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Is There a Feminine Genius?

Julia Kristeva

For a long time now, according to the cadence of chance and the necessities of intellectual life, the works of Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette have shed light on and supported my own work and life. In addition to this past, the years I've spent writing the triptych devoted to them have enabled me to spend a lot of time with them.¹ This leaves me now—as I complete the work—with the impression of actually having shared their lives. All these years of research have forged close bonds between us. It is a sisterly closeness in which affection has rivalled unconscious erotic projection, a relationship sometimes including an irritated distancing of myself from them as well as the critical rejection of their ideas. However, it is my admiration for these three women that prevails when reading their work, and a feeling of sympathetic support prevails when I consider the winding paths of their lives. Some of my acquaintances have said that the interpretation of their work that I propose in this trilogy is a sign of generosity on my part. If readers were to confirm this impression, it would be the greatest gift that Arendt, Klein, and Colette could have given me, in revealing what is often concealed by the harshness of life.

The provocative hyperbole of the term *genius* was the guiding idea that helped me to understand how these three twentieth-century women were able to surpass themselves in their respective fields (political philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature) so as to encourage each reader to surpass him- or herself in a similar way, in following the struggles of Arendt, Klein,

To Simone de Beauvoir

1. See Julia Kristeva, *La Génie féminin: La Vie, la folie, les mots*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1999–2002); trans. as three separate works under the titles *Melanie Klein*, *Hannah Arendt*, and *Colette*, by Ross Guberman (New York, 2001, 2004).

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and Colette and in working on his or her own. I'm convinced that the highest realization of human rights, and of women's rights, is none other than the Scotist ideal that we are now, at this moment in history, in a position to achieve: a particular attention paid to the *eccitas*, to the flourishing of the individual in his or her uniqueness, to what makes an individual *who* he or she is and raises him or her above ordinariness—*genius* being the most complex, the most appealing, and the most fruitful form of this uniqueness at a particular moment in history and, given that it is so, the form that is lasting and universal.

1. Beauvoir between the Situation and the Individual Potential of the Individual

Insisting in this manner on the uniqueness that expresses itself in exemplary works (in particular in the humanities, my own field) is also a way of dissociating myself from mass feminism. Women's struggle for emancipation has passed through three stages in modern times: first, the demand for *political rights* led by the suffragettes; second, the affirmation of an ontological *equality* with men (as against the idea that women are equal but different), which led Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), to demonstrate the existence and predict the realization of a "fraternity" between men and women, a fraternity that goes beyond their particular natural differences; and, finally, in the wake of May '68 and of psychoanalysis, the search for the *difference* between men and women, which would explain a specific creativity particular to women, in the sexual domain and more generally across the whole range of social practices from politics to writing. At each of these stages, the liberation of all womankind has been the objective. In this respect the feminists have not departed from the totalizing ambitions of the various liberation movements that arose out of Enlightenment philosophy and, if we go further back, that were the result of the dissolution of the religious continent that these movements struggled to realize here in this world with rebellious negativity—the paradisiacal teleology. Today, we know only too well the dead end to which these totalizing and totalitarian promises lead. Feminism itself, whatever various currents may exist in

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Europe and America, has not escaped this tendency. As a result, it has hardened into an inconsequential form of political activism that, ignorant of the uniqueness of individual subjects, believes that it can encompass all womankind, like all the proletariat or the entire Third World, within a set of demands that are as passionate as they are desperate.

However, we have to recognize that its most illustrious source of inspiration, Beauvoir, was far from underestimating the “subject” in woman or the “individual” in her that “felt an undefined need to transcend itself.” Faithful to this approach emanating from existentialist morality, and appropriating Marxism according to her own lights, Beauvoir the philosopher endeavored to liberate woman from her inferior status, which compels her to be the *Other* of man, who has neither the right nor the opportunity to form an *Other* herself. Denied the possibility of forming her own projects or of transcending herself, woman thus determined by the history of a society dominated by men is consigned to immanence, immobilized as an object “since her transcendence [is] perpetually transcended by another, essential and sovereign conscience.”² While never ceasing to oppose the biological reduction of woman—“One isn’t born a woman, one becomes one” (*DS*, 2:13)—Beauvoir never lost her rage against metaphysics because it imprisons woman in her status of the *Other*, consigning her to the realm of facticity and of immanence, refusing her access to the true status of humanity, that of autonomy and of freedom.

