

## (PLÄDOYER FÜR DIE SEXUELLE DIFFERENZ)

### A PLEA FOR SEXUAL DIFFERENZ

To every age, according to the German philosopher Heidegger, is given one principal issue to contemplate and come to terms with. For our own times, that issue may be the question of gender. Within that issue, what I want to discuss here is the current movement to sacrifice sexual difference on the altar of "humankind." Both women and men have suffered from this tendency; thus the question becomes an integral part of all therapeutic work, if the much-vaunted "I-thou relationship" of therapy is to be more than just an abstract concept.

In this essay I will try to deal with the *ethics* of sexual difference, as well as opening up the question of sexual differences themselves, since where these differences are concerned, we come up with as many open questions and uncertainties as there are answers and suppositions. By ethics I mean those general precepts and principles for living which have their basis in the idea of responsibility toward others, and toward the self. Needless to say, such an ethics does not exist and has not existed in a fully realized way in our culture, where gender relationship are concerned.

The format I will be using is that of a collage, a combination or montage of different verbal materials. These different materials consist of texts and fragments from antiquity and from the present, which are generally taken to comprise our culture. What I have done with this diverse material is to gather and then rearrange it, hoping thereby to disequilibrate the linearity of the sources, which is partly a matter of the confines of language itself, in order to give an image of the simultaneity of past, present, and future. My collage has the following tentative title: "the gendering of history, and of the present." The space where the ethics or basic assumptive set of values of gender difference itself should be represented, remains vacant.

#### Antigone and Creon -- the Fated Couple

This first image or representation lies far back in the past, in the realm of imagination, at the mythical moment of the dawning of a new order of things, a new system of thoughts and deeds which remains fundamentally unchanged down to present time. This is the tragedy of *Antigone*, by Sophocles. Let me briefly recapitulate the story. The royal couple of Thebes, Oedipus and Jocasta, had two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. When Oedipus realized that he had killed his own father and had sired these four children with his own mother, he blinded himself and left Thebes. Jocasta took her own life. With the king gone the question arose of who should be his successor. Eteocles and Polyneices resolved this in the familiar manner: each gathered his armies and went to war against the other. In the ensuing duel they killed each other, and Creon, brother-in-law to Oedipus, became king. So much for the background of the story .

The drama begins with the problem of burying the dead brothers. To Creon this is no problem at all, since he has already divided the world into bad and good, right and wrong, friends and enemies of Thebes. According to the new order of things, Polyneices, who had been declared an outlaw and had returned to take his inheritance by force, was to be denied the burial ritual, and his corpse thrown to the dogs. Eteocles on the other hand, who had stayed in Thebes and fought for his country, died a hero. He was to be buried with all the honours a hero deserved. "This is

my command,” said Creon, and of course his command was the law of the land.

Antigone, however, the dead brothers’ sister, sees things somewhat differently. Where Creon stands firm on the new ground of state authority, she follows the older divine commands. As she says to Creon:

... for it was not Zeus who published that edict, not such are the laws set among men by Justice... Nor deemed I that thy decrees were of such force that a mortal could override the unfailing statutes of heaven.

It is her higher duty to bury her dead brother, her mother’s son. Because she disobeys the laws of the state, Antigone is condemned to be imprisoned alive in a stone grave. Her response is to hang herself.

Antigone’s husband-to-be, Creon’s son Haemon, also kills himself when he learns of her death. Euridice, Creon’s wife, takes her own life as well, and dies cursing Creon as the murderer of their son. Only Creon remains to mourn the dead.

This tragedy was highly acclaimed during Sophocles’s lifetime, in the fifth century B.C.E. Particular praise was given to his careful portrayal of the various characters, the concentrated sequence of events, and the sophisticated plot. However, for our part we will now make a leap into more recent times, since the philosopher Hegel, one of the architects of modern dialectical thought, took Antigone as the literary portrait of the beginning of a new order of our culture. In his *Aesthetics* he praises *Antigone* as one of the markers of the transition from a nature-based society to the age of political states based on institutions and law, a necessary part of the inexorable progress of history .

