

# Room for Thought: Symbolic Space and Narrative Experience<sup>1</sup>

MARÍA ISABEL PEÑA AGUADO

“Los espacios, pues, cuando de la «mujer» se trata, no son lugares que toman su significación de sus proyectos como personas [...] sino que vienen pre-significados en base a su codificación por quienes los han diseñado en los pactos mismos que cobran trama en el mecanismo serial de sus autodesignaciones, autodesignaciones que por las cuales se instituyen, ante todo, en codificadores y adjudicadores de espacios [...] el patriarcado puede ser considerado como un sistema de adjudicación de espacios” – *Celia Amorós*.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of thinking, analysed from the perspective of intellectual women is a theme I have been working on for some time. Two issues immediately called my attention. First, the paradigmatic value which the figure of the intellectual woman represents in explaining the distinct moments in the awakening of feminist consciousness. And second, the lack of a proper space, a place in which she can develop herself both as a woman and as an intellectual.

I will approach this topic from the premise that, as long as the feminine condition lacks its own symbolic space, women’s voices will not be heard. Until we have found and created this space, we will continue to be trapped in the cave of shadowy utopias and potentialities, with difficult forays into the terrain of proper reality, a reality which requires a linking and unifying of past traditions and future projections, underpinning our present day-by-day.

I will begin by discussing why the figure of the intellectual woman seems to me paradigmatic. I will continue with the question of space, using the examples of two women intellectuals: Christine de Pizan and Virginia Woolf, both of whom insisted so much on the necessity of creating a space for living and developing the feminine condition. Thirdly, I will take up the thread in the present from the hands of the women of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective who have “lived” in practice that merely the obtaining

of a proper physical space does not solve the deficiencies of the feminine condition, unless a symbolic space is gained at the same time. Yet, for the expression of such a symbolic space, we do not have an adequate translation. Given that, as the Italian women remind us, it is impossible to speak of a feminine experience if the images of the language represent an experience that is not our own. To explain this situation of “non-translatability”, due to the lack of equality between discourses, I will succinctly refer to Jean-Francois Lyotard and his theory of the *differend*. Finally, I will briefly discuss the concept of *affidamento* (entrustment), utilized by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, to describe a type of feminine relationship of support and mutual recognition. My intention is not to define or review this concept, but to explore it as one more possibility in the search for a space in which the feminine condition can develop.

Before I begin, I would like to explain briefly what I mean by the “feminine condition”, an expression which still today arouses a significant amount of suspicion. It should be sufficient for me to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, who, in her book, *The Human Condition*, says: “To avoid misunderstanding: the human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature” (Arendt 1998, 9-10).

In the same manner, it can be considered that to speak of the “feminine condition” does not mean to expound on the nature of the feminine, but rather to allow us, in feminist theory, to gather several experiences and activities usually considered feminine (in Western cultures at least), such as maternity, and also the way in which women are –and had been – socialized or maintain their social relationships, without this being understood as a form of essentialism. This is a fundamental and controversial question in feminist theory that would require more dedication than it can be given in this paper.

## Woman and/or Intellectual

The paradigmatic value of the intellectual woman lies in her potential as an ideal figure for understanding not only discrimination in the socio-political sphere, but also the ostracism suffered by women’s experiences, above all in the cultural realm, where we still find many of the venues for the transmission of ideas and experiences, and which are fundamental for

encouraging the emergence and development of what we call “tradition”, closed to us. The figure of the intellectual woman is also useful in revealing a more personal type of process – albeit one very susceptible to over-generalization – in which can be traced an awakening of the feminine consciousness, the development of which coincides with that of feminism and feminist theory. This process begins with a moment of confidence and security in her own capabilities, notwithstanding a certain amount of misogyny towards other women who are less able, or who have resigned themselves. In the next stage, a certain astonishment arises – so characteristic of thinking – when the response to her intellectual desires is, on the one hand, a subtle roadblock and, on the other hand, a regression to a “feminine condition” which women thought they had escaped. Here we confront the dualism with which Western thought organizes its categories and in which the feminine appears on one side, associated with concepts such as nature, the irrational and the emotions, and overshadowed by that which is considered laudably human, i.e. reason, the life of the spirit, and so forth, which are identified with the masculine.

