Thinking Experience

An obstacle that I have encountered for some years now in philosophical work (and so in my being here), is that thesis typical of a certain kind of post-structuralism; according to this thesis, “woman” and “women” are words whose meaning belongs to the patriarchal culture, and would thus be an effect and a vehicle of sexist control. This seems to me to be a new way of cancelling out women. In the patriarchate, in order to have an existence, I had to conform to an image that was acceptable to male society. Now, however, it seems that in order to undo the patriarchate, I have to put brackets around the name that I give my humanness, which is woman.

This is paradoxical, as my interest in philosophy came about in the very act of being able to tell my philosophy teacher that I was a woman. I’ve already told this story. It was the early Seventies and one day he said to me, “Luisa, why do you side with the feminists? You are homo”. As soon as he said it, it was clear to both of us that this Latin name was a pure convention, a garment that he’d dressed me in with the best intentions; and that in reality, I was what we both sensed equally: a woman. I say, “in reality” not in the sense of naturalistic realism, which I learned to undo precisely thanks to him, Gustavo Bontadini. Rather, I say it in the sense of faithfully explaining one’s own experience by sharing it with the other, thanks to words.

If I believed in dialectics, I could also seriously consider denying that “I am a woman”, in order to reach, through the antithesis, a richer and more comprehensive idea of what I am. But I don’t believe that, or rather I don’t trust it: I fear that down that road lies feminism without women.

The question is more sophisticated than how I am presenting it, as we know. But that doesn’t change the terms of the question the way I put it, which is I do not intend to stray from that way of thinking in which things simply happen, women obviously exist and I am one of them.

Let it be quite clear that I am taking a political position, not a philosophical one. There are historical contingencies in which political action takes precedence: I consider it good philosophy to acknowledge and accept that fact. To my mind, there is a battle to be fought to defend realistic language against the sense of unreality that threatens our experience. Incidentally, that is the perspective from which I view Iris Murdoch’s work, both philosophical (Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature) and literary. A lot has been written on the theme of the sense of unreality which looms over experience, so I won’t discuss it at length. Let us consider the reasoning with which European politicians, weighed down by the inheritance of two World Wars and all that came with them, justify the increasingly casual bombing of civilians from 1999 onwards. We might guess that their minds are empty of living beings, and reason as though houses and cities were themselves unpopulated.

It could be argued that I am confusing destructive post-modernity (war) with the deconstructions that are employed by certain schools of critical thought. I would answer that I’m not confusing the two totally, but that yes, I am partially superimposing them. Figuratively speaking, in my point of view post-modern critical thought “keeps company” with the profound changes that are happening to civilisation, with all of their destructive features (I will skip over the historical analysis which would, however, be helpful), trying to shed the light of awareness on those changes. And,
because of this closeness, that thought is fatally contaminated, as used to happen to the better directors of mental asylums, who themselves became a little insane.
When invited to discuss the post-modern thesis of the symbolic inexistence of women, in the past I have said that it seemed to me to be a manifestation of philosophical hubris; in other words, a form of contempt for common sense, something which great philosophers have always managed to avoid. Not, therefore, a conflict with common sense, which could be productive, but one of those situations in which reasoning thought does not fit in, and becomes “futile thought”.

However, this line of reasoning, while it may be valid, does not extend beyond the requirements of a defensive argument. The symbolic deletion of women can also be seen in contemporary language. I am referring to Italy in particular. There, in contrast with the correct forms of the Italian language, it is becoming common practice to drop the feminine grammatical gender for titles and professions, such as *avvocata* (female lawyer), *ministra* (female minister), *sindaca* (female mayor). Or, alternatively, incorrect feminine forms are being coined, such as *vigilessa* (“traffic wardeness”), or *presidentessa* (“presidentess”). There are some women who seem to be afraid of the ridicule of the female gender, and there are men who can’t be bothered to learn its correct forms. So far, attempts to stem this drift towards undifferentiated language have not produced any results. In itself, the phenomenon might seem irrelevant compared with war or other forms of destruction such as domestic violence against women and children, or the new forms of prostitution. Yet it is not irrelevant, because all that is thought and language enters into a circle with what is real, as its interpretation (because let us remind ourselves that there is no reality in itself, separate and independent from thought, but there is a reality that becomes apparent and can be understood according to the mediations that it finds).

