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# The Body Machine and Feminine Subjectivity.[1]

## Summary

*Ever since philosophy abandoned the concept of soul it has been difficult to define personal identity. For Freud identity had its roots in the body. But the body ego (considered as a system of drives) is captured in a system of dialectics with the other subject. When the subjective body and the objective body intercross, then the image of the body is produced, an image that changes following the development of child sexuality and that individuals model according to their own temperament and history. In communicational relationships with others, the body expresses that for which adequate words cannot be found. Freud calls hysterical symptoms “organ language”. But in the technological age the physiological body extends and strengthens itself with accessories such as the telephone and actual prostheses, like pace-makers or transplanted organs. Where then does Anzieu’s skin-Ego begin and where does it end? Cyberpunk science-fiction saw in advance the intimate connection between man and machine, as well as the production of androids, extracting from this hypothesis very interesting consequences. Instead of condemning biotechnology, Donna Haraway makes an effort to capture its aspects of emancipation and social utopia. Taken in by the great net of global communication, personal identity risks becoming dissipated into a thousand masks. What then does the unity of the subject consist in? In imaginative, mythopoietic creativity, which alone can contrast the depersonalization of globalization processes and the anonymity infused by the presence of technology.*

A myth crosses all of Western culture, inexhaustibly proposing again and again its enigma. The reference to Theseus’s fantastical ship in which he would return to Athens, substituting piece by piece the worn-out planks, is a frequent recurrence in philosophical works—for example, in the work of Michael Frede, wherein he re-evokes it to comment on Aristotle.[2] Let us propose, writes Frede, that all the parts of a Greek ship (nothing more than an oversized boat) are progressively replaced and that the worn-out planking is piled up on a beach. Now, the scholar asks himself, what constitutes the real ship? That which conserves nothing of the original material yet reproduces its form, or that which has been reduced to a pile of boards?

The answer which Frede attributes to Aristotle can only be one: the real ship is that which continues to sail because the substitution of the material components does not impugn on the identity, guaranteed by the essential form, that is, the soul. For us moderns the spontaneous response would be another: the real ship is the planking deposited on the beach because that is the body of the ship, its history.

But if we abandon the supposed evidence of things, we find ourselves faced with the enigma, never recomposed, of identity.

Starting with Locke’s *Essay on the Human Intellect* of 1691, identity sets itself as a problem once the concept of the sole, individual and universal soul is destroyed. The problem, as Remo Bodei notes, assumes the form of the trauma and of mourning: “what is left of me once my body is consumed by time and my ideas dissolve?”

This reflection carries a high level of emotionality because it confronts us with the unknown, “otherness”, and death not as other with respect to the known, sameness, and living, but as indissoluble reciprocal constitution.

## Identity is corporeal

What guarantees that I will nevertheless remain *myself* for the time, by now long, that runs between birth and actual age? What connects a new-born body weighing 6 pounds and measuring 30 inches with an adult body such as that which identifies me right now before your very eyes? Intuitively, I feel that I have always inhabited the same body, that I “am my body”. Yet many clues undertake to undermine this false evidence.

A few days ago an elderly relative of mine sent me some photographs he had come across in the attic, showing me in my first year of life. Faced with this completely extraneous baby, the assurance that that image was me did not succeed in overcoming a tenacious sense of non-belonging. Thus does discontinuity creep in, defiling it, in a supposed continuity. In that moment, I underwent an attribution of identity thanks to the memory held by someone able to guarantee that *that* body is *this* body, that then and now, as far as I’m concerned, coincide.

The possibilities at stake reveal the convergence of two phases of identification: on the one hand, the subjective body, in me and for me, and on the other, an objective body, which is dependent on the other’s glance, on his attributions.