Uneasiness and rage accompany the demands for equality and the search for feminine models in which to find support. Disillusion is greatest when the search for tradition devolves into archaeology. It is when one looks at the landscape of a feminine tradition and discovers it discontinuous, disconnected and disjointed that the claims to difference and the critique and deconstruction of the cultural models and traditions constructed by men begin. Moreover, to vindicate the different experiences of women means to recognize that, “although the same things happen to us, we are not all the same,” to paraphrase the Argentine comic strip writer, Maitena.<sup>3</sup> A similar process has occurred in the evolution of feminist theory, in response to the theories which propounded equality, followed by the forceful defense of differences within the feminine, at the same time provoking the need to analyze exactly what the feminine is, in order to recognize finally that there are many ways of being a woman.

## Spaces

The question of space is closely linked to the figure of the intellectual woman and does not lack a certain historical tradition, as we see demonstrated in the “city of ladies” which Christine de Pizan dreamed about at

the dawn of the fifteenth century, or the right to “a room of one’s own,” which Virginia Woolf asserted at the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost five hundred years separate these two writers, yet the great similarities in their visions and propositions for reform continue to surprise us. Both authors justify their projects with the explanation that the time has come for women to have at their disposal a space of their own.

Christine de Pizan begins *The Book of the City of Ladies* (2018) by recounting that she is seated in her study, surrounded by books. Tired of intellectual work, she seeks distraction in a book which contains a series of platitudes about women and asks herself how it is possible for most poets, scholars, philosophers and moralists to have such a manifestly abhorrent view of women. In her despair, Christine desires to be a man. Disconsolate and head bowed, she weeps in her study. Suddenly, a light illuminates her. Before her appear three women, noble, beautiful and elegant, who calm her, encouraging her to use her critical thinking and her common sense.<sup>4</sup> The three women are Reason, Justice and Virtue, and they communicate to Christine that she has been chosen as the architect of a city of ladies (Pizan 2018, 119-29). In this city, all women will be able to dedicate themselves to the cultivation of their inclinations and preferences without interference, since this city will serve to protect women and provide them with a favorable environment. The raising of the citadel will begin with the gradual demolition of masculine prejudices. The consolidation of its walls will be found in the examples of women of integrity, valor, and fighting spirit, that is, by means of the memory and vindication of a feminine tradition. Once built, the city will be open to exceptional women elected to live within, who will inhabit the city for eternity and establish a new reign of women.

In *A Room of One’s Own* (2015) Virginia Woolf, seated by a river, muses on the subject of women and literature. Like Christine, she reflects on how much men have written about women and the little that women have written about themselves. Feeling herself incapable of coming to any conclusion, the only possibility that occurs to her is that of attending to one particular problem, which she defines as a minor one: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that [...] leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of fiction unsolved” (Woolf 2015, 3).

The modesty of Woolf, when compared to Pizan, is significant and probably the fruit of a more democratic attitude since, while Pizan opens her city only to distinguished women, Woolf underscores the “insignifi-

cance” which has characterized the feminine world. This is perhaps why she insists so much on having a proper space to begin with. Fundamental as this is, it is only a beginning – if we cannot also find the possibility of our voice resonating out to others and reverberating back to us in modified sounds and with different nuances. This is precisely where the question of symbolic space becomes relevant, in very close connection with the issue of language. We, philosophers and thinkers, know the degree to which the paths of discourse lead us to the realities where we can reflect and see reflected our own experiences, as well as those of other women.

## Symbolic Space

The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective has had no other experience as they describe in their book *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (1990), in which they claim that the “room of one’s own”, as described by Virginia Woolf: “must be understood differently, then, as a symbolic placement, a space-time furnished with female-gendered references, where one goes for meaningful preparation before work, and confirmation after” (Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 1990, 26).<sup>5</sup>

In their testimony – which reviews the experiences and feminist endeavours of diverse groups of women over more than twenty years – the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective recount with lived immediacy, a search for space and a symbolic order which represents women’s experiences and ways of inhabiting the world.<sup>6</sup> It quickly becomes obvious that the creation of such a space is essentially a question of voices, experiences and interrelations. Let me explain: voices which narrate history without fear of breaking the silence so frequently counselled to women and which – and this is fundamental – put these histories at the disposal of other voices that not only repeat them, but at the same time interpret them. It is a process of thought in which lived experience – primary material, as much as the elaboration of it – has a strongly plural character, to the point that many of these texts were published under collective authorship. In their group practices, the Milan women are a good example of the Arendtian notion of power, defined not as something possessed by a single person but rather as something which emerges between human beings when they interact and which disappears when they separate (Arendt 1998, 199-202). The great importance of tradition in our socio-cultural configuration – that is, in our form of seeing

and being in the world – reveals that the power dynamics of ideas, meanings and symbols,<sup>7</sup> are also maintained, thanks to our participation in the linguistic exchanges we all share, or rather that all – both men and women – *ought* to share.

