Textually intertwining the idea of woman with deconstruction

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The title of this article evokes the question 'which or whose idea of woman?'. The answer, however, is undecidable, since historically an universal, coherent idea of woman does not exist. The historical encounters with so-called archetypal renderings of woman are multiform and complex, which renders an universal definition of woman equivocal.

At present theorists are faced with hermeneutic ambiguity concerning the archetypal definition of woman, overridingly because of the politicising influence of feminism which has instigated a diffused stance concerning such definition. Since the 19605 there has been a noticeable difference in the renderings of woman: she does not seem to be a marginal ethereal identity any more, but a central and real one. Feminism, as a form of deconstruction, has led to a reconstruction and emancipation of the idea of woman, that is, of her restricted profile as found in patriarchal mythmaking. Such marginalisation of woman has been progressively deconstructed by poststructuralists.[1]

These radical strategies of deconstruction have, however, inverted the traditional (patriarchal) viewpoint of gender hierarchies to assert the primacy of the feminine. The emancipatory stance of woman as 'other' has therefore led to conceptions of difference in theories of reception and meaning. Woman's primordial otherness means that she views, understands and experiences texts differently from the male reader/viewer, a conception which invalidates absolute viewpoints. Feminist criticism challenges literary and political assumptions in male-oriented interpretations of texts and offers alternative insight in and experience of such texts. Woman has in fact taken her emancipation so far that

feminists themselves are unsure of whether contemporary women are creating new myths, or whether the latter are merely alternative versions based on old models[2].

Traditionally, the renderings of woman often metaphorised her as an object of veiledness, quest and pursuit[3]. These facets of proposed womanhood have been conjugated in part to add to the characterisation of mythic woman. Several theorists such as Christopher Norris, Jonathan Culler and Michael Fischer, have aligned these mythic aspects of woman with the strategies of deconstruction. In *The Deconstructive Turn,* for instance, Norris (1983:91) remarks that the idea of woman is "textually intertwined with a deconstruction of "truth" and its forms of masculine conceptual mastery". As such, contemporary hermeneutic theory is imbued with mythic feminine attributes in an age which, ironically, has experienced a radical emancipation of woman from her mythic portrayal and which doubts knowledge about mythic origins.

In the freeplay of revisionist interpretation in Michael Maier's *Emblema XLII* from the *Atalanta Fugiens* (1617), the images may be seen as an entanglement of notions pertaining to both mythic woman and deconstruction[4]. In this work the woman, decoded as Muse, escapes mortal man. The quest for poetic immortality may be translated as a quest or continual desire to recover mythic firsts or to transcend time towards a final vision of truth or an original ground-foundation. Derrida (1976:163) decodes the mythic quest in logocentric structures as a nostalgia for truth which leads to temporal frameworks or *parerga* being drawn over abysmal nothingnesses. The answer to any question arrests a dark empty 'abyss', which already presupposes that there is no decidable answer. Ortega Y Gasset (1968:136) rephrases the same idea as follows:

> Life is, in itself and forever, a shipwreck. To be shipwrecked is not to
> drown. The poor human being, feeling himself sinking into the abyss,
> moves his arms to keep afloat. This movement of the arms which is
> his reaction against his own destruction, is culture - a swimming
> stroke.

In *Emblema XLII* the enigmatic woman figure metaphorising veiledness is allegorical of the strategies of deconstruction which are also premised on ambiguity and elusiveness in the quest for truth. In deconstruction, as a corporate structure of hermeneutic theories or philosophical discourses, the recovery of ultimate truth or enigmatic origins seems impossible. According to Derrida, we are "white-washing" our mythic origins, continuously reappropriating faded metaphors of lost origins, so that truth has no certain epistemological base.5 His radical stance on identity views presence as a supplementation or simulation, since, archetypes cannot be known (Evans 1991:130). Yet, according to Derrida (1976:14), this must not be conceived with nostalgia, but with laughter and a dance. Although he predicates a logical scepticism by disallowing the myth, Derrida nevertheless does not close this viewpoint: he suggests that, in interpretation, there always remains a "crevice through which the yet unnamable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed" (Derrida 1976:14). On a much less enigmatic note, feminists advocate that women "move behind [the] cultural stage into the wings of female experience ... [to] uncover enough images created by women to discover the patterns in our experiences" (Lauter 1984:8) As such, a broader collective vision of the female archetype might be discovered.

