he is for life (we are all submitted to finitude). Here, death is not the opposite of life. His side does not oppose (or complement or supplement) hers. Derrida is not within the male tradition of thinking of finitude as an existence towards death, in which time is limited. He does not position a “being-towards-death” against a “being-towards-life” (pp. 88-89).

Derrida insists that the two sides are not in an oppositional logic. Death makes time run and count, but it needs its side to do so. Derrida continues, “It is *as if* she said ‘We are not going to die’; ‘But yes’ I would answer. She knows I tell the truth. I know she tells the truth. Now evidently we say the opposite, how is that possible?” (pp. 158-159, my emphasis) Let us note the correlation of the “as if” and truth as there are two truths that seemingly say the opposite but do not work as opposite. Within fiction—Derrida would say—we can say it all, with no opposition. It is *as if* there is the side of death and life, *as if* we would not die, *as if* there are no sides. However, sides, Derrida argues, need to be traced (even if they are one edge-sides) in the *as if* of their existence, since if there are no sides, no death *and* life (not as opposition, complementary or supplementarity), there is no life, no tempo, no distance.

Thinking finitude is the thinking of this distance, which is the thinking of the fiction and truth of sexual difference. Without sexual difference, without the *as if* of two sides, there is no distance, no finitude, and thus, no life. Sexual difference “as such,” is on the side of identity and difference, opposition and complementarity. The “as such” of sexual difference, however, is grounded on the “as if” of the two, of sex as the impossible identity of one’s body with itself.¹⁷

Thus, the two (not oppositional, biological, or sociological) repeats itself with Derrida. His insistent re-turn to Freud and psychoanalysis has to do with this thinking. On the one hand, Derrida “traces” in Lacanian psychoanalysis a synthesis of phallogocentric logic (1996). In reading Lacan, he seems to build what others have seen as “opposition” to psychoanalysis. An “opposition” that sometimes Derrida himself builds. It marks the limits between the phallogocentric tradition and deconstruction. This reading of opposition has also been strong among deconstruction critics. However, a reading that merely opposes two masters, two logics, a reading that leaves sexual difference out, curls back into the oppositional logic of metaphysics. It marks deconstruction’s resistance to deconstruction.

Sexual difference—the enjoying body not as biological, sociological, or historical knowledge—emerged in thinking finitude through the texts/thoughts of Woolf, Beauvoir, and Cixous. Then I turn to Copjec’s reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis to reconsider sexual difference through the question of finitude. Next, I took on deconstruction to think the two, finitude and sexual difference. In pairing psychoanalysis and deconstruction, I intentionally thought about their (non) relation, the (im)possible translation of one into another. Thus, I delineate two sides. On the side of hierarchical logical opposition, we encounter male over woman; One over the Other, logic over

17 See Johnson for an analysis of the ‘as if’ and ‘as such’ in Derrida (2019 64-98).

nature, mind over body, and transcendence over finitude. On that side, logocentrism and phallogocentrism are intertwined. Relations are normative, determined, and limited by the exception that breaks all rules. The other side is a side with one side, and no other side. It is undetermined since there is no limit or opposition to it. This side is split by an “as if” connected to finitude. This side can never be “completed” even if it is not incomplete, even if through the “as if” we say it all, as we cannot enclose the system and as the system does not close. On this side, reigns the logic of the not-all. There is no exception and no totalization. That is why death is a truth on this side, but also why death can be known and not believed.

To think this side, Copjec insists on the signifier “feminine;” while Derrida might consider this word still too metaphysical (H.C., pp. 140-141). We can name the sides differently, on one side, there is finitude as death; on the other there is in- finitude as death and life for life. We could also say, on one side, there is the Sovereign and the determined, phallogocentrism; on the other side, the undetermined -différance, the trace, hymen.... We could say, on one side men over women, and gender normativity. On the other, singularities that we must encounter one by one. Let us notice that if, at the point of undecidability, I keep using the name woman, I do it only because I accept that this name gives me no knowledge about what a woman is, how her body is, how she enjoys, how she writes. Keeping this name is not a reference to a biological body, a historical socio-construction, or a gender performance. Moreover, it is not also the name of a sexual identity. Woman is just a name for the failure of all these insofar as we connect the name with sexual difference and enjoyment. Woman, whenever we use that signifier, it will always be an improper name, an improper performance, insofar as there is no proper one. It will never become a full concept. Woman as signifier miss-names the singularity of my existence, my in-finitude, my undecidability. It is also a name that does not erase other signifiers, other names, and singularities, other improper names, and identity failures. The signifiers of the sides can vary, but the sides’ names should not be organized in a series of the same. For example, LGBTQ, Queer, or trans are singular but also improper names. They are names and experiences for bodies that are split by sexual difference and enjoyment, which destabilize our identifications. “Proper” names belong to the male logic, the hierarchical oppositional phallogocentric normative logic. However, those will always fail too.

Thanks.

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