

FROM HYSTERIA TO MELANCHOLIA THE MANY FIGURES OF FEMININE

Hanna, A Figure of Masochism

She was 30 years old but looked like a little girl, awkward, hampered by a body with no curves, wrapped in loose and colourless clothing. She saw herself as futureless, her professional life was in a rut, her marriage was petering out in the violence of words and blows. She was overrun by pernicious and obsessive anxiety which she drowned in alcohol – the fear of being a “bad mother.”

As the eldest daughter, she thought she had failed to satisfy her mother who was ostensibly delighted about the birth of three boys, robust little fellows that took up all the space because of the vitality of their will and the brilliance of their success. Lost in this manly crowd, Hanna hung on to an absent and exciting father, jealously guarded by his seductive and sensual wife. However, whenever Hanna felt desperate or threatened, he was always there: if anyone was to save her, it was him!

Hanna used her sessions like irremovable landmarks, like a space of infinite grievances colonised by relentless self-incrimination. She seemed very attached to her daily misery and even her dreams revealed themselves consistent with the destitute reality of her life – dark, sticky, muddy: the expression, if not the ostentatious display, of a pervasive form of masochism made up the leading thread of the transference.

Beyond that murky world, she would let out, as if by accident, small glimmers that she put out very quickly but which led me to think that, hiding within her, were a few more gems whose sparkle she persisted in obscuring: she would furtively mention the brilliant life of her family because of her father’s high-level post, the sumptuous places where she spent her childhood, a few loving and ephemeral childminders. An

unknown or masked princess, she reminded me of a dreamless Cinderella. But she had no use for a fairy godmother: no magic in language, no impact of my words, my constructions or my interpretations. I had to remain still, silent, so that she may carry on with her monologue, the long unfolding of her sorrows, without any pause, any sigh, any grand finale. In short, I had to maintain, on the altar of the transference, the mausoleum of her masochism and melancholia: a “dead mother,”¹ this is what I had to be, a mother who is impervious to grievances and claims, a mute, unavailable mother and, most importantly, a mother who did not look at her.

Hanna asserted that she did not exist for her family, that she did not have a place among them, putting forward, by way of evidence, the special treatment she paradoxically was a victim of in her view: a former officer, her father raised his three sons harshly and did not fail to give them a good beating whenever their misbehaviour passed the mark. But he never laid hands on Hanna, which wounded her as she linked this shortfall of blows to the state of being a girl – of lacking a penis. Strangely, it is the wish to be beaten that emerged as a phallic claim in an apparent inversion of activity and passivity.

Among the pairs of opposites that clash and unite in the dialectics of Freudian thought, the masculine-feminine opposition holds a paradigmatic place: the distinction between sexual drives and self-preservative drives naturally buttresses the differentiation between the ego and the object through the sharing-out of their cathexes (Freud, 1915). But the other, the alien is also the one who is *sexually* different. Hence the superimposition or the condensation of the sexual representations of difference and, inseparable from the latter, the representations of the difference between ego and object. The masculine-feminine confusion can therefore reflect another confusion, another loss of borders, the one that annihilates the difference between the ego and the object.

The analytic method unveils a twofold trend in the unfurling of the feminine: one that is tied to the networks of the complete Oedipus complex (Freud, 1923), and one that delves into the mysteries of the fear of losing the object's love. The representations of the feminine are torn between melancholia inherent in the vicissitudes of a femininity that is

¹ The term is used in reference to André Green (1986 [1983]).

associated – too hastily, in truth – with masochism and loss, and a potent claim for recognition in the triumph of the maternal, its ideal and troubling ubiquity; they are torn, alternatively, between the display of an exciting and voluptuous femininity, buoyed by its seductive powers – beguiling, if not cruel – and the revolt triggered by the lack of penis and the necessary recourse to its symbolic equivalents; they oscillate between reviled and shameful anality and a victory-child brandished in the eternalness of its absolute glory.

In its hollow, in the shadow of the mother, the feminine is home to the infantile through the appeal of images of passivity, powerlessness and helplessness. The maternal-feminine to which such images refer, inevitably summons fantasies and anxieties of penetration and intrusion. This feminine is featured in both sexes and constitutes the fundamental sedimentation point of bisexuality and of the ensuing identifications. It is the shared infantile core, decisive in the future of all, in everyone's sexual becoming, more specifically; it arises from the immovable nature of the maternal as it is represented: could an impossible separation between mother and child everlastingly stamp an initial mark, the basis for the constructions that sustain the processes of identification? Might it be a point of no-return, an unswerving hallucination of the ever-present mother, inseparable from the infant's every thought, for ever shaping the human condition? Winnicott's "pure feminine"? A maternal immemorial whose eternity would form the foundation of ideality; or an ideal feminine eviscerated by the emergence of sexuality and the disappointment it entails, as Freud theorises from 1910 (Freud: 1910)? Indeed, past the initial disbelief, the discovery of the mother's sexuality gives rise to acute disappointment and frustration which are resolved by a form of split between the idealised mother of childhood and the sexual woman, the object of the debasement underlying the gap between "the Mother and the Whore."