Therefore I agree with the writer Clara Sereni who, in the newspaper *L’unità*, establishes a direct relationship between the neutral-masculine titles used by women who have careers, and the domestic violence suffered by other, anonymous women.

So the problem becomes that of finding the stop point, to prevent criticism from being *futile thought* and the field from being wholly occupied by *real destruction*. I will now assert that this stop point has been found by women in their political practice of recounting experience; and it is found when they refer to experience with the sentiment and confidence that they can interpret it by themselves and thus render it the shared world of a personal experience. I will also add, without going into detail, that this ability to find the stop point of the “undoing” (“disfieri”), is linked to a way of thinking that is never simply reasoning (simply vigilant) but is always sentient too (dormant too), on pain of its insanity; it was reading W. R. Bion, *Learning from Experience* that inspired me to take this view.

My argument will consist of reading and commenting upon a short text: the final paragraph of a well-known essay by Joan W. Scott, *The Evidence of Experience* (“Critical Inquiry” 17 (Summer 1991), pp. 773-797). In Italian this title can be translated as *La prova dell’esperienza*, without excluding the meaning of the Italian *evidenza*, given the polysemy of the English word.

After her critical analysis of the use of the notion of experience, the author rejects the obvious conclusion and writes: “We cannot do without the word experience, it would be futile to demand its expulsion” (my italics). She then gives her reasons. However, we should first highlight this final “dodge” with regard to the series of critical arguments that she herself had set out, all of them typically structuralist (and to some extent I agree with them). Let us see her reasons for halting before the conclusion that it would seem logical to eliminate experience. This word, she writes, is intertwined with daily language. It is trapped in our narrations, we use it to talk about what happens. It is needed (and here there is a reference to feminist practice) in order to “claim an unassailable knowledge”; here she quotes from a typescript entitled *Experience, Difference and Dominance in the Writings of Women’s History* by Ruth Roach Pierson.

Implicitly, it must be asked here whether this claim for an unassailable knowledge is a vain demand, or one that is well-founded and valid. Joan Scott, having specified some conditions that I will not examine here, gives a positive answer. It is a valid demand, and the argument that Scott gives is philosophical, scientific and political all at once: “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted” (p. 797).
In the light of this notion of experience, the thought of experience is that thought (not necessarily philosophical, as has rightly been said) that fits in between the already-interpreted and the not-yet-interpreted, in an inexhaustible interval of time (“at once always”).

While always already interpreted, experience always demands to be interpreted. It is not an infinite flow of time from the future to the past (as that “always” could suggest, from a historicist perspective) but a re-launch, here and now, motivated by the demand for meaning.

Unfortunately, that demand is often inaudible or unsustainable. Often, that which has already been interpreted saturates the “not-yet-interpreted”. Often, the subject that seeks existence succumbs to what the other has already thought. Therefore, that grafting of thought that I mentioned as the thought of experience, often or always leads to a true break in a sequence; by its very nature, that sequence would continue uninterruptedly from the already-interpreted to the not-yet-interpreted, saturating it and silencing the subject. This is a feature of anything that it is organised with the aim of lasting; we could label it as the maternalism of power. It is, therefore, a break with that which claims to be the right interpretation, and also with the symbolic and material devices of the “right interpretation”. Structuralism, in Michel Foucault for example, went very far in analysing these devices. Too far, I might say, in the sense that it went so far as to render the occurrence of a new thinking unimaginable. From this point of view, I find Joan Scott’s “dodge” in the final paragraph of *The Evidence of Experience* quite remarkable. She has managed to find the stop point of deconstruction, which would otherwise risk being confused with destruction.

To conclude, I will return to the claim for unassailable knowledge made in the name of experience. This is valid and well-founded, despite that fact that knowledge with absolute value doesn’t exist. The claim has an absolute value. It is given that value by the experience which demands to be given meaning not by a symbolic machine that is already set up but by a sentient, speaking living being. Experience does not provide evidence, its obviousness is not proof. It simply calls the subject, we can even say it gives birth to it, it calls it to take the floor and supports it in its claim to say something which is true. And this is not a neutered or neutral subject. It is a living being which, thanks to language, together with others, accounts for what appears to him, to her.