However, by putting to one side the question of difference and focussing on equality, Beauvoir denied herself the possibility of pursuing her existentialist agenda, which she had however announced and which would, no doubt, have led her to reflect, via the consideration of women in general, upon the possibilities of freedom of each one of them as a unique human being: “The tragedy of woman consists in the conflict between the fundamental demands of each *subject* who posits herself as essential, and the demands of a situation in terms of which she is inessential. How, in the feminine condition, can a *human being* arrive at fulfillment? . . . That is to say that, by concerning ourselves with the *possibilities open to the individual*, we will not be defining these possibilities in terms of happiness, but in terms of freedom” (*DS*, 1:31). Indeed, and although Beauvoir’s thought is frequently inspired by the achievements of “individual” women, women as “subjects,” examples of genius ranging from Saint Theresa or Colette to Mademoiselle de Gournay or Théroigne de Méricourt, it’s less to the human being or to individual possibilities that *The Second Sex* is devoted than to the condition of womankind. Because it was through the transformation of

2. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1949), 1:31; hereafter abbreviated *DS*.

the condition of women in general that its author saw the possibility of individual autonomy and feminine creativity realizing itself, such possibilities of the individual remained nevertheless, in her opinion, the principal historical objective.

It would no doubt have been premature for the author of *The Second Sex* to defend the uniqueness of women while so many sexual and economic conditions still hampered women's liberation. Her particular style of philosophical journalism conveys her intense political commitment, coupled with her prodigious qualities as a teacher, and is tinged with a sense of irony that is as graceful as it is perceptive and has guaranteed her book unequalled success, as we know. The issues she dealt with are still topical to the extent that the global era that is emerging in the wake of modernity threatens to be riddled with all kinds of conservatism and archaism. Nevertheless, it's far from obvious that the "conflict" between the condition of womankind as a whole and the self-realization of each individual woman—which, according to Beauvoir, is at the root of women's suffering—can be resolved if we concern ourselves only with the conditions and neglect the importance of the subject. By focussing on the transformation of the feminine condition, Beauvoir herself leads us away from the essential question of individual projects and consigns to the shadows the issue of the indeterminable possibilities arising from the *eccitas* (or fundamental uniqueness) of each individual according to Duns Scotus. Arendt, Klein, Colette—and many others—did not wait for the "feminine condition" to be ripe in order to exercise their freedom. Is not genius precisely the breakthrough that consists in going beyond the situation?

To appeal to the genius of each individual is not to underestimate the weight of History—these three women faced up to history as much and as well as any others, with courage and a sense of realism—but to attempt to free the feminine condition, and more generally the human condition, from the constraints of biology, society, and destiny by placing the emphasis on the importance of the conscious or unconscious initiative of the subject faced with the program dictated by these various determinisms.

Isn't subjective initiative, in the end, this highly personal force, tiny yet irreducible, on which depends the possibility of deconstructing any given "condition"? By focussing on the irreducible subjectivity of these three women, on the uniqueness of the creativity of each one of them, my study has been concerned with their "individual possibilities" in "terms of [their] freedom," to use Beauvoir's own vocabulary. Moreover, leaving aside our differences, I firmly believe that I am retrieving and developing an essential question raised by *The Second Sex* that, due to historical circumstances and to her own existentialist convictions, Beauvoir had to leave unanswered,

namely, *How, through the feminine condition, can a woman fulfil her being, her individual potential in terms of freedom, which is the modern meaning of happiness?* It will be seen that, in formulating my own work in these terms, I wish to express, as well as I can, my debt to Beauvoir, that pioneer feminist who is all too often, and unjustifiably, criticized or underestimated, and dedicate my three-volume work to her.

