

The Missionary Position: A Reading of the Mystic Woman in Lacan's Seminar XX

Méira Cook

Les séminaires de Jacques Lacan sur la sexualité féminine en général et sur la statue de sainte Thérèse d'Avila de Bernini en particulier constituent des exemples parfaits de discours qui ne donnent pas la chance à leur interlocuteur de répondre. Cook fait une relecture de la position du missionnaire à travers l'articulation de l'orgasme de sainte Thérèse. Provoquée par le regard de l'homme, la femme se voit refuser l'organe phallique, cette fois le regard sur le phallus plutôt que le phallus lui-même. Il y a une absence du regard mâle (Lacan, en se positionnant en voyeur, projette sainte Thérèse hors de sa vue), ce qui implique que les textes de Lacan sont en cela performatifs et pervers. Cook interprète cette performance non pas comme une représentation de la jouissance féminine mais comme un effort pour réorienter le regard du corps matériel vers le corps textuel et du corps textuel au construit social.

Between 1972 and 1973 Jacques Lacan gave two seminars: "God and the *Jouissance* of ~~The~~ Woman" and "A Love Letter," and it is these two texts that make up the central chapters of Lacan's Seminar XX, *Encore*. These seminars take up the question of feminine sexuality raising the demand for an understanding of femininity which is not confined to phallic signification. Perhaps Lacan's most notorious statement in these seminars is that "The Woman" does not exist since the sexual relation, which is itself inexpressible, is dependent upon a fantasy of oneness which the woman has come to support:

The woman can only be written with *The* crossed through. There is no such thing as *The* woman, where the definite article stands for the universal. There is no such thing as *The* woman since of her essence – having already risked the term, why think twice about it? – of her essence, she is not all. (144)

Lacan crosses out the definite article in his title in order to de-essentialize

the noun (woman) and to draw attention to the problem of naming as well as to designate 'her,' the woman, as occupying the relationship of *jouissance* or supplementarity to the phallic function. Since "The Woman" does not exist, since phallic sexuality assigns her to the position of fantasy, Lacan is in the enviable position of hallucinating or fantasizing this "not woman" from the precarious position of the subject who is supposed to know.

Now I don't think this is necessarily the case at all but it would be well to take into account feminist objections to the Lacanian position that the woman can only be represented through negation, she is the "not-one" (*pas-une*) of the phallic structure of language. Following Freud, Lacan argues that sexual difference is inscribed in language via the phallus both as an instrument – if you like – of gender construction and of signification. Consequently, while the woman in this scheme is figured as a remainder, a negation, that which is left over after the phallus, her sexuality is figured as excess, as *jouissance*, as *encore*, that which exceeds the phallic term which is the mark of sexual identity. As Lacan puts it with typically provocative insight:

There is a *jouissance*, since we are dealing with *jouissance*, a *jouissance* of the body which is, if the expression be allowed, *beyond the phallus*. That would be pretty good and it would give a different substance to the Woman's Liberation Movement. A *jouissance beyond the phallus...* (145)

The woman then who is "less than," who is defined, at worst, by the signifying function of the phallus is at the same time in possession of a sexuality that is "more than," that is in excess of the phallus's ability to represent, control, or satisfy her. It seems to me that this hybrid, this less than / more than woman who both lacks yet exists in excess of any lack is in fact the mystic woman, St. Teresa, of whom Lacan speaks at the end of the seminar.

In the *Encore* seminars Lacan articulates woman's relation to *jouissance*, and while, as Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose point out, this is a question that can easily lapse into an essentialist mystification of woman as site of truth where Lacan may be accused of being complicit with the fantasy he is trying to expose, it seems apparent that he is as concerned to expose masculinity as a similarly constructed category of *méconnaissance* (mis-

recognition). In other words, that the male (as lover, as viewer) can believe himself whole merely because “male” signifies that which opposes itself to female. In this case the man, like the woman, is defined by the Other; both inhabit language, marking it with the desire that is in itself the trace of what is lacking.

I will come back to this question of what is unrepresentable in language as in love, but first I want to point out that in *Encore* “the man” is as much a hybrid construct as Lacan’s female subject. Through a certain arrogance of rhetoric as well as in his position, firstly as writer and later – when he comes to view the image of St. Teresa, the mystic – as voyeur, Lacan seems to be performing the role of chauvinist. He speaks of women in the third person, referring to “them” and “her” and seeming to imply that even her desire is a mystery to her:

There is a *jouissance* proper to her, to this “her” which does not exist and which signifies nothing. There is a *jouissance* proper to her and of which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences it – that much she does know. She knows it of course when it happens. It does not happen to all of them. (145)

In other words, while “she” may be traversed by the effects of pleasure she is unable to either understand or articulate this pleasure; she is merely the conduit for the *jouissance* that convulses but fails to convince her.