In *Emblema XLII*, the space between the two figures is allegorical of the deconstruction of traditional notions of ultimate truth. In metaphoric or veiled form, the space might be decoded as a feminine infinite space or the womb, further associated with primeval chaos and darkness, the locus of genesis or possibly the answer to the cosmic riddle which has instigated so much logocentric speculation. Yet, according to Jonathan Culler:

> Celebrations of woman or the identification of woman with some powerful force or idea -truth as woman, liberty as a woman, the muses as women - identify actual women as marginal. Woman can be a symbol of truth only if she is denied an effective relation to truth, only if she presumes that those seeking truth are men. (Culler 1983:166-7)

This view challenges the patriarchal marginalisation of woman as exterior to any 'intellectual' male force seeking truth. However, by accentuating the specificity and uniqueness of woman and her sexuality, feminists end up marginalising woman even more. This ambiguous situation could be illuminated by Jean Baudrillard's postulation of the hyperreal. Baudrillard (1983:3), also using the term "simulacrum", argues a praxis of supplementation in which models are created based on unknown origins. According to him, associations or references are mere iconic copies, new versions of the mythic original of which we have no proof of truth. Relating this condition to production models, contemporary conceptions of the real then become coding processes we have invented ourselves (Baudrillard 1983:2). The term 'simulacrum' refers to repetitive human behaviour to the extent of recognisable patterns. Baudrillard (1983:2) sees the simulation not as referring to a 'territory, a referential being or a substance': it is a copy or simulacrum based on a model of a real without origin. According to Baudrillard,

> … the real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative stance. It is nothing more than operational. (Baudrillard 1983:3)

Woman is clearly an essential 'other' in *Emblema XLII*. Although her identity seems unreal and poetisised in relation to the old man, she is marginalised in terms of identity. It would thus seem that in both the patriarchal and deconstructionist viewpoints woman is identified by 'otherness'. In this work, the female figure becomes metaphoric of both her traditional archetype and the quest for truth. She becomes a

> … space not only of art and writing but also of truth ... : the unpresentable truth that lies beyond and subverts the male orders of logic, mastery and verisimilitude … she is not only the enigma to be deciphered but the teacher of truth … . (Culler 1983:173)

Both woman as space and the impotent space between the two figures illustrate

that there "[is] no center, ...that the center ha[s] no natural site, that it [is] not a fixed locus but a function ..." (Derrida 1978:280). According to deconstructionists, truth has no specific origin, center or absolute locus. It may be searched, but no ultimate answer is possible. An endless shift from sign to sign takes place in the search for meaning which is never terminated or fixed. The pursuit of woman, love, or truth, seems to be an eternal mythic desire, a key activating element in restoring energy to the praxis of signification. In Barthes' words, "there always remains, around the final meaning, a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating ..." (Sontag 1982:119). The idea of "floating" meanings signifies a quintessential feature in postmodern and deconstructionist thinking: that of activity, movement or flux. Both the old man, searching for truth, and the woman, the fleeting Muse, are moving; being viewed or read, a text never stops and certainly cannot close (Klinkowitz 1988:53). The metaphoric space becomes an accommodating space in which a mother's love knows no boundaries.