It would be pointless drawing up a list of the qualities shared by Arendt, Klein, and Colette with the aim of defining feminine genius. Uniqueness, by its very essence, cannot be subjected to comparison; it's not something that is repeated identically from one individual to another. Nevertheless, there are some similarities in the life histories of these three women, and I'll come back to this point. But before I do, and in the absence of a real treatise on female sexuality, I should at least clarify the second term of my title, which I have left unexplained until now in the hope that its meaning would make itself clear through the various experiences of these three geniuses, namely, what is the *feminine*? Is it possible to define neither *woman* nor *womankind*, but a *feminine particularity* that is different in each (thus one could speak of the feminine aspect of woman and the feminine aspect of man) and for each individual person and do this without confining the feminine in the concept of the Other or in "that which defies representation"?

Without going so far as to propose a systematic theory, my previous work in psychoanalysis has tried to answer this question by approaching the feminine from the perspective of the various symptoms or psychological structures that I have been able to analyze in treating my male or female patients. Given this background of study, the existential and cultural experiences of Arendt, Klein, and Colette have left their own mark and have led me to refine and even to alter my conceptions on this question. I cannot in this limited space develop this complex picture of female sexuality based on my experience as a psychoanalyst. Let me say only that it involves, first, a complex process of disidentification from the mother, which results in the subject becoming a sexual object of a man (that is, the father) but also and, second, in an identification with the father as a symbolic figure that allows the subject to speak, to think, and to take part in society. This theory of a primary and a secondary Oedipus complex, which I call a bifacial Oedipus complex, implies that women have a stronger bisexuality than men, as Freud said. Women take part in the symbolic order, but only as outsiders or, in the words of Hegel, as the "*eternal irony of the community*." In addition to this the experience of maternity enables women to consider death in the light of birth, and women's experience of temporality would seem to be more like that of rebirth than the temporality of life-unto-death developed

by classical philosophy from Plato to Heidegger. Finally, the link to the Other—that is, the object relation—seems to exist from early childhood and to be stronger than the narcissistic tendencies that women are traditionally said to exhibit.

Now, what did my three geniuses have in common, and how did they differ, in terms of their feminine qualities?

2. Common Characteristics

Beyond the incommensurable differences and the originality of the three oeuvres that I have surveyed in my triptych, there are some common features that stand out:

1) The first one concerns the object relation. How is this expressed in the works of my three authors? Let me start with Arendt. Keen to defend the uniqueness of who an individual is as against his or her various determinations, or what he or she is, which is threatened by various forms of totalitarianism, she nevertheless does not seek refuge in solipsistic incantations. Against the isolation of the philosophers that she derided as a “*melancholic tribe*” (from Plato to Kant and to Heidegger) and against the anonymity of the crowd, the “they” (to use Heidegger’s term) into which the multitude of anonymous individuals melts, our “political journalist,” as she (Arendt) liked to call herself, makes an appeal for a political life in which the originality of each individual is guaranteed through (the creation of) a “web of human relationships” consisting of memory and narrative destined for others. This realization of the who of the individual in the web of attachments that unite particular individuals is a distinctive feature of Arendtian political thought, at one and the same time intensely libertarian and eminently social—and therefore to which, paradoxically, both the most eccentric anarchists and the most conservative spirits can subscribe. It’s not simply a reversal of idealist philosophy onto the terrain of sociology nor just a tribute to Aristotle as a counterpoint to Plato that we should read into this transvaluation of political ties, but rather the conviction, as ontological as it is existential, that what is unique in each individual “remains hidden” to “the person himself” and does not “appear so clearly and unmistakably [as it does] to others.”

Concerning Klein, we may say that she radically transforms the Freudian hypothesis of an original narcissism and postulates, from the very beginning of a baby’s psychic life, a “self” capable of a “relationship with the object,” albeit partial (to the breast), before the child becomes capable of constructing an object-relation to the “total object,” following the depressive position. One consideration is prior to all others for this psychoanalyst: the

psyche does not exist and is inconceivable in the absence of a “self” that she postulates along with its correlate, which is the relationship to the “object.”