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Pivotal in the construction of the ego (Freud, 1923), identification is based, from the outset, on the ties to the object, an object it is inseparable from because identification consists in an unconscious operation of appropriation: the ego unwittingly seizes a trait in the object; reciprocally, the object seizes the ego by unwittingly imposing a trait which the ego must passively subscribe to, make its own. The twofold aspect of appropriation emerges clearly, in the most direct way, in the sexual identifications: the identification with man or woman is underlain by the dialectics of activity and passivity mobilised by the process itself.

From 1915, looking at the treatment modalities of object loss, Freud devotes time to

the differentiation between hysterical identification and narcissistic identification, both being respectively featured in mourning and melancholia: in hysterical identification, the object cathexis persists whereas it is given up in narcissistic identification (Freud, 1917 [1915]). But while these two types of identification are distinct, they share a common root all the same: narcissistic identification is the most primary one, somehow paving the way for hysterical identification for which it may lay the foundation. Based on Freud's suggestion that women's object choices are endowed with more narcissistic valency (1914), we can then venture the hypothesis of a primary narcissistic identification of a feminine kind!

The key element appears in the consubstantiality of identification and loss: through a thorough analysis of the various stages of mourning and melancholia, Freud insists on the ambivalence that links the two processes together, revealing how, in mourning, the libido possibly binds the aggressive impulses whereas, in melancholia, the hate of the object backfires and sets upon the ego. The disappointment (or the prejudice) inflicted by the loved one does not lead to a displacement of the libido in the direction of a new object, it heads for "an identification of the ego with the abandoned object" (Freud, 1917 [1915]: 249) and the object-loss is transformed into an ego-loss.

Conversely, hysterical identification gives precedence to an identification with the object of the father or the mother's desire: the father for the son, the mother for the daughter. In 1921, Freud shows how identification can take on several forms in the structure of a neurotic symptom. Either the identification fulfils the desire to take the rival parent's place "under the influence of a sense of guilt" (1921: 106): thus, in the case of a little girl who develops the same tormenting cough as her mother, the cough achieves the identification in the form of punishment – "You wanted to be your mother, and now you *are* – anyhow so far as your sufferings are concerned" (Ibid.). Alternatively (as in Dora's case), the symptom is the same as that of the loved one, in this instance the father's cough. In this case, identification has appeared instead of object-choice, object-choice has regressed to narcissistic identification.

In the complete Oedipal organisation, the twofold orientation of the conflict impels a double identification – with the father and the mother – according to the positive or the inverted form of the complex. Yet, the object-choice demands that one or the other be abandoned. This leads to a partial exclusion of both alternately from the field of preferential investment and it determines a related orientation towards "one more than the other."

It is also in this context of loss that the process of "hysterical" identification operates: the possibility to renounce is, notwithstanding, testament to the durability of the tie to the

object and to the resistance of the investment. Conversely, narcissistic identification is determined by a weak primary cathexis of the object: in case of defection or disappointment, the withdrawal of the cathexis assumes an anti-objectal pathway as evidenced by the process of narcissistic reversal. This is where we encounter those figures of the feminine that are haunted by moral masochism and melancholia functioning as a desperate fight against the mark left by the object and the dependency it entails. In such situations, the address to the analyst constitutes a transference anchoring point that mobilises drive-related activity immediately, with a view to providing means of facilitation within the analytic process.

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Traces of Hanna's relationship with me began to suffuse her distinctly: she could smell my perfume everywhere; during sessions, she would hear the sound of scissors and was convinced that I devoted myself to sewing projects; she would experience strong urges to urinate which she suppressed all the way back home, as if she had to retain the state of excitation tied to my presence as long as she possibly could. She changed: she became more delicate, neat, elegant even, she could show her woman's body; she stopped drinking, found a job in keeping with her abilities, left her bogeyman husband and came out of the "rat-hole" where she had been dwelling.