On the other hand – and one must always read Lacan with two hands – a mere paragraph later, Lacan confesses himself honestly bewildered by the enigma of female sexuality, taking up the Freudian catechism “what does a woman want?” with ever more hysterical (and I use this word advisedly) emphasis: “Ever since we’ve been begging them, begging them on our knees to try to tell us about it, well, not a word! We have never managed to get anything out of them” (146). His conclusion is that since she won’t tell the secret, since she won’t articulate her *jouissance*, confess to her pleasure, since she is resolutely silent on the subject, her silence betokens ignorance; she has come, yes, but without knowing it.

In fact, this conclusion fails to convince except perhaps in the Cassius-doth-protest-too-much category. All this talk of begging, “begging on our knees” says Lacan with no small hint of bitterness, seems to imply the suspicion, no matter how small, on the part of the psychoanalyst, that “she” experiences *jouissance*, knows that she is experiencing it, could articulate it

but chooses not to. I'm being a little flippant, of course, and while I don't think Lacan's seminal insight that "she comes without knowing it" can be entirely reduced to the sour grapes category, it provides us with a small opening or crevasse by which to approach the subject of the hybrid male in this text, the man who is both sincerely puzzled by female sexuality and overtly, even arrogantly, knowing: the male subject as writer, lover, and viewer who seems to know more than the woman – even if all he knows is that she comes without knowing it – yet who nevertheless suspects that he is not being told the whole story, that something is being kept from him.

I hope these two hybridized constructions of gender in Lacan's text begin to break down the binaried polarities he is sometimes accused of propagating. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan points out, Lacan's masculine subject is an inhabitant of language and consequently as marked by deficiency and unknowing as ~~the~~ woman. Indeed, since gender fictions are themselves based on the illusion of a coherent subjectivity it may well be that, as Ragland-Sullivan suggests, "woman is man's symptom of a refusal to believe he is not whole" (7). If identity is a gendered set of fictions, then the assumption of a gender identity is dependent on fantasy and projection, and it is here that I would like to situate Lacan's hallucinatory image of the mystic woman, St. Teresa of Avila. Towards the end of his seminar, Lacan experiences a vision of his own which he articulates as follows:

you only have to go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that she's coming, there is no doubt about it. And what is her *jouissance*, her *coming* from? It is clear that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it. (147)

I describe this excerpt from Seminar XX as a vision because it is so immediate, so – for want of a better word – visual, perhaps because Lacan directs us to the Baroque sculpture of Teresa of Avila by Gianlorenzo Bernini, and perhaps because Lacan's citing of this pictorial representation of the female mystic is so sudden and spontaneous and is imbued, it seems to me, with the perverse energy of the unconscious. (But that's just speculation...)

The Baroque sculpture of St. Teresa of Avila at her moment of ecstasy after the angel has withdrawn his golden arrow from her breast is part of the tabernacle of the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome (1647-52). Combining, perhaps for the first time, architecture, sculpture

and painting in *un bel composto* Bernini placed his tableau of the ecstasy on a marble altarpiece surrounding this with polychromatic decorative motifs that transform the shallow chapel into a depiction of heaven. As well, Bernini grouped sculpted busts of his patrons, the eight Cornaro men, in the niches of the chapel. Paradoxically, he shows them discussing and meditating upon an apparition – St. Teresa – set deliberately beyond their sight lines, thus illustrating the biblical encomium: “Blessed are those that have not seen, yet believe.”

In his seminar, Lacan reads the woman, Bernini’s St. Teresa, as a female orgasm constituted by the male gaze. The text is itself a scene, a theatre that embodies the spectacle of desire. Here the male viewer is in possession of the signifying organ, not the phallus but the eye, the scopic field. As for the woman she does not have it, and furthermore does not know that she does not have it. Seeing, the metaphor of the male gaze, is in this sense nothing but an acknowledgment of the position that she has nothing to see.

In a rhetoric that is arrogant, manipulative, by turns seductive and pejorative, Lacan, in the assumed position of the subject who is supposed to know, tells the woman what she knows: that she doesn’t (know / come / speak / see). The female, played by *jouissance*, “the woman” who is supplementary to the phallic function, comes without knowing it. Like the mystics, her testimony is a double scandal. In this way Lacan situates himself in the position of Bernini’s patrons in the niches of the Cornaro chapel. While watching the female mystic “come” he performs his own anxiety with regard to the *jouissance* of the woman.

Where do we position ourselves in the Bernini text – as subject or as viewer, as the woman having a fantasy of God or as the spectator having a fantasy of the woman having a fantasy? And where, given the duplicity of his performance, do we position ourselves in Lacan’s text?

I read Lacan’s seminar as both performative and perverse. My position as a female reader demands this *méconnaissance*, this (mis)reading of the text as an elaborate ploy, a performance of the assumption of the phallic position. In this way, Lacan’s anxiety is foregrounded in his relocation of the orgasm because if the woman can come without him (albeit without knowing it) then what of the signifying function of the phallus? Bernini’s figure of St. Teresa is peculiarly suited to locate the male writer’s anxiety because it breaks the traditional feminine binary. Neither whore nor virgin she is at once both, so that the male viewer loses his phallic position (his

erection) in the text. In his avowal in this seminar that there is a *jouissance* beyond the phallus, Lacan stages the mystic body as the relocated site of pleasure, that place where silence and confession intersect. In this seminar Lacan asks how to write other than as a phallic subject. His implicit reply: as a subject of surplus, of *jouissance*. But since this place belongs to the woman, we must read his text as an invocation of a possible position for the feminine in language. In this sense the seminar is a performance of the phallic position – Lacan, like Bernini, taking the missionary position, converting us *against* the phallus by speaking through the hegemony of masculine discourse.