“Colette the lover,” who was repeatedly betrayed in her love life—and who indeed was often herself the betrayer—finally declares herself to be beyond the passion of love: “Love, one of the great banalities of existence, takes leave of mine. . . . Once we have left it behind us, we notice that all else is gay, diverse, and plentiful.” Make no mistake: this comment ought not to be seen as the prologue to a melancholic report on existence. Thanks to her friendships, and through the discipline of writing in which she immersed herself (forgetting herself in the act and rediscovering unity) in the pure experience of Being, Colette never renounced her participation in the plurality of this world, which she celebrates in a kind of pagan mysticism of self-realization through a multitude of cosmic connections. Thus when she says “all else is gay, diverse, and plentiful” this should be interpreted as a modulation of human love—beyond the love of a couple, not a love for god, but an osmosis with Being.

In these affirmations of a *self that cannot be separated from its various attachments*—political, psychical, sensory, amorous, or literary—I would be tempted to distinguish a constant of feminine psychosexuality. A woman is less cut off in her erotic pleasures and more dependent on the Other—whether this Other is an imaginary vehicle of the psyche or of a real, needed presence. We may venture to say, then, that a woman has a greater inclination than a man to seek and to nurture, in the context of her *attachments*, that which permits the flourishing of what is unique in her rather than that which, in these attachments, restrains and suppresses her pleasure. And that while constantly rebelling against all kinds of fetters, constraints, prisons, camps, and other concentrations of the social that reduce her to a condition of banality, woman never ceases, in spite of the obstacles, to seek in the context of an attachment to an object that is “gay, diverse, and plentiful” the conditions of her political and psychical liberty.

2) The second common characteristic of our three geniuses is their identification of thought with life. By diagnosing a radical evil in totalitarianism, which dared to announce “the superfluity of human life,” Arendt set herself up as the champion of life if (and only if) *this life has a meaning*: life not as *zoé* but as *bios*, giving rise to a biography that becomes part of the memory of the city-state. Through an investigation of the meandering paths of the acts of *willing, thinking, and judging*, she attempts to understand the meaning of an existence such as this, in which life is coextensive with thought and which the two versions of totalitarianism of the twentieth century started to destroy in order to annihilate, with thought, life itself. Deeply shocked, but retaining a sense of humor, she even manages to make fun of

Eichmann, who banalized, “trivialized evil,” not by committing trivial crimes (and some have said that this is implied in what she says) but because he was “incapable of distinguishing good from evil,” because he had the “sad capacity to console himself with clichés,” which is “closely linked to his inability to *think*—in particular to think from another person’s point of view.” Arendt transformed her political struggle against totalitarianism into a philosophical struggle to defend thought: not thought in the sense of calculation (of instrumental rationality) but questioning-thought, savoring-thought, forgiving-thought.

In founding child psychoanalysis, Klein did not simply barter *eroticism*, which Freud had placed at the center of psychic life, for the *pain* of the newly born child that she supposes to be schizo-paranoid and then depressive. Klein’s critics have often thought that this was the case, Lacan calling her that “delightful tripe butcher.” By focussing on the problems of childhood and in particular on child psychosis, which handicaps the cognitive faculties, Klein was the first to use psychoanalysis as an art of curing the capacity to think. Bion, Winnicott, and many others who followed her and often disagreed with her views continued to innovate in terms of their practice by making it increasingly sensitive to the conditions of possibility of the human mind so as to optimize its creative capacities.

It was not only out of vanity that Colette declared herself to be a stranger to literary art. Was it then out of a refusal to imprison herself in a fetish of the literary object or in the rituals of the literary milieu? No doubt it was. But she was far from having avoided the social and aesthetic traps whose perverse effects she was hardly against. However, as a writer she does not use words rhetorically, or in a quest for pure form, or still less as a means of communicating ideas. If we may say that she thinks as she writes, then it is in the sense that this written thought itself emerges as a new life that brings her, beyond a new self and a new body, into a real osmosis with Being. Her writing—sensual, gustatory, and sonorous, fragrant and tactile—is thought made flesh or flesh made thought. Colette does not invent a literary form; she constructs an alphabet of the sensory world by weaving and by feeding on the fabric of the French language. Is she a novelist, a writer? Of course she is. But she has an indomitable energy that never tires of reconstructing the flesh of the world in Sido’s (her mother’s) language.

