

Dis/Continuities:

Natural and Artistic Landscape/Seascape in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

LES DIS/CONTINUITÉS:

LE PAYSAGE/PAYSAGE MARIN NATUREL ET ARTISTIQUE DANS "LA TERRE VAINNE" DE T.S. ELIOT ET "LA RIME DU VIEUX MARIN" DE S.T. COLERIDGE

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Abstract: This study sets T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" against Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", arguing that although both poems belong to different literary traditions, yet they exhibit certain similarities and parallels that should not be overlooked. This paper identifies these parallels within the two poem's recruitment of the following: the quest motif, along with notions of sin, punishment, and salvation; fertility rites; indifferent setting; raped/betrayed nature or female; water imagery; the supernatural figure and resurrection of the dead along with notions of life-in-death. It turns out that natural elements are incorporated in both poems as a test tube to examine human values and norms of behavior against the background of nature, within a conception of man as the archetypal solitary outsider. The paper then underlines the interrelatedness of the symbolic journey in nature in both poems and the journey into precursor artistic/poetic landscapes, whereby Eliot's journey across the indifferent realms of the Waste Land might perhaps be seen as a continuity, or even discontinuity, of the piscatorial journey of Coleridge's Mariner. And with the parallels between the two poems in mind, the paper then poses a question about the boundaries of Eliot's overemphasized anti-Romantic attitudes.

Key words: Eliot; Coleridge; Rime; Waste Land; Romantic Poetry; Modern Poetry

Resumé Cette étude met "La terre vaine" de T.S. Eliot dans l'état opposé de "La Rime du vieux marin" de Samuel Taylor Coleridge, en affirmant que bien que ces deux poèmes appartiennent à de différentes traditions littéraires, ils présentent certaines similitudes et des parallèles qui ne devraient pas être négligés. Cet article identifie ces parallèles au sein des éléments suivants utilisés dans ces deux poèmes: le motif de quête; ainsi que des notions de péché, punition et salut; les rites de fertilité; le raptage indifférent; la nature violée / trahie ou féminine; l'imagerie de l'eau; la figure surnaturelle et la résurrection des morts ainsi que des notions de vie en mort. Il s'avère que les éléments naturels sont incorporés dans les deux poèmes comme un moyen pour examiner les valeurs humaines et des normes de comportement contre le contexte de la nature, dans une conception selon laquelle l'homme est un outsider archétype solitaire. L'article souligne ensuite l'interdépendance des parcours symboliques dans la nature dans ces deux poèmes et le voyage dans des paysages précurseurs

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artistiques / poétiques, par lequel le voyage d'Eliot travers les royaumes indifférents de la Terre vaine pourrait peut-être vu comme une continuité voire une discontinuité du voyage halieutique des marins de Coleridge. Et avec les parallèles entre les deux poèmes dans l'esprit, l'article pose alors une question sur les limites des attitudes anti-romantiques surestimées d'Eliot.

Mots-clés: Eliot; Coleridge; Rime; Terre Vaine; Poésie Romantique; Poésie Moderne

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"No poet... has his complete meaning alone.... [Y]ou must set him, for contrast and comparison among the dead." (Eliot, 1980: 15)

It is the purpose of this paper to set Eliot himself against Samuel Taylor Coleridge as potential precursor, by exploring some analogies between Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Eliot's "The Waste Land". Though both poems belong to different literary traditions, yet they exhibit certain similarities and parallels that should not be overlooked, a connection to which A. D. Moody laconically alluded, suggesting a "correspondence" between "The Waste Land" and "The Rime" as far as the "inner process and its meaning" in both poems are concerned (1996: 125; 117). This paper aims at identifying these parallels within the two poem's recruitment of the following: The quest motif, along with notions of sin, punishment and salvation; fertility rites; indifferent setting; raped/betrayed nature or female; water imagery; the supernatural figure and resurrection of the dead along with notions of life-in-death.