The two dimensions converge to constitute the image of the body (Paul Schilder) whose unity is a structural and functional datum, as the *Gestaltpsychologie* demonstrates. We perceive ourselves not as the sum of single parts but as an organic whole whose form is already predisposed by an innate scheme that pre-exists, and might resist, perceptive data—as when a person who has lost a limb experiences a phantom limb which, paradoxically, s/he continues to feel, as though it still constituted a part of his/her organism. For instance, one might experience pain or itching in a foot not there anymore. And yet, integration is not acquired once and for all: fragmentation, expulsions and incorporations are always possible, for which becoming prevails on the static form. For psychoanalysis, the body is a libidinal surface, a force field, a screen of imaginary projections, a detour of identification. It is a path which follows evolutionary phases according to the transmigration of the libido in various corporeal zones. According to Freud, in fact, the libido is concentrated first in the oral zone, linked to sucking, and successively passes to the anal zone, later stabilizing the greater part of its energies in the genital area, the seat of adult sexual functions. Since whatever happens in the body is recorded by the mind through unconscious fantasies, the drive investments determine various configurations of the corporeal image. In the oral phase the oral cavity prevails, then that of the anus, and finally, in the phallic period, the erogenous zones of the penis and clitoris, fantastically analogous, to finish by differentiating, for the two sexes, into the convex and concave complementarity of the penis and vagina.

With respect to the anatomical-physiological maps however, there is always the possibility, at least in the imaginary, of shifts, deformations and substitutions, as revealed by the perversions which haunt a fantastical image of one’s own and others’ body to follow the desire. For the fetishist, for example, the foot takes the place of the penis which the female body lacks, and which would otherwise be felt as anguishingly castrated. Furthermore, the body image varies according to the mood and changes in conformity to the prevalence of affects and emotions, to such a degree that psychosomatic symptoms can be discerned in many cases, above all during child therapy, through self-portraits. Children being treated in hospital for serious forms of headache without any corresponding organic cause often draw themselves with enormous heads, expressing the psychic conflict through the deformed *soma*.

In a sense, the founding act of the psychoanalytic cure resides in the expression with which Freud translates hysteric symptoms into “body language”. Through symptoms, the body represents that which thought

cannot take in, but the opposite is also true: that the mind translates into discourse, into shared language, the pictograms of the body.

This relation of reciprocity is expressed very well by the titles of two famous books by the psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall, *Theatres of the Ego* and *Theatres of the body*, where the metaphor of the theatre refers to an interactive, mobile and living representation.[3]

But why, we can now ask ourselves, does psychoanalysis seek the truth of the body indeed not in the proof of its signs, but in the *Other scene*, that of the unconscious? Because the body, as Foucault teaches, is subjected to a regime of powers—medical, juridical, pedagogical, religious—which objectify it within multiple practices and discursive regimes which aim at knowing it in order to render it more and more suitable to social exigencies. We are thus dealing with a system of “know-hows” which are intrinsically transformative, technical.[4] But a body built in this way in turn interacts with the lived body and modifies it to its own image and likeness. It is therefore impossible to find a “natural” body, since we have always been inscribed in a cultural world, in a universe of language.

Different and various representations of the body are to be found in different epochs, according to the various social and cultural contexts and disciplines[5], in relation to which the body as life, as energetic field, retires, forced to that non-place which is the unconscious.

Whereas in the Middle Ages the body was considered the prison of the soul, the main cause of its dejection (the sins of the flesh), in late modern times it would seem that the contrary applies: the body has been kidnapped by the mind. Today, following the success of “word therapies”, we witness a true invasion of body cults: we want to rediscover a condition of bodily spontaneity, fullness and bodily creativity that had been cancelled out by the prevailing verbal codes, the dominating logocentrism of post-industrial society. But is a return to the origins, through procedures short-circuiting language, possible? Could it not be just another way, probably the slickest, of celebrating the eclipse of the body?[6]

We know that our own body, the body we live, is not a sanctuary secured away in an exclusive inwardness. It is ever in relation, and sometimes in conflict, with the world: on the one hand I am my body, I am always aware of it, I receive the messages it sends me on the other hand, I consider it an external object and therefore I experience it as something foreign to me. In this sense I am not my body because it has alienated itself in the request for recognition I make to the other. The surface of the water that reflected and duplicated Narcissus relentlessly separates him from himself, to the extent that the attempt to be reunited with an impossible unity turns out to be his death sentence.

In Freud’s model, the lived body is defined as an energy system: the drives, endogenous forces not quieted by escape behavior, force the mind to represent their needs, to keep up the representation of their somatic sources, objectives and means alive until satisfaction is attained.