In their different ways, none of these three women simply places thinking, or sublimation, at the center of life. For them life is thought and thought is life, and in this way they attain the highest state of felicity in which *to live is to think-sublimate-write*. The metaphysical dichotomy between abstract and concrete, meaning and matter, being and existence dissolves in their experience as it does in their thought. Is this an echo of the Christian belief

in reincarnation that I read into these adventures in modernity, which, however, purport to be entirely secular? Or is it not rather another instance of a resonance with female psychosexuality (which I sketched earlier) and which is reluctant to isolate itself in the obsessional palaces of pure thought, in the abstractions of the superego or in the (male) phallic mastery of logical calculation (although many women are capable of such abstract performances, deemed as male, precisely through identification with the male)?

Doesn't the feminine prefer, on the contrary, the "poetic" regions of thought, where meaning is rooted in the world of the senses, where representations of words run alongside representations of things and where ideas give way to instinctual drives?

3) The third common characteristic of my three geniuses is their approach to temporality. Without having experienced maternity herself, Arendt attributed a nodal function to the temporality of birth in her ideas about freedom: it is because men *are born* "strangers" and "ephemeral" that freedom—which is the very possibility of starting anew—can be given its ontological foundation. "This freedom . . . is identical with the fact that men *are* because they are born, that each of them is a new beginning, begins, in a way, a new world." In contrast, Terror eliminates "the very source of freedom which man receives from the fact of his birth and which resides in the fact of his capacity of being a new beginning." Arendt did not deny that the temporality of concern and the temporality of death made an important contribution to the development of thought. But to these she adds her own reflections inspired by St. Augustine and Nietzsche and enriched by her own experience of the twentieth century. These new conceptions are based on a new conception of time: of the time of new beginnings, of renewal.

Thanks to her analysis with Ferenczi and Abraham the depressive Klein was born again into a new existence as a psychoanalyst. Moreover, by renouncing the German language and seeking new theoretical inspiration in English, in the context of British psychoanalysis, she reinforced the countertransference involvement of the analyst. This was one of her most important findings. Some accused her of using suggestion, violence, of making intrusions into the malleable psyche of her young patients. There was no lack of criticism, some of it justified. But in reality, in her infantile fantasies, Klein put herself at the service of the child who came to consult her. Thanks to this unconscious projection, but nevertheless remaining sensitive to the patient's intimacy, she manages to name the unnameable trauma of the Other, to name it with the child's words. Freud practiced transference and countertransference without making explicit what he was doing, and it was the female disciples of Klein, not Klein herself, who theorized the analyst's countertransference. It was Klein who revealed the need for this projection

at the source of the interpretation; by allowing the child in the analyst to be reborn, she created the possibility for the child in each of us to reemerge. And then it was Winnicott, another attentive critic of Klein, who considered analysis itself as a perpetual rebirth of the subject; beyond biological destiny and the weight of family, rebirth becomes possible for each one of us. Freud left us a conception of the unconscious as atemporal, *zeitlos*. Through the play of transfer and countertransfer, Klein and the post-Kleinians offer us a new conception of the temporality of analysis, as new beginning, as rebirth.

Colette avoided dwelling on the inevitability of death and preferred to celebrate birth with Sido (and she frequently used the image of *hatching*): “All my life, I’ve been interested in birth, and more so than in any other manifestation of life. That’s where the essential drama of existence is situated, to a far greater degree than in death, which is no more than a banal defeat.” The blooming of a cactus rose, the budding of plants, and the birth of children—this woman, who was herself far from being a model mother, found above all in writing, this rhythm that she made her own. This is the rhythm of the infinite (in the sense of the French *in-fini*, that which is never finished), of new beginnings: “To metamorphose, to reconstruct oneself, to be born again, have never been beyond my powers.”