The effects of these "successes" (successes of the analysis?) were not long in coming: Hanna hurled herself into extreme negativity, magnified her self-accusatory grievances with perceptible and impressive force, conveying them, beyond the insults she inflicted upon herself, through the restlessness of her body on the couch. She would frantically slam her legs together in an almost compulsive motion that could take on a variety of transference meanings: exhibitionistic, it called for my gaze with the aim of prompting intense homosexual seduction; auto-erotic, it reflected her wish to be self-sufficient; discordant, it combined sexual excitation with a litany of suicidal and melancholic statements; masochistic, it acted out a fantasy in which I filled the role of the merciless torturer.

Paradoxically, another trend fundamentally aimed to deaden me: Hanna refused to face the arousals of homosexual transference by applying a form of mortification that negated our existence – hers and mine – as desiring beings. By repeatedly assigning me the function of mechanical robot, cold and interchangeable, she also averted the negative transference: the recognition of her hate for me would

have necessarily led her to concede her ambivalence and, therefore, her transference love.

Hanna endlessly insisted on her failure, her worthlessness, the repetition of her defeats; then, another grievance emerged, a more libidinal one this time: her inability to satisfy me and the anxiety of prompting my anger – my patience was unfathomable to her.

“You would therefore like me to beat you to punish you,” I said to her, “but for what crime?”. Then the memory returned, troubling: she is playing with her little brother by a river, they are fighting over a toy; seized with an uncontrollable impulse, she brusquely throws him into the water. On this occasion, for the one and only time, she managed to unleash her father’s anger and he beat her with rare violence, quite in contrast with the indifferent coldness with which he usually chastised his sons. Her mother was screaming and Hanna thought her brother was dead, that she had killed him. Was it therefore this scene of seduction – “a daughter is being beaten by her father” – which she had waited for for so long and had so wished to repeat?

In Freud, from the first theory onwards, seduction inevitably implies the child’s passivity: the event undergone, the decisive trauma in the aetiology of the neurotic disorder institutes a child subjected to the other’s desire. The ‘perverse’ adult, the father, holds the active place of power while the daughter remains passive. The specificities of the hysterical construction of the seduction fantasy reveals a telling reversal: ‘I am not the one who desires, he is the one who seduces me.’ This version upholds the repression of the daughter’s incestuous wishes and preserves her innocence: the ‘criminal’ seductive action is down to the man she is the victim of (Freud, 1950 [1895]: 350).

But when passivity is intolerable, the reversal into activity is no longer possible and seduction becomes inscribed in a version I refer to as “melancholic” (Chabert, 2003), a version characterised by the certainty of having *actively* seduced the father instead of having been *passively* seduced by him. The guilt and, most importantly, the need to be punished are then fuelled by masochistic constrictions and compulsive sacrificial mortification: the seduction fantasy sinks into a melancholic drift as conveyed by a process of self-accusation that repeatedly demands humiliating and lethal measures of retaliation. In these fantasmatic configurations, moral masochism is rooted in an incestuous conviction that leads to major anxiety pertaining to love loss and a hateful reversal, against the ego, of the destructive attacks targeting the object. Consequently, both come to blend in the deleterious violence

that strikes them. The trauma persists, in its endogenous source, caught up in the excitation overload of the melancholic feminine, leading to a distinct treatment of sexuality: guilt and a need to be punished imposed by a cruel superego that assures the girl of an active position in the double function of criminal and torturer.

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The striking difference between boys and girls lies in the dynamics of their object choice: for boys, nothing changes, the mother remains the privileged love object and the father's arrival seals the prohibition of incest and relieves guilt by separating and protecting. For girls, the change of object, which the early disillusionment of the bond with the mother dictates, can already be a betrayal, exacerbated by the wish to take her place in relation to the father.² The risk incurred is high: losing the mother's love, destroying the fundamental loving care that is the guarantee of narcissistic investment; at stake is the first sediment of identifications whose vital function is to bring together the drive-related forces that sustain the feeling of existence and continuity. With Hanna, the condensation of masochism and melancholia guaranteed the permanence of a passionately loved and hated mother; only the transference pathway and the experience of this passion in the analysis gradually allowed her to free herself from it. She had given me the place of a mute and frozen mother but the passivity she imposed on me (and which I endured) probably elicited the rekindling, *via* the homosexual transference, of the extinguished libidinal traces and the fundamentally incestual nature of the bonds she had formed with her father and her mother. On this basis, the frustration implemented by the analyst in the treatment, the twofold experience of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, led the drive-related impulses to reinvest the scenes they had abandoned. The address to the analyst reawakened the share of suffering that pertained to the object and loosened the ensnarement in moral masochism and melancholia where narcissism and its cruelty prevail.