The lack of access to a discourse, in which is also implied the lack of space where one can be, or – what amounts to the same thing – the imposition of a discourse which cannot express or reflect other ways of being and other identities – was the first premise of the so-called “postmodern condition”, which the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard diagnosed as characteristic of our time. Lyotard dedicates his book, *Le Différend* (1988), to a discussion of the insoluble conflict between the diversity of discourses, and he analyses a situation of conflict impossible to resolve due to the lack of criteria for establishing justice, in the sense of being able to chain together the different discourses, without losing any part of them. Thus, any judgment or decision will inevitably lead to the detriment of one of the parts; the only escape is silence (Lyotard 1988, 48-9).

If one reads carefully the different experiences narrated by the Milan Women, one can see that many of their “discoveries” can be described in the same manner as Lyotard – the verification of the lack of a symbolic order in which one can see oneself reflected or by means of which one can “translate” one’s experiences as a woman. This “non-translatability” is a function not only of an incompatibility with the masculine social and symbolic order but also reflects the impossibility of creating symbolic connections with other women mediated as they are and, in some cases, boycotted by the masculine order (Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 1990, 127). The discovery of the differences between the women themselves reproduced the same succumbing to silence – which, as we may remember, is also a form of discourse – as the only means of expressing the lack of representation which some women continued to suffer, in spite of coming together regularly as a collective that was ready to represent their experiences in theory but not in practice. Their silence suggested a feeling of being treated unjustly.

To seek reparation and to convert this search into a political practice only leads to the awareness of a conflict, very similar to that defined by Lyotard (cf. Lyotard 1988, 30) and which is unsolvable for the same impossibility of finding a projection of this injustice in the discursive-symbolic world that fails to provide adequate relationships for recounting the experience and reality of women. As the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective says:

“We have also seen the demand for redress become a sort of female politics; in this version, on the assumption that they are all equally victimized by male society, women turn to the latter for redress. The response to such demand is usually positive; society has no problem in admitting that women are victims of a wrong, although it then reserves the right to decide according to its own criteria how they will be compensated, so the game may go on forever.”  
 (Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 1990, 128-29)

The model of political exercise and of theory followed by the Milan Women also made use of story and narrative – opening the traditional concept of theory to new forms of discourse – which can serve as reference and guidance to the real experience of women. But, in contrast to Lyotard – and this is essential – the Milan Women do not take an idea of justice as a point of departure. This is for two reasons: First, because, as I have already noted, they reject the idea that any reparation is possible, for it cannot take place in the symbolic realm, which is where a true reparation must occur. Second – and in logical consequence to the first – because the idea of justice is not the main priority in the context of women’s relationship with one another:

“Justice does not come before everything else. Fidelity to what is, to what one is, comes before everything else. The practice of disparity among women is not justice or injustice, but something which comes before and concerns the interpretation of sexual difference.”  
 (Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 1990, 132)

Assuming that “sexual difference” does not indicate so much an essential trait which conditions our existence but rather a way of being in the world which accepts that “sexual difference is partiality; it is a sign of finiteness, the most powerful sign marking thought as corporeal” (Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 1990, 149). From this perspective, justice can only be understood as a consecutive moment which enables the expression of this difference in “free social forms” (132). The most pressing question, then, is to ask what kind of freedom we are talking about and what its forms of social expression are. It turns out to be extremely difficult to convey this experience of finitude and partiality without establishing a symbolic space in which this sexual difference can become an experience that can

be shared by all women in their social relationships; a symbolic space that begins with the physical place of the bookshop, passing through the encounters and conversations between them, and which ends in the recognition of a symbolic maternal order that mediates the women's relationships with each other.

The propositions of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, surprise, frighten and irritate for their radicalism, since, taken to their logical conclusions, they suppose a total reconstruction of the symbolic-social order which begins with a retrogression to a prior point of departure, including "the time when sexual difference receives its first interpretation" (144). This is essential if one keeps in mind that so-called sexual difference does not consist "in this or that content but in the references and relations inside which existence is inscribed" (31). It is crucial to rescue this previous moment in order to allow these relationships to reflect what women have lived since the beginning.

This is no other than what Reason recommends to Christine de Pizan who, before building the citadel, must begin with systematically deconstructing the masculine order (Pizan 2018, 66). Only after that can she begin to construct a new order, the new space, the new city. In the same manner, the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective asserts that, "the politics of sexual difference does not come *after* the equality of the sexes has been achieved" but rather, it is one based on and accentuating a feminine liberty won and founded on the social relations between women (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990, 144-45).