In this way thought takes upon itself the “task” of representing the body in an effort to satisfy primary needs aimed mainly at survival. As I have stated, drives are partial, contradictory, anarchical, but the mind organizes them, puts them into a hierarchical order until it “builds” an image of the body which goes to make up the fundamentals of identity, so much so that Freud speaks of a corporeal Ego. “The Ego is primarily a corporal entity...”, he writes.[7] The ego is originally derived from sensations coming from the body surface, so we have a famous essay written by Brick entitled “The Function of the Skin in Early Object Relations”[8] and one by Anzieu, “The Skin Ego”[9].

### ***Crisis of the Skin Ego.***

The *Skin Ego* is a complex concept; it talks of an anatomical wrapping as the limit and barrier of contact between the inside and the outside, between psyche and soma. But in *Civilization and its Discontent* Freud had already noticed that this is a technique that has immensely broadened the power of the human race, its control over the world. “With the tools he came into contact with”, Freud writes, “man improves his motor

and sense organs—or he shifts the boundaries of their actions. Today it is possible to hear over the phone the voice of, say, a nephew who has moved to New York, reach him on board of a ship to see him, write to him in real time using the telegraph”[10].

Our motor organs offer us enormous forces that, like the muscles, can be put to use in different ways; furthermore, glasses can correct imperfections of sight, telescopes pry into immense spaces; the microscope overcomes the limits of the retina, while the camera fixes transient visual impressions, the gramophone auditory ones. In this way man has achieved the omnipotence and omniscience he once ascribed to the gods. “Man has become so to speak”, Freud points out, “a sort of prosthesis-god, truly great when equipped with all his accessory organs; these, however, do not form a single whole with him and occasionally give him trouble. We may take comfort, nevertheless, this evolution will not cease in the year of our Lord 1930.”[11]

It hasn't in fact ceased, and progress has been able to change the corporal model and, as a consequence, to make the identity limited by the skin-ego quite problematic.

Attacks to the identity of the body-ego come from transplants, and the metaphor of Theseus's ship is helpful in this case. We can in fact ask ourselves, pushing the issue to its extreme consequences: can a person who has undergone skin, corneas, tongue, liver, kidney and hand transplants (all these operations are currently possible) still be considered the same person?

We would immediately say yes, even though with this way of thinking we risk falling into a spontaneous Aristotelianism, unconsciously evoking the priority of the soul over the body. The organs received by the transplant patient do in fact embody a history: they have elaborated perceptions, they have been part of a body that lived through several experiences, and they have participated in a complex system of relations. What is inscribed in them, through a system of codification we know little about, is the plot of time. I am not sure whether a heart, torn out from one chest and put into another, bears no trace of the emotions that had made it at times beat more slowly, at other times frenetically, because of fear, joy, pain or hope. Passions always involve body and mind, this much we know, but we are unable to go through with the consequences of this now shared conviction to the end.[12]

In any case, the receiver does not remain neutral: he receives within himself not a thing but a person. The same is true for artificial insemination. Nothing can prevent whoever receives biological material from humanizing the event: to give a voice, a face and history to the donors, be they dead or alive. Studies on the psychological experiences of transplant patients are still scarce, but the difficulty of the task the mind needs to take upon itself, one involving first of all personal identity, is already becoming clear<sup>12</sup>.

For example, it seems that liver transplants take on specific meanings and connotations in the subjects who undergo this type of operation. The other's organ modifies the receiving body, inducing the mind too build a new personal identity. The operation involves a complex elaboration of the violence related to both the symbolic meaning of the organ, connected to strength, courage, daring, and to the actual circumstances, nearly always a mortal accident, which made the removal of organs possible. Nor is the donor's personality to be neglected, usually a bold, foolhardy young man, passing in a split second from the projection of his own future, typical of youth, to the stillness of death.

The transplant gives a sickly body, an identity made fragile by long illness, elements of vitality hard to harmonize or to insert in an often diametrically different life history.

However these are very special cases, even if in actual fact the symbolic effects of apparently symbolic practices are always vaster, because they change everyone's thoughts on the relations we have with ourselves and with others.

Much more widespread are the deformations induced upon the skin-ego by technological communication devices, real “accessory organs”, to use Freud's effective description of them. Many carry a pacemaker underneath the skin of their thorax; others benefit from cardiac valves or other “spare parts” that I shall not

list here. Yet they still feel they are themselves.