Antigone defies the law of the state, and Creon defies the law of the family. The antinomy of the two principles, according to Hegel, is the essence of the tragedy. He goes on to say that each of them contains intrinsically and dialectically the seeds of its opposite; thus each is broken, finally, by that which is part of its own being. In other words, Antigone should have obeyed the law of Creon, while Creon should have respected the primeval holiness of the blood. Both do know in some sense about the other part of their character. On the stage of ancient Greece, the old and the new order are in perfect equilibrium, and at the same time we have the milestone, which signifies the transition from the ancient ways to the patriarchal order as we know it today. This new order requires hierarchies, in particular the hierarchical structure between men and women. As Creon says:

Now verily I am no man, she is the man, if this victory shall rest with her and bring her no penalty.

The matter is clear. First the public image of the man has to be preserved, and second we have here the equation of the preservation of the order of the state, with the role and identity of the man. This is of course no longer Hegel’s interpretation, although he did make the observation that the daughter who follows the laws of her mother has to be excluded from the town, the society of the time. She is not to be actively killed, but her freedom is to be taken away.

By nature, the laws which Antigone would obey are the cultural responsibilities to the blood of the mother. Blood which is shared by sisters and brothers of the same family implies certain duties. These duties are forbidden when patriarchal culture takes over. The daughter is no longer allowed to honour the ties with her mother. Rather, with the advent of patriarchy she is separated

from the mother, and from her family generally, supplanted as she is into the genealogy of her husband.

Mythology mirrors this event, and shows the consequences of the separation as well. When Hades, god of the underworld, takes Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, by force, the mother goes on strike, so to speak. Since she is goddess of fertility her action throws the earth into barrenness. Even Zeus, who had known and approved his brother's plans, cannot change Demeter's mind. She will not give in until the bond between mother and daughter is (partially) restored, and they can see one another again. Mother and daughter need to remain in contact, and when this is reestablished, the natural cycle can start up again. Thus the myth of Demeter and Persephone still contains the traces of the old knowledge with regard to this connection, even as that knowledge is increasingly forgotten, replaced by the presumed necessity that the two of them must be separated by a man. This separation still prevails, through the imposition on the woman of the new identity of wife.

The myth of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia is yet another step on the road to patriarchy, by the placement of the emphasis of the story on Clytemnestra's act of "betrayal," the murder of her husband Agamemnon, an event described in horrifying detail. Agamemnon was the leader of the expedition to Troy, along with Odysseus, Menelaus, Achilles, and the other traditional Greek heroes. But before they could set sail, he had offered his daughter Iphigenia as a blood sacrifice in order to influence the winds in their favour. When he returns home years later, a slave woman in tow (the prophetess Cassandra, possibly his mistress by force), he finds the royal household slightly changed. His wife, instead of doing the noble, wifely thing of waiting patiently for his return, had taken a lover, and together they kill Agamemnon on his first night home. In my reading, she is also taking revenge on her husband for the murder of their daughter, who had to be sacrificed for supposedly higher aims -- but this is not the traditional emphasis of the story .

Rather, what we find in the traditional story is the affirmation of the patriarchal order, as Orestes, their son, then kills his mother to avenge his father, and ultimately is absolved of all guilt for what under the old laws would be the most horrible of all crimes. The goddess who speaks up for him, not surprisingly, is the motherless Athena, born of Zeus himself after he eats her pregnant mother for fear of her giving birth to a son who would be his father's rival.