The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, always attentive to the "practice of doing among women" (81), identifies a specific model of friendship among women who share mutual support as well as a recognition not only of the authority of one of them but also, and in particular, of the differences between them. The practice of this type of relationship they have named *affidamento* (entrustment), a term which implies confidence, trust, faith and fidelity, and whose theoretical meaning is difficult to understand, without the concomitant political practice, because *affidamento* names precisely the exercise (praxis) of these relationships and not the relationships themselves.

At the individual level, *affidamento* exists between two women who exercise a relationship of validation, esteem and recognition of feminine authority. It is not a question of closed relations, or dependence, but rather, "it is offering and asking from female human experience the

means of signifying its true and great existence in the world” (149). But it is at the socio-political level where the practice of *affidamento* acquires its symbolic force as reflection and transmission of women’s experience, which then acquires a value that had been denied until now, thus contributing to the “foundation of a female social authority” (148).

## Conclusion

In the search for a space for intellectual women, the practice of *affidamento* (entrustment) presents itself as an attractive and revolutionary path, since it is in the cultural realm where the force and support of a feminine tradition is most absent, and which would be present from the beginning if we did not have to go on reconstructing it at every turn.

This reminds me of that statement of Isaac Newton: “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants” (Turnbull 1959, 416). The metaphor is sufficiently explicit to suggest what might be the result of the lack of such giants. Many of us have experienced, at one time or another, how immensely helpful feminine support can be. Nevertheless, we still find it difficult to imagine such a practice. And the fact that it takes great effort for women to imagine this seems to corroborate the lack of a symbolic space that reflects and transcends feminine relationships, as the Milan Women emphasize.

However, it should be noted that the rules governing the male order have been established by mechanisms along the same lines as those used by the Milan Bookstore Collective. Newton has no problem in relying on his predecessors and their knowledge, experiences and mistakes to advance his own ideas. The women, however, require an effort to imagine the figure of the female mentor or tutor. More difficult still is to imagine – or even accept? – the maternal figure. Thus, the intellectual woman still finds it difficult to accept and acknowledge feminine authority. Christine de Pizan laments that it has not been possible to learn more from her father, and the women she elects to the city of women are not really maternal figures, but rather exceptional ones, whose exceptionalism manifests itself in a behavior and a set of values clearly inscribed in the masculine order.<sup>8</sup>

In surveying the examples with which Pizan wishes to shore up the walls of the city, what draws our attention are the acts of extraordinary heroism required of the founders, and the fact that such heroic acts are

valued and governed by a code that does not correspond to the reality of women in the early fifteenth century.

The fact that the women of the Milan Bookstore Collective recognize the difference – even the inequality – between women themselves and turn it into a form of political practice is both novel and peculiar at the same time. The proposal to regulate this difference through mediation by a “symbolic mother” which, in turn, is reflected in the practice of *affidamento*, arouses great mistrust. It has also awakened significant rejection on the part of those who consider it important to gain greater representation within the existing symbolic order, without the need to create a separate one. With reference to the image of the “symbolic mother,” which the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective wishes to be the guarantor, for the continuation of women’s experiences, it has been noted that this entails a certain infantile regression in some relationships, where one of the women whose authority is recognized is converted into that of a symbolic mother. There is also a certain fear of founding a parallel order and renouncing participation in the already established order, which, in the end, is the one that governs the world. These critiques are based on the prejudice that claiming certain practices and the figure of a symbolic mother would mean, once again, reducing women to women-only spaces and functions, such as motherhood. The fear is that it would be a return to an essentialist model of woman, as long promoted by patriarchy.

What these detractors do not take into account is that the Italian model promotes just the opposite – to leave behind the devaluation of women by patriarchy, to create and establish relationships between women who are disparate in their ways of life, projects, etc., and to create a symbolic order that brings together all these experiences to guide and help women in the recognition of their own desires and experiences. Far from creating a relationship of dependency, the practice of *affidamento* appeals to women’s own responsibility and freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, we are still enlisted in the task of seeking our own representations. Within the established order we lack “languages” that signify us. The alternative to searching for these languages to express our experience results in difficulties precisely because of the lack of models which allow us to “imagine” something different (Cavarero 1995, 157-58).

The practice of *affidamento* could be one alternative, or at least it points in a stimulating direction. However, it is necessary to note that it operates from an already established model, since that is the manner in which the

present symbolic order has been maintained. That means it is a model very similar to the masculine one.