Outside the bounds of the medical field too we all now rely on technical aids, which are always becoming more and more incorporated: the tape-recorder, the Sony walkman, the cell phone, the Sound remote control, the interactive computer. We all carry around prostheses of mouth-ear communicational exchange as if they were wristwatches or handkerchiefs. But the majority of our technological extensions are optical: video, modem, Internet, e-mail, scanner. We interact with these in a transitional zone known as cyberspace, a meeting point between technology and human behavior.

### *The Enticing Net.* 13

So-called cyberpunk science fiction has already anticipated a human-computer connection taking place via neuronal axes and a time when robots would no longer be the automatons of “*Metropolis*” but rather the androids of “*Blade Runner*”. Yet we still think of the biological as in opposition to the technological. The U.S. Feminist movement led by Donna J. Haraway, philosopher, animal rights biologist, socialist activist, Foucault and Derrida scholar and author of the *Cyborg Manifesto*, provides us with a particularly interesting outlook in this sense<sup>14</sup>.

On the cover of the Italian version of the book we have an oil on canvas by Lynn Randolph that sums up the new cyborg identity. We see a young woman, who looks rather like Joan Baez, typing onto a computer keyboard connecting to her body via electronic circuits. Above her head an albino tiger stands out, its paws coming down to embrace her round the shoulders. The animal’s legs are made transparent by X-rays, while the woman’s hands are phosphorescent and slightly palmate like those of ET, expressions of a virtual corporeality. Fractals, mathematical formulae and atomic orbits are being drawn onto the black background, while deserted worlds lie before her. The uncanny mixture immediately brings across what the author means by “new subjectivity”: a going further than the nature-culture polarity, an identity made up of body-mind, animal-machine, inside-outside, an ego-world where the two poles interact productively.

Being firmly rooted in materialist tradition, Haraway believes that rethinking the subject means rethinking its corporeal roots. However, the body is not biological data, but a technological device built, as Foucault maintains, by the “bio-power” of society, expression of its will to know and to control. Technology is not “other” in respect to biology, but “it fulfils the biological destiny of human beings in such an intimate way that the organic and technical mutually complete each other and adapt to each other”.<sup>15</sup> The hybrid post-modern body makes up an illegitimate fusion between animal and machine. These may appear as paradoxes, but, at a closer look, many young people, and this will become more and more true as time goes by, spend the entire day at home teleworking: ten hours a day stuck in front of a computer, their eyes fixed on the screen, their fingers stretched out on the keyboard, their bodies constricted on an ergonomic stool, on which they are immobilized in a position of reverent genuflection. Thoughts bounce off the software onto the mind, swiftly flowing, unstable and temporary until they enter memory and from there transmigrate via a modem to another computer and the biosphere of Internet. The single individual of the late modern age often has a pet at his/her side, nearly always a cat, with which this volunteer hermit lives in continuous symbiosis: the cat is her/his transitional object, and as such is a representation of him/herself: the younger brothers she/he never had, the far-away mother, the indifferent lover, the friends who were absent when he/she needed them. At night, when costs are lower, these computing Ulysses become navigators. Once again, *Odyssey* dominates the Cyborg Imaginary. Our single never leaves his house, yet he can reach out to anywhere, find “travel companions”, lose them, find them again, lose himself. All this where, when? That is not important. Time and space, insofar as they are virtual, lend themselves to infinite variations. Actions are reversible, consequences can be cancelled; one may interrupt the sequence and pull out of the game at any time. For those who have crossed into the mirror, who have entered the screen, external time no longer exists. Death, when it comes, risks finding not finding anyone.

Equally evasive is the virtual identity of the navigator: he can put himself forward as male or female, old or young, rich or poor, fair-haired or dark-haired... everything is possible when there is no body, our first and

ultimate reality test. Ulysses's new journey does not have a final destination: Ithaca has disappeared into the void, Penelope doesn't live here anymore and the "mad flight" will never meet Hercules' Columns.