Athenais, Hysteria versus Melancholia

She is a tall and beautiful girl, lively, cheerful, direct and remarkably at ease. She presents herself as a woman, a real woman, comfortable with her voluptuous curves and a sensuality enhanced by the plenitude of her face and the honey-coloured tones matching her complexion to her hair. She is 20, her older sister died of a long

² “[The girl] enters the Oedipus situation as though into a haven of refuge” (Freud, 1933: 129).

illness a year earlier, just after she herself was sexually coerced and then abandoned by her first love. She cries profusely but dries her tears very quickly and lets herself be carried away by her rage in very crude language: she speaks loudly and proclaims her hatred of men and her equal hatred of the weakness of submissive women who let men put them down. The sexual assault but also the death of her sister had been experienced as debasement, which the young woman's ego could not escape unharmed.

In 1910, Freud formalises the discovery of the Oedipus complex in men: dominating the picture is the love, the erotic passion for the highly regarded and fiercely defended women of easy virtue. But behind them, behind these “whores,” dwells the mother: a mother whose merit glorifies her purity and eludes the sexual dimension, probably owing to the excessive disappointment that might arise; but, also, due to the risk of unveiling a jealousy that is all the more unbearable as it could lead to the worst of all punishment: the loss of her love. In first love, the representation of the whore couches the love for the mother, the mother whose son cannot get over the fact that he was disappointed by her.

Symmetrically, so to speak, how can we account for the specific types of object choice in girls? Can we recognise any of the characteristics described by Freud in relation to men? It is possible that, under cover of early twentieth century's sexual morality, he could not ask the question so frontally? To him, the model of hysteria prevails in feminine sexuality despite its shift from 1914 following the introduction of narcissism.

We can therefore look for similarities between the specific types of object choice in women on the basis of three questions: what type of man can be held as the equivalent of the women of easy virtue, what idealisation, what wish to save the loved man can be found in women?

Debasement and its sadistic component along with, most importantly, the part that is destructive for the narcissism of the object – a part likely to be involved – can probably guide us here. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud underlines the fact that the narcissistic reversal of melancholia leads to formidable fierceness directed against the ego that becomes overburdened with all the flaws, all the crimes. This occurs with all the more forceful intensity as, beyond the indicted “poor ego,” what is under attack, in truth, is the object with which the ego has become merged. In the melancholic impulse, therefore, there is a

debasement of the ego which, in all probability, could resonate substantially with the debasement of the loved object in erotic passion.

On the other hand, Freud insists on the disappointment by the object, a pivotal experience in the implementation of the dynamics of melancholia: it is also at the risk of disappointment by the mother once her sexuality is exposed, that Freud relates the specific type of object choice in men and the startling coexistence of idealisation and debasement, one coming to veil the other. Could disappointment by the father equally lead to his debasement in the daughter's eyes or is this disappointment unthinkable, always pertaining to the mother only?

Athenais remembers that, as a child, she was awkward and grumpy, a little girl who fell all the time, failed at everything, a negative image of her sister (and her mother?) who was so beautiful, radiant, agile. She remembers her torn up dresses, the scabs crowning her knees, she remembers the lice she would catch at school, the quarantine and how impossible it was to get rid of those parasites. She still remembers that harrowing moment when, out of desperation, her mother decided to cut her long hair; she remembers that moment when, meeting her reflection in the mirror, she thought she saw the face of a strange little boy. She remembers her place as a bad pupil, the slowness of her learning, of her notebooks covered in stains, of her crude handwriting, her hesitant reading, her ineptitude at calculation. She remembers her sister who, barely older than her, was always well in the lead, in every way, giving out her radiance and her smiles generously. She cries: yesterday she visited her grave, she went to have a chat with her, brought her her favourite sweets as well as the latest novel by a writer they both love passionately.

Athenais experiences inexplicable backaches, her whole body is sore as if she had been beaten black and blue. Yet, she has never been beaten up, she says, she is the one hitting her lovers in moments of rage and disappointment whose violence overwhelms her. There are no words that are harsh enough to destabilise them, to weaken them, no phrases cruel enough to despise them and reduce them to impotence. The very one she sought to seduce, the one she won over triumphally is turned into a wreck, into repulsive waste – the absolute opposite of idealisation, hence an equally suspicious form of dis-idealisation.

She sought the root of her shame in her childhood state, in the unappealing and unsightly little girl she used to be, a fatso, a dummy, the child-horror she continued to

bear within, to drag with her without ever disposing of it even since her radical change. For everything changed at adolescence: in a few months, puberty transformed the ugly duckling. As if by magic, she became a beautiful young woman, full of life and prospects, a brilliant student pursuing the creative path that appealed to her and delighted her. She thought she could reach the peaks of her ideals, relish enjoying her conquests and successes. But here she is instead, crushed by pain, in the deep dark hole. I say: "In the deep dark hole, with your sister?"