The romantic notion of the quest of woman, maybe as Muse, Aphrodite, Venus or Truth, is tied to the desire for a lost mother/fatherland, a romantic or erotic unknown, or a poetic or religious sublime. In Anselm Kiefer's *Jerusalem* (1986), the spiritual history associated with the holy city, recalls an empyrean realm inhabited by the purest of beings, rendered as a golden glow on the horizon[6]. The designation, *Jerusalem*, signifies

> the ultimate landscape in a Kiefer world, a holy city that has undergone thousands of years of struggle and change. Jerusalem epitomises a universal, eternal, religious ideal: as a pilgrimage site and promised land, it is a source of spiritual sustenance. The invocation of this name suggests the restitution of a perfect, paradisiacal state … . ([Rosenthal 1987:143)

In deconstruction, the fragile sublime of arbitrariness and undecidability is often mutated into sexualised metaphor, as found in Norris' remarks (1983:91) on the emergence of woman as seductress guised in the use of metaphor in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Derrida. Welsh D Everman (1988:80) goes so far as to argue that erotic fiction is, to a considerable degree, the prototypal

postmodern fiction. Such notions confirm woman's affirmative sexual identity, as encountered in Culler's (1983:165-175) decodification of the essential sexual/ otherness/ of woman.

In *Jerusalem*, a scarred terrain confronts the viewer, an unknown feminine expanse of space, encrusted with multiple fragments and layers in the form of a relief. Womb, space, landscape and sublime become metaphorically synonymous in terms of female sexuality. In this work, the landscape lends itself to such decodification to the point of eroticism. During an interview in December 1986, Kiefer explained his deconstructionist artmaking process as follows: He first created a landscape painting after which other layers of hot lead and paint were added (Rosenthal 1987:143). Several months later he peeled off parts of the lead, leaving patches, removing colours and textures and revealing others (Rosenthal 1987:143) The excoriation of the surface regards a maniacal, on-the-edge activity, treating the painting surface in a fetishistic way. Decoded into sexualised metaphor, the open landscape may be interpreted either as excoriated, destructed lands consigning to womanly symbolism of ruin, or, alternatively, as virginal or primordial earth, that is, woman as maiden. Nevertheless, an erotic or even pornographic interpretation remains another 'other', existing in impotent presence in the imagination, precisely like the religious sublime or the romantic unknown.

Decoded into the praxis of deconstruction, Kiefer's artmaking process becomes a symbolic ritualistic act of the deconstructive excoriation of traditional concepts of ultimate truth. In metaphoric association, the alchemical process of pulverisation of materials reflects a deconstructionist state of mind which leads to a similar deconstructivism in artmaking. According to Gilmour:

> The process of alchemical transformation ... reflects a rigorous process of experimentation and alteration, which undermines the everyday understanding of reality, and it is unremitting in subjecting the materials under investigation to 'pulverisation', until something not otherwise evident may be made evident. This is what the metaphor of transformation into gold is suppose to convey. (Gilmour 1990:132)

In the deconstruction encountered in feminism, there is special emphasis on woman as reproductive earth-mother-nature. In *Jerusalem*, imagery and materials have been allegorised to an alchemical, prototypal mythos of life-death-new life, which is related to woman as symbol of regeneration and the strategies of deconstruction. The use of goldleaf in the painting is reminiscent of the refining alchemical process (or deconstruction), as Mircia Eliade indicates:

> The 'nobility' of gold is thus the fruit at its most mature ... The alchemist ...assists Nature to fulfil her final goal... to its supreme ripening, which is absolute immortality and liberty. (Eliade 1956:51-52)

The ultimate maturation of woman is in child bearing, which is a supreme station in the extension of self in Time. Woman overcomes the confining boundaries of mortality by producing a child. The empty space seems to be fertile after all, and new life proceeds from the dark water world or the blacksmith's oven. As such, lifetime is provisionally extended, appropriated to deconstruction attempting to extend the boundaries of meaning: in the chaotic multitude of deconstructed and reconstructed texts, the full and inner meaning of things might be discovered.