Donna Haraway incongruously maintains that her Cyborg is a feminist subject fighting for a Socialist utopia. Yet mutants have not only one sex, but two, three, one hundred, "n", as many as fancy can conjure up. Cyborg has no past, because soon procreation will take place exclusively using biotechnology and genetic engineering. It is true that U-topia means "no place", but the toponymy of nowhere too has maintained up until now an alternative relationship with the extant: with the so-called real world<sup>16</sup>. However, if we are not able to distinguish between reality and unreality, the opposition between the world we live in and the one we would like to live in fades away and becomes indistinct.

Within this framework, psychoanalysis constitutes an accusation against, and an answer to, the discomfort of civilization. To modern man, anguished by the evanescence of the body, the fragmentation of the ego, the precariousness of human relations, the plurality of roles, the abdication of the vertical, transcendent organization of the world, Freud suggests recovering his own biography, because the strings of the past prefigure the path to the future.

The patient who comes for analysis, Lacan says, brings with him a symptom to solve. The symptom, of which he knows not the cause, represents an enigma for him and forces him to face the most radical of questions: "Who am I?" To this the psychoanalyst has only one answer: "You are your history".

The narrating ego thus reunites around its subjectivity the scattered pieces of modern identity.

But our history is only partially retrievable. Differently from Oedipus Rex, guided in his investigation based on circumstantial evidence by Apollo, who predicts the future, and by Tiresias, who knows the past, we soon stumble on contradictions, blanks and inconsistencies in our attempt at recollecting events. Nor will things get easier in a world dominated by biotechnology, which brings into our lives, as is already clear, more and more widespread elements of anonymity. How will someone born in a bioengineering laboratory, out of the assemblage of desegregated and recombined genetic materials, ever be able to reconstruct his/her own genealogy? In one of his latest works, Freud already had a possible answer.

### ***The Narrating Ego and the Mythopoietic Ego.***

In "Constructions of Analysis", written two years before his death, in 1937, Freud suggests that, to fill the blanks in collective and individual history, one should produce, in the intensive field of transference, substitutive conjectures, fanciful elaboration, actual deliriums in some cases, even if moderated by congruence and likelihood, in order to be able to recover as far as possible the lost memories of a removed past.

Mythopoietic creation, subsidiary and marginal for Freud, who still believed in the resources of anamnesis, takes shape as the only possibility for post-humanism humankind to subjectivize itself, a humankind without a past or a future, more and more under threat from homogenization and from the muddle of the indistinct.

To subjectivize oneself means constructing an individual and/or collective grammatical subject reinstating humans at the center of their history, recognizing them as the leading actors of their own individual lives. At the same time this means admitting that one is a subject, in the passive sense of the word, subjected to limits and conditioning, recognizing oneself as finite and mortal. Outside this process, in whatever way it may take place, only the undifferentiated exists, along with the omnipotent, the indistinct of earliest childhood, what contemporary analysts describe as the empty Ego and Tustin calls "black holes" in her treatment of autistic nucleuses.<sup>17</sup>

At this point it would appear that the body, on which we had based our earliest and most evident reality, our guarantee for continuity in space and time, is lost. This is as if the body ego had left its place to the narrating ego. But it is not as simple as that. This is because the body itself has become the seat of mythopoietic

production, the surface on which to inscribe its determinations. This is especially true for women's bodies, as the syndrome called "anorexia" reveals.<sup>18</sup>

"The more the outline of my skeleton became visible", writes an anorexic, "the more it seemed that my real ego was emerging, as from an amorphous block of stone progressively giving birth to a beautiful sculpture".

Anorexic transformation acts out a series of rituals directed to finding again an identity overwhelmed by an endless amount of widespread, indirect but pervasive and intrusive social impositions. A flood of messages suggest to every woman how she should eat, move, dress, sleep, what she should or should not desire, what should or should not make her happy. Because the female body is the vehicle of most of these often contradictory forms of conditioning (consider TV commercials, street posters, fashion, photographic advertising), corporeal identity becomes a persecutor to annihilate by emptying it out. At the same time, paradoxically, the anorexic completes the Diktats of contemporary aesthetic and morals: not eating, going to the gym, moving a lot, dressing and undressing, looking in the mirror, weighing oneself, taking great care over the choice of food, reading cookery books, talking about recipes, thinking above all about oneself and making the body the empty temple of one's own monotheism according the motto: "You will have no other god outside the ego".

