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Medusa as the story of Victorian feminine identity¹

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Abstract

This paper scans the meandering paths of a quest through the realms of womanly self and its articulateness in (robust) constructs of individuality. We have departed from a paradigm of interpretation related to a mythological figure, dual in itself, namely the *Medusa*, perceived as either mask, or face – which has always fascinated with her tragic beauty. It is within the semantics of the word *fascinum* – charm, evil spirit but also virile member – where the attributes of an age, the Victorian time, that was equally fascinating, as it was whirling and powerful, lie hidden. This paper focuses on artistic reflections of Victorian femininity in an effort to examine how it contributed to the ever-changing definition and search of female gender identities at times of hegemonic masculinities. Art and fiction articulate some of the more powerful challenges. If philosophy encapsulates phallogocentrism, as Derrida points out, fiction, he claims, is an invagination, namely a creation of differences where no term spells self-sufficiency.

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“Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance; practically, she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history” wrote Virginia Woolf in 1928, stressing the dramatic cleavage between the deep print women bestowed upon the lofty realm of myth, symbolism and letters and their position within the infinitely more mundane, pragmatic fabric of the nineteenth century.

In *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers sees Victorian women writers as an “undercurrent, rapid and powerful” (Moers, 1976) impetuous energy that symbolizes a “literary movement apart from, but hardly subservient to the mainstream” (Moers, 1976). Metamorphosis seems to be one of the keys that decodes the picture of this second Renaissance which breathes life and corrodes canons, for it not only adds new voices to the general chorus, but it also singles some out of the shadowy, blurry distant horizons. Silhouettes no longer sketch diluted contours; they make dreamers turn into doers. Medusa turns *fascinum* from simple *charm* into articulated *action* and thus, the messianic figure of Shakespeare’s sister, Virginia Woolf speaks about, the very same who “lives in you and in me” (Woolf, 1928), slowly abandons the reclusive gynoeceum and boldly heads towards the hustle and bustle of the agora. Nevertheless, it is with grace that she approaches it, making flowers bloom canvases and words weave some of the most sensitive yet bewildering stories. Fiction, we argued, comes to articulate some of the more powerful challenges

We are strolling along the corridors of a very special age, a real moment of *Sturm und Drang*, marked by much uncertainty and confusion, a period of growth and change, of discovery and self-discovery, of abandoning the tranquility of shallow waters and courageously setting sail to conquer seas and oceans, unique in the fact that it may be paralleled with a beam of light reflecting itself through, and at the same time flooding the stained glass with a dazzling multitude of reflections and metamorphosed echoes of its shininess. Victorianism embraces not only an epoch but also a cultural phenomenon whose significance goes far beyond the limits of the age. It might be defined as a *magic* blend of opposite tendencies, individualism and sobriety, material pursuits and idealization of life, the influence of science and the force of religion. What seems to give the essential note of Victorian culture is the complexity resulting from opposed attitudes, for the specific mood of dramatic quest was defined by the dilemma between assent and denial, responsibility and non-commitment, imagination and reason. However, it seems surprising that such an age that bewildered the world with its force and intelligence that opened new perspectives upon the inner logic of things vertically articulating a sense of being and perceiving had a rather reserved, if not obtuse, attitude towards women.

The women of the nineteenth century gave a special dimension to Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope, for they sublimate time and space as universal categories into *the time and space of women*. When admiring the canvases of the time, suffice to look at women's eyes, at their posture to know that they simply do not belong to themselves, but to all the others that surround them and to whom they seem to be in debt - in debt with their life, with their unuttered words and unexperienced emotions. Always looking down, of simply staring farther away, always surrounded by domestic objects in an almost ritual-like attitude, these women live the life of their husbands, children, parents, paying little, if any, concern for their own. Blank eyes, staring off into the distance, in search of a million questions or of no questions at all, this is what painting and literature seem to breathe with all their lace of words, strokes and shades.

Evermore symbolic seems to be the fact that it was the feminine intuitiveness and innate insight into the very deep seas of their own selves that developed an almost pioneering exercise of psychoanalysis. If we look into the lives of three women Impressionists, Marie Bracquemond (1840–1916), Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) and Berthe Morisot (1841–1895), we will see that they negotiated not only personal challenges but also those posed by the conventional ideas of acceptable behaviour for the women of their time. Mary Cassatt, the only American lady of the Impressionist circle, enjoyed considerable financial independence that allowed her to travel extensively and attend the art schools she wanted; as a result, Cassatt rejected the idea of becoming a wife and mother and embraced her independence as she forged a successful career painting women as *subjects, not objects*. At the antipodes stands Marie Bracquemond's career that was unrightfully discouraged by her husband, the artist Felix Bracquemond, the one who compelled her to stop painting. These are the times that by simply, at first, photographing, then plunging into the feminine soul, almost X-raying its inner folds and scars, project a new perspective upon the way women perceive the world, and the world perceives women. Both approaches fall under the same common denominator – the idea of self as the very core of one's personality, God's gift to all human beings.