In other words, woman has done her duty, and is no longer needed. Historically speaking, the slow and steady devaluation of the structure of relationships based on the maternal line in favour of the paternal corresponds to the privileging of projective and conceptual/analytic thinking, over older modes. This way of thinking then reifies and redefines the sexual differentiation of nature and fits it into imagined and abstract concepts of difference. A vital part of this conceptualized difference is the privileging of the relationship between father and son, over all other relationships. In relation to the question of gender, we find that this reduction to a single (male) genealogy constitutes the first obstacle to a true ethics of couples, a system of values based fully on mutual responsibility -- running directly counter as it does to the affirmation of the needs, wishes, and characteristics of the two sexes.

At this point sexual difference itself is subsumed into the so-called "human," and into the single gendering of discourse itself. These are some of the building blocks of an image of the world which claims to mirror reality. In reality, I am arguing here that this is nothing less than a paradigm which creates and maintains (not mirrors) a reality which accords with its own terms and image. The introduction of gender as an analytic category, as we are doing here, then serves to reveal the historical context and bias of all these findings and claims, and at the same time allows for a closer scrutiny of that supposedly neutral (but actually male) abstraction, "mankind."

This leads us in turn not to a demand for “equality” in the sense of sameness or parity of the sexes, but rather for the recognition and appreciation of *difference*.

Every succeeding age has then explained and argued its own “gender apartheid,” as one German woman painter calls it, in terms of its own dominant ideology: theologically, medically, psychologically, militarily, and so forth. What they all have in common is that women always lack the essentials. Either they have no soul, too little ethical sensibility, not enough muscle, or possibly (especially since the turn of this past century) they lack the libido. By contrast the “human being,” who unites all these qualities in abstract form, comes into existence around the middle of the 18th Century. Anthropology, the study of “mankind,” played a vital role in this conceptual creation, as it struggled from the first with the problem of gender: on the one hand there was the idea of “the human,” and on the other hand there was woman. In general this process of neutralizing or neutering was completed by the middle of the 19th Century: man and only man would form the basis for what from then on would be called the modern “human being” of the “humanities.”

Patriarchy by definition does not attempt to include the sexual differences of nature and experience in its thinking. Moreover, the ideal of (male) mankind is reflected within a discourse which pretends that its messages and its structure are gender-neutral. However, when we analyse this discourse more closely, we find that we are dealing constantly with the equation that Male = True = Valuable. God is male in most current languages, and we find as well that the origins of the neuter gender in most languages often lie in that eradicated sexual difference. All the cosmic phenomena, for example, were once attributes of the various gods and goddesses, who were then neutered into impersonal forces. Another example is the legal system, under which “one” is or is not allowed, and so forth -- all of which covers up the fact that men and only men were the “ones” who made the laws and determined what was and is social order and duty.

### Paradigm Change and Consequences

The fallout of this gender-indifferent generalization has, in my opinion, become a problem for both sexes. On the one hand the patriarchal paradigm established the power of males to define and give meaning; on the other hand it resulted in a re-fabrication of both, male *and* female. This re-fabrication then takes the place of experienced sexual difference. At this point I find myself faced with the following question: how is it that the extreme discomfort which surrounds the *ideas* of maleness and femaleness is mainly experienced by women, and how is it that this profound re-defining of our sexual identity seems only or mainly to be of interest to women and not men?

Let me give two examples to demonstrate what I am talking about. One example is historical, the other one from our present. The change of real woman into an idea, an image of femaleness as seen from a male eye, finds expression in the figure of Carmen, a fictional creation of Prosper Merimee from the middle of the 19th Century. She is exactly the archetype of the kind of woman who not so long before would have been declared a witch and burned alive. Only here this “devilish woman,” born of a man’s imaginative power, far from being simply evil, is the embodiment of real life, pulsating nature and sensual reality. In short, the ultimate embodiment of the male misunderstanding and fantasy of female eroticism and sexuality. Carmen thus represents aversion of “the feminine” which renders the woman herself utterly superfluous. I agree with Christina von Braun, who looks at the consequences of this process and comes to the conclusion that the self-doubt of many women, particularly at a time when women’s rights have

been rediscovered and reasserted, can be traced back to this conflict, in which women cannot distinguish between their image of themselves and the male projection of femininity which needs to be incarnated in them.