She is furious with me and cries that dying is out of the question for her and that she will prove to me that she isn't dead. She is off on a mission, looking for a new partner that she will seduce as easily as the previous ones and who is himself inscribed, as I surmise, in a series: like the previous ones, he very quickly proves insufficient when it comes to satisfying her intellectually. A few months later, she leaves him and starts all over again.

In view of the question initially raised regarding the specific object choice in girls, I cannot find, in Athenais, the wish to save her deficient partners: she sometimes picks "bad boys," "skirt-chasers" but she isn't really interested in them. With the others, she sometimes tries to make up for their intellectual or cultural deficiencies but she gets tired of it very quickly: they are not worth it, they are too inept. If anyone needs to be rescued, she is the one! What rescues her, however, is a sacrificial identification that shields her against the rivalry with her mother. The debasement of the object may then pertain to a mechanism that is typical of the "the complex of melancholia" (Freud, 1917 [1915]: 253) as if the impact of the "open" wound focalised a massive narcissistic counter-cathexis, drawing such quantities of energy that the ego emerges depleted and impoverished.

What is melancholic about Athenais? Besides moments of breakdown, the reverse position is probably what characterises her best: hyperactivity, histrionics and the exuberance of her words, the categorical tone, the strength of her voice can all, at times, be heard way beyond hysterical expressionism. Athenais can even be discreetly manic: impossible for me then not to be mindful of the flip side of this joyous turmoil, impossible not to capture the boundless debasement of the ego below, an ego subjected to tormenting guilt and to the attraction to death it entails. That sexuality should take up its place in the midst of these mood swings goes without saying: in this compulsive quest, I make out an immense and partially unknown demand for love. Increasingly often, Athenais complains of a loneliness that she not only ascribes to her sister's death; on a more intimate level, she

releases a timid wish for love that is present enough for me to hear, disclosing scraps of her little girl's dreams, beyond her conquering feats.

Athenais mentioned the love of her life on our very first meeting: "My true love," she said, "is my father; yes, I know, you're going to talk to me about Oedipus but I am a girl, so no need to tell me the same tales as all the others. My father has always loved me, he loved me the way I was, even when I was ugly and dumb, so you can imagine how he loves me now! He loves me and I will never give that up! I don't give a shit about the others." Behind the love for her father of course, is the love for her mother, an inextinguishable love, but the shift from one to the other, the displacement provide an open path which the request for analysis and the transference actualise distinctly.

Following a long and intense analytic work, Athenais married an older man, a man she loves and admires and who got a divorce for her; they have two children she adores. Happy ending?

Since the end of her analysis, she has been coming to see once in a while and it is always the same scenario: she met a man, her life is disrupted by this erotic passion, she is wracked with guilt. Then she leaves her new lover, always for the same reason: she is very infatuated sexually but he does not live up to her expectations, whether culturally or intellectually. Curiously, our meetings pacify her each time.

The interpretation of this repetition can be relatively easy in the light of the Oedipal passion that is always operative, always active, in the splitting of objects: the good and the bad, the mother and the whore, the father and the gigolo. Is it not the same fantasy that Athenais repeats, switching the protagonists' places around? By being the one who cheats instead of the one who is cheated on? By inducing jealousy in her partners, an experience of jealousy she has been unable to claim for herself until now? She confirms the Freudian view regarding the decline of the Oedipus complex: destroyed in boys, it would remain incomplete in girls, reflecting the weakness of their superego.³

³ I deliberately leave out a deeper analysis of the feminine superego, whose action can be distinguished in excessive guilt and the need for punishment.

What can be said about the transference and Athenais's need to come and show me, repeatedly, after the end of her analysis, that I can be replaced, that her potentialities for love remain as keen as ever and can become attached to new objects?

The odd end of this analysis brings to light what transference love actually drains off, its residues catching fire again, not only in the treatment but also beyond, in life, through the surging of love when it comprises the drive-related violence that remains alive within it. This is the part that morphs into the impatience to love, embedded in the compulsive quest for new objects: "manic" love – as I like to call it (Chabert, 2017) – that occasionally comes to veil not only loss, abandonment, separation but also all their related affects, sad affects whose acknowledgment is prohibited. It is as if, indeed, there were no place for them, no rights to asylum, as if they could never be truly accommodated, forever banished, inescapably exiled, outside the psyche's bounds: in such situations, the serial repetition of object choice, in men and women alike, sometimes actualises the Oedipal tragedy, a passion that betrays the impossible renouncement of love objects because the inextinguishable fear of being abandoned by them simply persists.

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