Thus, by taking it up again, we are in a way also blowing it to pieces, since we can re-signify what has hitherto been valued as “insignificant.” The question which could be asked is why is there this need for signifying feminine experience, that is, if it merits the effort involved. If we go in search of other spaces, should we not also change the paradigms of value and signification? It’s a difficult task. To pay attention to experience in order to guide our thinking is an important step.

However, we must remember that, in the case of the experience of women, it is necessary to sift through to arrive at what is really ours, so as to ultimately desist from employing models which, alien as they may be, are the only ones available to us. Returning to a zero point of origin appears impossible, particularly if the origin is one only. For what we call our experience equally involves those models we wish to exorcize, as was seen when discussing the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective. How to escape from this vicious cycle which threatens to asphyxiate us? As I have already stated, the key is to acknowledge our own experiences as women and, even more relevant, to be aware that we do not speak or use a neutral objective language (Cavarero 1995, 184). I suggest a strategy of *pre-vision* in the double sense of what the word means and also suggests: it expresses both an attention to what is transferred to the future but also suggests, by the constitution of the verb, being conscious to previous visions and to the origin, appearance and context of the images, ideas and symbols they carry (Peña Aguado 2021, 52).

## Notes

- 1 I had the pleasure of meeting and working with Veronica Vasterling during the time we were together on the board of the Internationale Assoziation von Philosophinnen (IAPh, The International Association of Women Philosophers). Those were years of intense work in favor of women philosophers, their spaces and the feminist theory. The question of spaces for women is still relevant, both in the academic and social world. It is a right that continues to be challenged, either because sexual difference is questioned for the advancement of gender theories, or because attempts are made in different ways to intimidate women and to reduce their presence in public space – currently in the form of pin pricks at parties and entertainment venues.

- 2 “Spaces, then, when it comes to ‘woman’, are not places that take their significance from their projects as persons [...] but are pre-signified on the basis of their codification by those who have designed them in the very pacts that are woven into the serial mechanism of their self-designations, self-designations by which they are instituted, above all, as codifiers and adjudicators of spaces [...] patriarchy can be considered as a system of adjudication of spaces.”
- 3 Maitena, *Mujeres alteradas, por fin las 5 juntas*, Madrid, Lumen, 2005.
- 4 Christine de Pizan was – no doubt – a woman of the Enlightenment *avant la lettre!* Cf. Bourgault and Kingston 2018, 25.
- 5 The original authors were Libreria delle Donne di Milano and the title of the book, *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (1987).
- 6 In general, and without entering into more concrete discussions about the meaning of the symbolic – I am thinking of Jacques Lacan and his well-known differentiation between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic – we can define the symbolic as the process and the way in which an individual subject participates in the procedures of signification and re-signification of an abstract, cultural reality. Already, from early childhood, we begin to develop abstract thinking through language (including mathematics), plays and culture, as well as to understand the value and meaning of representations through symbols. From its beginnings, feminist theory has denounced the extent to which this symbolic order has ignored women and their contributions to the signification of reality. Far from being recognized as subjects of these representations, they have been objects of them. But it has been the feminism of Sexual Difference, to which the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective belongs, that has insisted most on recovering and creating a feminine symbolic order that would recover the symbolic value of the mother, as well as the importance of relations between women, in order to find a new language and feminine genealogies and also to recognize the differences between women themselves, their desires and experiences. It is this search for a female symbolic order and a place for its development that I am referring to when I speak of symbolic order and symbolic space. In the book, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective does not offer a specific definition either of this symbolic space, nor of the “symbolic of women,” but it is often mentioned. Creating a symbolic space for women means building a web of relationships between women who, at the same time, recognize the differences between themselves. Entrustment (*affidamento*) is the name of this form of relationships. Highly recommended and very helpful in understanding the different concepts that emerge in the feminist practice

of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective and their "symbolic revolution" is the introduction written by Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy: An Introductory Essay" (1990) that accompanies the English translation of the book.

- 7 I am aware of the close connection between these three concepts, but here I am interested in pointing out their differences: The concept of the "idea" is related to our own knowledge and imagination, "meaning" has more to do with the significance and definition that we share with others and "symbols" are things or objects which, by convention or association, are considered to represent an entity, an idea, a certain condition. This "representation" is relevant in this context, then women have been the object of representation but not subject of it.
- 8 Lauretis calls it "the paradox of woman" and underlines, among other things, the extent to which women are trapped in a world tailored to and ruled by men (Lauretis 1990, 12).
- 9 Lauretis has pointed to this pre-eminence of relations between women, which she describes as an "accountability to women." On their conception of women's freedom, she portrays this as "as startlingly radical a notion as any that has emerged in Western thought" (Lauretis 1990, 12). Cf. Lauretis 1989.

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