In the end we are still confronted with the woman convulsed, transformed by her coming into knowledge, into language, into bliss. Her face, in the book in which Lacan publishes his “love letter,” *Feminine Sexuality* (edited by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose), is photographed and reproduced in tight close-up. Eyes half shut, mouth half open, we are obliged to witness her mystic swoon – while Cardinal Federico Cornaro looks on from his niche – before we can read the seminars. His face is vigilant, alert, self-aware; hers is unprotected, transfigured, vulnerable to our scrutiny. Curiously, in this 1982 cover reproduction, St. Teresa’s body is deleted, censored, at any rate absent, in favour of the minute exegesis of her face with its play of unrepresentable pleasures. In a book that purports to theorize the meaning(s) of feminine sexuality, we are denied body, the body beneath its Baroque drapery that we know exists, and is as evocative of desire and its misalliances as the face.

Lacan himself describes the mystic’s face, the face of the Other, as “the God face ... supported by feminine *jouissance*” (147). What then is the function of this perverse insistence on the face in Lacan’s text? Is it perhaps to emphasize the gaze and its performed failure within Seminar XX? In Bernini’s sculpture as in the reproduction on the cover of the Mitchell / Rose edition of Lacan’s seminars, the convulsed face of St. Teresa is set deliberately beyond the sight-lines of the patrons of the Cornaro chapel. If the woman is coming without knowing then the men are watching without seeing. This seems to provide a wonderful paradigm for Lacan’s seminar where the male gaze of the viewing subject(s) and the female gaze of the viewed subject signally fail to intersect. In rearticulating the question “What does a woman want?” within this failure to meet the gaze of the Other, Lacan represents feminine sexuality as a mystery in excess of itself, an ironically unrepresentable *jouissance* (despite the lengths he goes to

force representation) but one that is impossible to interpret within binary opposition.

Toward the close of "God and the *Jouissance* of ~~the~~ Woman," Lacan exhorts his students, his readers, to take up what he calls the "mystical ejaculations" of the saints since it is "the best thing you can read" with the possible exception, he hastily notes, of the *Écrits* of Jacques Lacan (147). Since we have been talking of the failure of binary oppositions I would like to briefly discuss Michel de Certeau's *Heterologies*, in which he writes of the mystic speech of, amongst others, St. Teresa of Avila.

In *Heterologies*, de Certeau maintains that mystic speech originates from an essential split between the "I" and the "thou." His division precedes the binaries I have been discussing between male and female, life and writing, face and body. In de Certeau's reading, the *I* and the *thou* in mystic speech, the self and the Other, seek one another out, and in their yearning for what has been lost, create the spoken or written word within the convention of a listening God. From this the autobiographic "I" of the mystic emerges: vacillating, yearning, subjective, but destined to failure because of the impossibility of constraining the utterance in all its dimensions – spatial, phatic, oracular and acoustic – to the temporal narrative of the page.

It is for this reason that twentieth-century readings of the mystic inevitably fail (to greater or lesser extent – the range, at least, is extensive), and I certainly don't exclude my own reading from this list of necessary failures. The mystic's image-laden narrative, the interchangeability of her metaphors, acts to substitute "body" for discourse, for that which cannot be grasped except in effigy, and then only as the representation of something (somewhere) else. The body in the mystic's discourse fails as textuality, as figure of speech, because it cannot carry the burden of representation or the significance of the experience. My own reading, I suspect, has demonstrated only how in these texts – written, sculptural, architectural and verbal – narrative exceeds any possibility of fulfilment, just as the body exceeds the structures of representation.

At this point I would like to confess to my own vision, one that came to me on re-reading seminar XX on a rainy Vancouver evening with the sound of the refrigerator humming in the background and the kettle puffing itself into a discrete frenzy. I was tired and confused, turned the book listlessly over in my hands and was confronted, once again, by the cover with its close-up of St. Teresa's ecstatic face overlooked by the Mephistophelian but undirected gaze of Cardinal Federico Cornaro. My

identification with the swooning mystic St. Teresa was as sudden and shocking as my realization that I had unconsciously been associating the dapper Cornaro patron with my internal image of the man who had written the seminar – with Jacques Lacan. So there I was traversed by *jouissance*, or more likely weariness, under the unfocused gaze of the very subject who was supposed to know. And what did he know? Clearly that I didn't.

In an effort to transform indignity into indignation I opened my eyes, squared my shoulders, grew a seventeenth-century goatee and directed my gaze into the middle distance. Beneath me, on the page, a body swathed in billowing draperies formed and reformed. Like a photographic image coming into existence I recognized the blissful face of Jacques Lacan under the folds of St. Teresa's demure wimple.

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