But why does the anorexic pursue such a counterfeited construction of corporeal identity, regardless of her suffering and in spite of her putting her own life at risk? What impels her to raise such solid, cold barriers against the world? There certainly is not a single answer because each case concerns a specific life history. But if we take identity as a way of managing relations between the inside and the outside, the ego and the other, drive energy and social needs, we can deduce several considerations from anorexia.

If the character armor, to use an expression of Wilhelm Reich's, that the anorexic puts up as a fence around her ego to protect it is so strong, it means that the risk of desegregation is particularly threatening.

The cyborg body forms a chimera (in biology the organic assemblage of elements taken from different species) with a high level of anguish. Contaminating the vital with the artificial, bringing down the barriers between man and man, man and animal, man and machine, cannot be something void of consequence. Futurist vitalism is not enough to comfort us in the face of a future that is becoming more and more threatening. We leave the survival of the human to thinking, to its extraordinary symbolic and mythopoietic abilities. But who does thinking belong to in the time of a globalization that is not only economic?

From their earliest age children who play with their computers are confronted with a fluid, plastic, mobile, reversible, impersonal reality. If one surfs the Net, one immediately notices that the virtual world is now wider than the real world and that no one controls data banks and archives, which feed on themselves and make up a Library of Babel that contains everything and therefore nothing. Faced with the danger of being broken up, dispersed, of making everything meaningless in the muddle of general confusion, the psychic apparatus protects itself in a merely defensive identity.

Identity becomes like being crucified to oneself, as with piercing, when a nail transfixes the tongue, a ring runs through the nose or penetrates the navel, deep cuts engrave the skin, burn marks scar it. Tattoos permanently trace on the skin the mysterious engravings of an unknown identity that affirms itself not in the meaning or sense of one's life but merely in a mark. Flesh, blood, pain are conjured up in an aseptic, frigid, anaesthetized and mechanized society, as an appeal for a life with no adjectives.

It is the weaker subjects in society, young people, women, who first devise forms of defense, ways of reacting. This unveils new problems relevant to identity, i.e. the humanity of humans.

Until now young people's protest had taken the form of rebellion, but to take place rebellion needs for there to be connections to cut, norms to infringe, solid identities to demolish, whereas it is not possible to rebel against the undifferentiated. Nothing therefore remains except the possibility of an individual, lonely initiation, which has one's own body as the only horizon. If we compare these metropolitan rituals with the

tribal rites of passage described by anthropologists, we notice that what is missing is the communitarian horizon: social participation, the reference to tradition, the developmental meaning of the trauma leading from childhood to maturity, from being marginal to belonging.<sup>19</sup>

In Western history, which is taken as beginning with the Greeks, there is no room for rituals contemplating violation of the body, injury or physical pain as something redemptive. Practices detrimental to somatic integrity have only made their appearance recently, perhaps in imitation of far-away cultures, introduced with immigration, mass tourism and the media. They are certainly one of the many effects of world homology, but this does not excuse us from analyzing their function.

## **New Identity Constructs**

Their function, in my opinion, leads us back to new constructs on identity. Identity has always been, as I stated in my premise, a process of mediation, bargaining, re-balancing between inwardness and exposure, the ego and the other, received attributions (country, religion, class, group, family, role) and pushes towards self-realization, individual achievement.

In this sense the great historical projects, political utopias, have up to now represented a powerful vector for aggregation and individualization. Within these, take the Socialist Movement for example, the heavy industrialization of early capitalism adopted a human form. Relations induced by production methods changed drastically in the labor movement, to become social practices and cultural production. The working class was able to consider itself as representing a project valid for all, as capable of changing the world. And even if that utopia never came into being, the man-machine relationship on the Taylor assemblage line, so effectively illustrated by Chaplin in *Modern Times*, resolved itself, for good or for bad, in favor of human beings.

In the same way we must try to understand what social relationships are implied by current production processes, mainly related to computer technology nowadays, and to think of how to work out forms of internal resistance to the technological system, so as to open up individual and collective creative spaces.

We often witness the devaluation of individual and collective identities, considered a conservative, inopportune re-emergence of the past, in favor of a panegyric in honor of “non-identity.”<sup>20</sup>

If this is true for ethnic, religious and regional claims, for selfish, self-centered particularism, we cannot evade making projects for new forms of identity, necessary to oppose the globalization of the world, the affirmation of single thought.