Can this *mutatis mutandis* not also be said about men? Where is the discomfort with man-made images of masculinity, the production of which has long since replaced experience, and does not involve any individual man? And yet all these images demand realization in actual individual men (and women). To be sure, this premature subsuming of sexual difference into the abstraction “mankind” serves to cover up the hierarchical structure of gender relations, and certainly this process has been greatly at the cost of women. But is it really an advantage for individual men? Is it not also true that the process of linguistic neutralisation and objectification leaves its traces and distortions in both women *and* men? Is it really only women who are required constantly to translate a language which, in its abstractions and generalisations, does not reflect sexual difference?

Now to the second example. This one I find in the pages of the *British Gestalt Journal*, where I read an interesting correspondence among three men. Their names do not matter here, since what concerns me is a more general point. In these letters and answers the authors write with great care and well-argued points about the issue of I-thou. They write about therapeutic relationships and discuss a vital question: namely, are the *roles* of therapist and client always part of the therapeutic meeting? While reading, I find myself wondering, how does this “I” in the letters understand itself? Does it see itself as male, as human, how does it experience itself, and does it also presume to speak for me, a woman? And more: how does this “I” imagine the “thou” it writes about? And why is the question of gender not worth mentioning at all in this context?

I do have a very clear request at this point: sexual identity needs to be included in our reflections, particularly when the issue written about is explicitly the dialogic relationship. Particularly in those texts which deal with the I-thou relationship, one can detect a discrepancy between the content, which talks about an incomplete “I” which needs a “thou” in order fully to become an “I,” and the formal structure of the discourse, which implies very much the opposite. If we assume that our discourse integrates language according to the laws of logic and grammar, and if we further assume that the structure of our discourse no longer contains the sexual distinctness of the speaker (but instead produces an artificial, abstract other), then it would seem to me that every text dealing with dialogic relationship needs to reintroduce sexuality explicitly. If that were done, we could create a space, an in-between, where desire could be at home. This desire can only be where there exists an awareness of one’s own sexual identity, where the “I” experiences itself as complete, through a fully owned need for a relational other. This “I” would truly desire to meet the other, in a real meeting, since it could not produce that other by reason or abstract logic from within itself. The acknowledgement of and identification with one’s own sexual position would render every hierarchy and every domination of the other superfluous. All this will of course be a long process, but I do think it is essential, if we are interested in real meetings. Otherwise, taking the present status quo only a small step further, we will end by creating a situation in which people are completely self-referential, creating their own “thou” out of themselves.

Astonishment -- the first passion

The steps along the road to this process will surely be different for men and women. However,

the necessity of creating a true ethics of sexual difference has long since been agreed upon, at least from the point of view of women's studies, as well as in literature. The differences are in how the respective ideas are represented, and how they are expressed. The short text *Les Guerilleres*, by the Belgian writer Monique Wittig, offers a remarkable example. The idea of the text is utopian, a collective where women from different countries, taken out of mythology and history, all live together. There is no coherent narrative, no chronological structure, and no logical thinking. This last point in particular is quite telling: whenever any one of the women begins to draw logical conclusions, they all fall asleep. Here the genealogy of women and the history of women within patriarchy are being kept alive and remembered as knowledge by women, about women. Then comes war, the women fighting men. When the war is over, the new society consists only of the women and the young men.

The utopian conclusion is interesting, in that it holds the seed of a reality created by both women and men. The first thing they all do together is to name and re-name everything that surrounds them. The former reality, which was exclusively female, was changed the moment men became part of it, and so they need to find a new terminology for everything which had already been signified. In other words, they do not impose a single language with all its history and all the meaning it already contains upon the new social members --in this case, men. They do not create a hierarchy of terminology. Rather, Wittig's text anticipates a process of re-naming which does not operate on the principle of inclusion and exclusion, or the negation of one reality and experience. The old names contained the history and memory of the women, now replaced by new names which contain the history and memory of both men and women. They acknowledge each other not so much in the name of equality, but in the name of identity.