Whether or not it is founded on the experience of menstrual cycles or of maternity, this temporality that breaks with linear time and the headlong rush of desire-onto-death also seems to resonate with female psychosexuality. From the primary to the secondary Oedipus complex, as we noted, a woman follows a complex trajectory of changes of positions and of objects—passivization, receptivity, aggression, possession—from the mother to the father, from the sensitive to the signifiable, from the anal and the vaginal to the phallic, from the internal object to the external object. She follows this path, once again, in the perpetual Oedipus complex that never seems to end for the female subject, an episode that is never closed but that becomes calmer, less passionate through the experience of maternity, friendship, and union with nature. Might it be then that the bifacial Oedipus complex is the source of this insistence on the rhythm of renewal as against the linear time of the realization of destiny?

Let me recapitulate the characteristics that are shared by our three geniuses: the permanent nature of attachments and of the object; a desire to safeguard the life of thought because life is thought; and an emphasis on the temporality of birth and rebirth. We could no doubt add other characteristics, which would be more or less convincing. The fact that we can associate them with certain constants of feminine psychosexuality does not mean that they cannot also be found in the works of many male authors—

psychical bisexuality being common to both sexes. Besides which, in the course of my study of Arendt, Klein, and Colette, we can see the extent to which their achievements are a result of their “mental hermaphroditism,” to use Colette’s expression, and how it would have been impossible for them without a sort of phallic affirmation to express their uniqueness.

However, beyond these common features, but also in and of themselves, what has interested me during the time I have spent with these three women was, I would like to repeat, not what they have in common with all women but how each of them, against this shared background, managed to negotiate an original and unprecedented advance.

By paying particular attention to sexual difference, my investigation of female genius has led me, in short, to go beyond the dichotomy of the sexes, to distance myself from the initial presupposition of a binary sexual system. This has been made possible not only because psychical bisexuality seemed to me to be a fact that applies to both sexes, with the dominant factor varying between sexes and between individuals. Nor is it possible just because each individually constructed sexual identity deviates from some standard. These factors are relevant, but finally and most importantly what allows us to overcome the traditional, binary model of sexuality is the fact that creativity, when developed to the full in genius, pushes this deviation from the standard to its furthest limit and to the highest degree of uniqueness, which is *nevertheless* something that can be shared. At the heart of the precarious solitude of their pioneering work, which was the price they paid for their unique creativity, Arendt, Klein, and Colette managed to create the conditions that give rise to a necessarily public opinion and, why not, a school and, at best, create an effect of seduction that solicits a communion of readings and a community of readers.

The sexual, social, and political liberation of women and their entry into various intellectual and professional domains in the modern polity raises the question of their equality or their difference with regard to men. This was the central question of the twentieth century. However, the third millennium will be the millennium of individual opportunities, or it will not be (here I’m making an allusion to André Malraux, who famously said that the twenty-first century would be a spiritual century, or would not be). I’ve tried, with my three-volume study, to go beyond the well-worn approach to these questions, which sought to define fixed sexual identities. And, beyond the sexual polymorphism that is already appearing in the global era—to the extent that it is raising questions concerning not only our identity but also the idea of the couple and of natural procreation—I would like to think that each individual invents his or her sex in the domain of intimacy. Therein lies genius, which is quite simply creativity.

So, is there a feminine genius? The example of twentieth-century women has made it difficult to avoid the question. And it has led us to consider that the anxiety over the feminine has been the communal experience that has allowed our civilization to reveal, in a new way, the incommensurability of the individual. This incommensurability is rooted in sexual experience but nonetheless is realized through the risks that each of us is prepared to take by calling into question thought, language, one's own age, and any identity that resides in them. You are a genius to the extent that you are able to challenge the sociohistorical conditions of your identity. This is the legacy of Arendt, Klein, and Colette.