While subjectivity feeds on historical narration, identity is made up of a mythopoietic process that has never once and for all come to completion. In the former the symbolic prevails. Both in different ways represent forms of resistance to the powers that be, to the dynamics of assimilation. On this subject Foucault writes: “The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the struggle against exploitation coming into the foreground. Today the struggle against forms of subjugation, against the submission to subjectivity is becoming more and more important.”<sup>21</sup>

I think that this is a process that mainly involves women. Insofar as they are hysterics, they have always denounced social unease, the oppression of sexuality, of fancy, of desire. They have always been a discordant voice from the magnificent destiny of scientific progress. Any ideological mechanism has become in them an unwitting grain of sand. The female body has never entirely given itself up to social conditioning.

Furthermore, women are those who feel technological intrusion the most—for example in the way pregnancy and childbirth have been medicalized, in the introduction of methods of artificial fecundating, genetic engineering and aesthetic surgery. As well, female work prevails in the most highly computerized



activities, those that, as we have seen, dilute personal identity in the sea of endless communication.

As far as corporeal identity is concerned, I lay my hopes on our ability to remember how we were, to feel how we are, to imagine how we could be, in our sensitivity, emotions, passion as an extreme form of feeling.<sup>22</sup>

Traditional identity has dissolved, now a new one must be built, one that should be adaptable, multiple, tolerant, hospitable towards the foreigner and open to the new.<sup>23</sup> But we cannot forget that what persists in us is the desire for, possibly a nostalgia of, an identity that is auto-centered and self-sufficient, autarchic, static, peacefully natural and organic, closed inside itself, with no confrontations or clashes, that identity that Freud calls “primary narcissism”.<sup>24</sup>

This structural conflict sets nature against culture, the inside against the outside, the body against the psyche, the unconscious against the conscious, *parole* (speech) against *langage* (language). There is no doubt that this puts the breaks on the construction of the new, of the utopian. It is not, however, only a negative element, an obstacle to be removed, because it does in any case set up an antagonistic tension in respect to social anonymity, to the imposition of an identical identity for all, to the constitution of a single personality prototype.

The homogenizing process, which sees us as accomplices and victims, tends towards a totally void form of identity, which Wislawa Szymborska ironically compares to an onion.

The onion is something else.

It has no interiors.

Entirely onion

to its very onionness.

Oniony outside,

onionish to the core,

it could well look inside itself

with nothing to fear.

Within us the unknown, a wilderness

of skin barely covered,

infernal interiors,

violent anatomy,

but in the onion- onion,

not twisted bowels.

Naked again and again it becomes,

to the very end, and so on.

How coherent the onion is

and how successful.

In one there's the other,

in the main the minor,

in the next the following,

the third and fourth, that is.

A centripetal flight.

An echo composed in the body.

The onion, fine:

the world's finest belly.

It sings its own praise

wrapping itself in its own aura.

Within us-fat, nerves, veins,  
mucus and secretions.  
And we are denied  
the foolishness of perfection

*Translated from the Italian by Gianmaria Senia*

## Notes:

[1] This paper is a revised version of a speech held at the conference “The Faces of Identity” at San Servolo, Venice, March 20, 1999.

[2] References to Theseus’ mythical ship can be found in: Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume up to the contemporaries Blumenberg, Neurath and Quine. Michael Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

3 Joyce McDougall, *Théâtres du Je* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982); *Theaters of the Body* (London: Free Association Books, 1989).

[4] Alessandro Mariani, ed., *Attraversare Foucault* (Milan: Unicopli, 1997).

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[6] Cf. Armando B. Ferrari, *L’eclisse del corpo. Una ipotesi psicoanalitica* (Rome: Borla, 1992).

[7] Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, *SE*, XIX, p. 26.

[8] Esther Bick, “La funzione della pelle nelle prime relazioni oggettuali” in *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*, XXX, 3, pp. 341-355.

[9] Didier Anzieu, *L’Io pelle* (1974) (Rome: Borla, 1987).

[10] Freud, *SE*, XXI, p. 90 following.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 92. SilviaVegetti Finzi, ed., *Storia delle passioni* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1995).

[12] SilviaVegetti Finzi, ed., *Storia delle passioni*, op.cit.

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