In *Jerusalem* two forged steel skis are collaged onto the painting, placed with their upwardly slanted ends pointing towards the 'golden land'. The upward/downward cycle indicated by the form of the skis, recalls the Gnostic symbol of ouroboros[7]. Ouroboros contains a tragic element when, at the moment of its apperception, the realisation dawns that life and death are entangled. The vision of the subliminal state is reminiscent of ouroboros, also ambiguously tragic, since the sublime is only a dream after all, echoing the fleeting Muse.

Derrida's deconstruction admits to similar visions of solipsism. According to him, the voice or space (Derrida 1987:22) of the artwork may be seen as a mutation of metaphor: its creation, a beginning; the discourse on it, an end. Yet, they are identified by sameness -the beginning is recaptured in the end and vice versa (Ricoeur 1981:167). A paradox is thus encountered: the hermeneutic circle is

carried out in the binary emergence of event (or artwork) and meaning. Gilmour (1990:133) views ouroboros as a condition:

> ...of ignorance that corresponds to the undifferentiated state of matter in its molten state. It may also refer, psychologically, to a condition of childhood before the child has been separated from the parent. Metaphorically, it may refer to the condition of contemporary humanity before the cosmos, as we engage in the beginning of the space age.

Carl Jung (1962:329) has described the road into the sublime of regression, whether into infancy or primeval beginnings, as a road into the mother's body; it becomes the entering of a dark unknown, "the prenatal realm ...[an] immemorial world of archetypal possibilities"[8]. The symbolic regression into a mythological mother's body (as an 'other') in a postindustrialist age, might be one explanation for the current prominence of the female archetype. Joost Meerloo (1962:5) argues that when life becomes too bothersome, regression into a sublime of primitive being occurs, to primitive magic ideas, expecting to be reunited with mother earth in death as new life. This ouroboros concept is reiterated in Mary Daly's reinterpretation of death as an icy baby that we carry within ourselves from our birth (Lauter 1984:14).

The forged skis form the top surface 'layer' in *Jerusalem*; they seem whole and inviolate as if representative of a new world, a golden zone, emerging from the debris of the old. The 'new life' and 'the other' conceptions which are personified in woman, link with similar notions of the 'death of the author' versus the 'birth of a text' in deconstruction. The baby is separated from the mother at birth and again she has to let go of the child reaching adulthood; similarly, in terms of interpretation, the viewer resumes where the artist's activity has 'ended'. Derrida calls this emancipation of meaning, "alterity", an extension (or sacrifice) of the self into a play of "otherness" (Kearney 1986:125). The emancipation of the reader/viewer from the Author-god, echoes the deconstructionist emancipation of woman from Man-god.

The text under deconstruction suffers like the woman in labour in order to produce new life (meaning). Referring to the notion of sacrifice, Ritter (1971:31) notes that:

> It is important to grasp the significance of the novelty represented by the idea that creation is effected by immolation or self-immolation ... the stage is reached where creation or fabrication [is] inconceivable without previous sacrifice.

The idea of sacrifice suggests suffering, which is related to the Romantic concept of *Weltschmerz*. The latter conception sees the poet/artist as an exile or outcast, an 'other', experiencing a sense of loss and alienation. Nonetheless, the suffering carries a certain charisma: "it is through the suffering of absence that the poet finds his [or her] way to the plenitude of creation" (Morse 1981:237). These metaphoric states echo the real-life suffering of the woman giving birth, which in turn relates to the artist's cathartic artmaking process. In deconstruction, logocentrism is 'sacrificed' in order to attain a transcendent, sublimal state of truth. According to Eliade (1954:100) suffering finds "its explanation and justification in the transcendent in the divine economy", that is, the sublime.