The perspective we would like to open is that of a synesthesia of arts, and what better echo but the 'voice' of Charles Dickens's and his most famous beginning of *A Tale of Two Cities*: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair [...] (Dickens, 1994).

Those were the times when the sisters of Scheherazade, the long forgotten and silent voices of the century began contemplating their inner tower of ivory and dare utter their thoughts and wonder. Interestingly enough, the echo of their voices was hosted by the second greatest age in the history of the British Isles, who, equally surprising, bears the name of a woman, a name of symbolic reverberations – Victoria.

In 1837, when 18-year-old Victoria became queen, no social outlook was more widespread and deeply rooted in Britain than patriarchal authoritarianism. It pervaded the age's novels, poetry, and academic tomes, as well as the speeches and editorials of its politicians and journalists. It was almost an instinctive reflex of the wealthy and powerful that ruled Britain, owning and running its economy, and who based their creed on the assumption that social should be authoritarian, hierarchic, almost organic. Patriarchs command and expect to be obeyed, and by patriarchs we understand fathers, kings, bishops, and landlords, all epitomes of ultimate and supreme instances. Patriarchs were not reformers. They had no hope of remaking the world. The humanists, following Aristotle, found the origins of 'the patriarchal state' in the 'extensions of the family,' a patriarchal state in which, said Elyot, 'all property is [...] a trust of God' (Dunham and Pargellis, 1938). But all these things are about to nuance. In terms of geometry, such patriarchal pattern fully overlaps the arrow-shaped contour of the pyramid, in fact, the very symbol of power, authority and mightiness. If the profiles of this pyramid grow dim, also accounting for women's choice of no longer denying themselves the right not merely to exist but to live, is by no means a question of coincidence. In order to analyse the complex phenomena that shape the profile of a uniquely immense age, it is important that we consider the geometry of power that has diluted the dominant silhouette of the pyramid into the more overt space of the circle, the agora-like amphitheater where voices are heard and opinions articulated. Patriarchs were at the top of the pyramid and it is this pyramid that is about to change into the spherical body of the circle. We can analyze the dissolution of angles and their melting into the spherical embrace of the circle from the perspective of another deconstruction, operating with the terms proposed by Jacques Derrida. The French philosopher advocates that any given structure, in our case the social pyramid, the historical geometry of power with God-anointed monarch at the very top, can evolve towards a different shape, in what Derrida calls the play of substitutes (Derrida, 1965). If philosophy encapsulates phallogocentrism, fiction is an invagination, namely a creation of differences where no term spells self-sufficiency. Thus, whereas philosophy may be seen as the very core of the canon, literature builds a bridge for women to challenge the vastness of terrains of male utterance.

The fiction women wrote was a cathartic exercise through which not only have they articulated their own identities, but they have also echoed their silent voices into the much wider symphony of the world; it is as if women have discovered their vocal cords, and with them, their right to existence and recognition. Resembling the mythical mermaid, the *écriture féminine* of the nineteenth century allured a whole world into acknowledging its song, a song that first of all told the story of female self and claimed its part into the Victorian chorus of voices.

Detached from the myth of the androgynous, overwhelmed by the centuries of subdued complementarity, yet not fully articulate in conjugating their identity, women have made literature the reflection of their journey towards (dis)covering the real *self* of the *other*, in one of the most powerful exercises of outlining the profile of budding womanhood. With an age that came to assert a crushing identity of its own, spanning its core substance over the two 'shores' it brings together, the realm of patriarchal *logos* and the realm of *logos* itself, also came the splendid metamorphosis of what used to be female ignorance into, first of all, female acknowledgment and finally, proud recognition of female identity. The puzzling issue is whether she, the lady author, comes to speak the *logos* of men, or if it is the silence of women that utters the language and music of the female self. Is 'speaking as a woman' a fact determined by a series of biological predetermination, social impositions, culture, the moment knowledge comes through figures of light, penetration, unity, mastery, figures that have always defined and spelled masculinity? Who were the lady novelists of the nineteenth century writing for? Were they writing for themselves? Were they writing to persuade? Were they attempting to compete with the masculine hegemony? I dare say that they wrote in order to be perceived as that *other*, though not evil spirit, or charm, but as another robust profile, an equally valid member. In our opinion, they spoke and wrote in the name of their own self, in a double exercise of recognition and discovery - -recognition from the patriarchal authority and discovery of their own self. Once Penelope stopped weaving herself into the twisted threads of her fabric she could sail the seas of the world, wind in her hair and dreams in her mind. Thus, this dissertation came to tell a story, one of many, about women writers engaged in 'battle for self-creation' against an overwhelmingly powerful patriarchal hegemony.

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