This of course is easy for them to do, since this is a work of fiction; and yet I think the possibility of something new does shine through. As they are re-naming their reality, both women and men assume the position of a positively defined place. This positively defined position is a prerequisite for the new step they are taking toward the other, and for withdrawing from the other as well. In other words, it is the prerequisite for contact.

In Hegelian terminology this means that both sexes can be in the position of "*an sich*," or existent in its own right. From there, each would have to take it upon itself to create the relationship with the other. Until now, the position of "*an sich*" for women has been only in the negative. What one is, the other is not. To focus on the creation of a positively defined space, beyond attributed values, means that women cannot help but undermine the dominant discourse. It also means that female genealogy as the source of female identity has to be revived in order for it to appear on the level of symbol.

The subjective identity of woman is by no means the same as that of man. To reduce the mother to an object in order to find one's own identity by way of difference and distinction can be useful as a process -- if it is useful at all -- only for the emergence of male subjectivity. For women this process is quite different, since the other the woman becomes subject in relation to, the mother, is identical to her in sex. Women cannot reduce the mother to an object without reducing themselves to an object. The Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray comes to the conclusion that women have to be able to express themselves within an *intersubjective* relationship with their mothers, and with other women; and they must find the language, the imagery, and the symbols for the task. This is necessary not only for themselves, but also in order to avoid a mutually destructive relationship with men. We must make space for the development of the particular structure of female identity. We need to learn about it, and we need to cultivate and develop it: this is absolutely essential for the creation of a sexually differentiated culture. One of the

requirements for this is that the mother-daughter relationship be supported, not denied or destroyed. This means also that the daughter not be required to leave the mother in order to love the husband, and become part of his genealogy at the cost of her own bond with the mother. The constituting of sexual identity needs the genealogical relationship with one's own sex, and the honouring of both sexes. For this to develop, we need valid erotic concepts, not the neutralisation of sexual identities that we see happening around us.

Where men are concerned, they need to work on a male identity which sees itself beyond "masculinity," which has been hierarchical (or "human," in the sense of abstractly general). The constitution of an ethics of sexual difference must be based on this understanding of equality, not hierarchy, and then go beyond mere equality to a real sense of difference, of other. Only then can we come back fully into that first passion, which according to Descartes is the most important and fundamental. We find his thoughts on this subject in the book *The Passions of the Soul*, where he talks about it like this: when we meet an other for the first time we are first of all surprised, astonished, as we find that it is different from everything we know or what we assume. This astonishment will occur even before we decide whether we like this other or not -- in Gestalt terms, in the stage of predifferentiation or "creative indifference." The conclusion I draw from this is that therefore astonishment has to be the first of all the passions.

We need to find this passion again, since then everything will be new and for the first time. Applied to our theme here, this means that the man and the woman, the woman and the man, meeting as other, will always meet for the first time. They cannot be substituted or interchanged, one for the other. I will never be in the place of a man, and a man will never be in my place. We can identify with each other, but the one cannot be reduced to the other. I would like to close with the thoughts of Luce Irigaray, since my own hopes and wishes are embedded in hers:

Who the other is, what he is, I shall never know. But the other who shall always remain mysterious is that other whose sex is different from mine. The surprise, the magic, and the astonishment in the face of the unknowable must return to their origin: the place of sexual difference ... Astonishment will always look and see for the first time, and not reduce the other to an object. This has never happened between the sexes. It is this astonishment which maintains the irreducible other in the state of sexual difference, and creates between the sexes a space for freedom and attraction, holding the possibility of separating and being united as well.

*-- translated from the German by Renate Becker and Gordon Wheeler*