In Kiefer's *Osiris and Isis* (1985-87), the idea of woman or regenerative nature is contrapuntally reiterated in the images of the connective circuit panel, the mythic tidal ebb and flow of the river, and the conceptual dialectic of death and monument.9 In the myth Isis's tears, signs of her suffering, fill and regenerate the Nile. Derrida sees tears, a typically female attribute, as a veil over eyes, as the tragic inherent in contemporary impotent modes of knowing (Kelly 1991:102).

In *Osiris and Isis* the central image of a massive stepped pyramid, surging up and away, transcends the boundaries of its phallic characterisation into an interpretation of a massive, broad-hipped woman, an androgyne. The myth of Osiris and Isis speaks of the transcendence of boundaries and fragmentation *par excellence.* These concepts are embodied in the pieces of broken crockery and string, collaged as found objects onto the surface, overpainted with reddish

tones to simulate blood and arteries. The fragmentation in the imagery is mythologically female: being 'blind or impotent' mutations, fragments contain an element of shrouded mystery, of partial knowledge. Abandoning the logocentric realms in favour of a 'blind', sensuous journey into the sublime, the fragment creates the labyrinth of text-ruins 'where it suffices to trace the distance covered in order for the ruins to be revealed, erased by the living monument that one had at first forgotten' (Pierssens 1981: 168) .The enigma that is woman echoes the 'blindly' ambiguous and undecidable stance of deconstruction admitting to the myth of woman whilst denying knowledge of mythic origins. Only the sphinx knows the secret to the silent pyramid of truth; the space between the old man and the woman remains.

Memory is in ruin, yet it activates the imagination. It is my viewpoint that our experiences of the myth convince us that archetypes are lurking in the shadowy ruins of memory, considering their quite loud proclaiming of themselves every now and then. Maybe the real serves as illumination of the dark hole that is memory. Maybe artmaking should proceed with dance and laughter, since mythic origins are not lost, but are discovered, recovered and remade via the present. Woman is neither an angel found in heaven, nor a ruin or a fragment, nor does she assert herself at the cost of man; she is a sublime part of creation, an echo of the sublime ambiguity which exists in the world.

Notes

1. Derrida, for instance, has deconstructed the narrow delineation of woman in the writings of Nietzsche and Freud. In, for example, *Moses and Monotheism,* Freud describes the "establishment of patriarchal power ... merely [as] an instance of the general advance of intellectuality" (Culler 1983:59).

2. Mary Daly (1973:42-43), for instance, is of the opinion that women live a double existence on the boundaries of patriarchal culture.

3. As found in the myth of Leander swimming stormy seas for every meeting with his love, Hero; also found in Orpheus's quest for his dead beloved wife, Eurydice (Mayerson 1971:204 and 272).

4. Michael Maier, *Emblema XLII* (1617). Etching from the *Atalanta Fugiens.* Illustrated in Argüelles, M & Argüelles, J. 1977. *The Feminine: Spacious as the Sky,* Plate 53).

5. Taking his cue from Heidegger, Derrida extends notions of reference and association into a theory of "white mythology" (Kearney 1986:131): Metaphysics "has forgotten its own mythological derivation, because it has covered over or whitewashed those metaphorizing figurations which gave rise to its concepts" (Kearney 1986: 131).

6. Anselm Kiefer, *Jerusalem* (1986). Acrylic, emulsion, shellac, and gold leaf on canvas with steel and lead, 380 x 560cm (in two parts). Collection of Susan and Lewis Manilow, Chicago. Illustrated in Rosenthal, 1987, Plate 79).

7. Its most well-known forms being the snake biting itself in the tail and the unborn fetus in the womb.

8. Derrida's consistent deconstruction of Western metaphysics also admits to regression into historic texts in order to deconstruct logocentric constructs or conceptions of truth.

9. Anselm Kiefer, *Osiris and Isis* (1985-87). Oil, acrylic, and emulsion on canvas (in two parts), with clay, porcelain, lead, copper wire, and circuit board, 380 x 560cm. Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco. Illustrated in Rosenthal 1987, Plate 81.

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