To start with, both poems are structured upon the quest motif, a journey initiated by a major character attached to a mythical ultimatum. "The Rime" focuses upon the Mariner's sinful violation of nature and the consequent physical and mental ordeal he is left to suffer, along with the accompanying sailors, towards his final self-discovery in the sea, altogether comprising the boundaries of a journey of what is called "life in death" (Bowra, 1976: 57). At the end of the journey the Mariner attains an intermission, a temporary relief from sin and its "agony" (235), having recognized that "He prayeth well who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast," when *things*, regardless of their size or magnitude, are creations of God who "made and loveth all" (612-613; 617).³ Such recognition is revealed in the Mariner's confession to "the Hermit good" (509) who, Robert P. Warren identified, represents "the priest of Nature as well as the priest of God [who] officially reintroduces [the Mariner] into human society" (1969: 43). The Mariner is then compelled to retell the story to achieve a partial salvation that is necessary to materialize the symbolic redemption conferred when "the Albatross fell off" (290) his neck. The retelling is essential for the forgiveness, since it may stop further and similar violations of nature, whereby the Mariner may gain the blessing of the ugly water- snakes, the retelling becoming hence what David Jasper considered "a recognition of the irreparable damage which has been done... [,] a statement of loss rather than gain" in a poem ("The Rime") where "the problem of sin and moral guilt" occupies a position of thematic centrality (1985: 55; 59). Such redemption is brought within Christian allusive notions of sin-cleansing and baptism, as the Mariner's "body lay a float" (553), having turned more sympathetic to and appreciative of objects of nature.⁴

Likewise, the Fisher King in "The Waste land" bears the responsibility for salvation in the contemporary society where sterility and disease prevailed and generated waste and death upon the land and modern people. Hence, the Fisher King embarks upon a quest of spiritual discovery that ends in the south, a direction that echoes the Mariner's journey "southward" (50). In "What the Thunder said" the Fisher King achieves an epiphany and peace ("shantih"), as also reflected in the repeated "Da", from the Hindu tradition, meaning "Give, sympathize, control" and representing knowledge outside the fold of corrupted Christianity whereby the Fisher King becomes aware of the individual's need to be humane and control his conduct, rather than being enslaved by his personal whims and wishes, having experienced the "Unreal" (376) vision of the "empty chapel" (388) and "Falling towers" (373) of Greco-Roman civilization, the ethical foundation of the European Christian culture.⁵ Therefore, the repeated "Da", given the southern nationality, comes to announce the end of the poem with its three extended images (of the heart that dwells upon its regretful memories, the room and its key, and the boat within the sea, lines 401-422), leading to the Fisher King's decision to "set" his land "in order" (425). As A.D. Moody remarks, "The Waste Land" is about "the process of breakdown and reintegration as it occurs in the individual psyche" (1996: 116). Thus, both the Mariner and the Fisher King achieve recognition of one's own self and environment and the vocation of the first for sake of the second, which [the latter] retaliates once disrespected.

³ Citations of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (henceforth "The Rime") are from *The Norton Anthology of English Poetry*: 812-28.

⁴ For discussion of matters of guilt and remorse in "The Rime", see Watkins 1988: 28 and Bowra, 1976: 56-57. See also Michael Raiger's perceptive interpretation of "The Rime" where Raiger expounds the Mariner's blessing of the sea snakes in light of Augustine's understanding of the will (2006: 72-73).

⁵ All citations of "The Waste Land" are from *T. S. Eliot. The Complete Poems and Plays*: 61-80. As for meaning of "Da", see Eliot's notes on the text of the Waste Land (Eliot, 1968: 80).

Such retaliating Nature acts as part of the setting, which opposes Nature and civilization, configuration of which are evidently stressed in both poems. "The Rime" refers to "kirk" (church), "hill", and "lighthouse" (23-24) which are emblematic of moral/natural/civilized (social) guidance. The story takes place in ancient times and at a distant sea, most probably in the South Pole, igniting an ordeal marked by a loss of innocence due to the absence of such sources of moral, natural, and social guidance. The sea, for the Mariner, embodies the void in which he is abandoned to review his deeds according to a perspective different from what he experienced in civilization, having now been exposed to atypical community which comprises along with people, fauna and natural contexts, the sea in particular, all of which come to act upon the Mariner.⁶

In "The Waste Land", the modern "Unreal" (60) city, symbolic of civilization, is depicted within varied languages (European dialects) in the first and last parts, reflecting on the rootless post First World War European metropolitan life and its fragmentation into different nationalities, as illustrated by "London Bridge is falling down" (426). As such, the city provides the Fisher King's journey with the backgrounding state of moral bankruptcy in modern civilization, an insolvency incurred by man's indifferent desires, as the one represented by Hieronymo's craving to avenge his son's murder. Such a scene of disintegration starts the traveler's apocalyptic vision. In fact, the city has a metaphorical centrality in "The Waste Land", through which the Fisher King surveys various types of moral stagnation underlining the chaos and transience of modern life.⁷ Opposed to the shapeless liquid sea, the city, though supposedly a context of form, is chaotic and lacking moral restraint, a world the Fisher King needs to reorder. Nonetheless, London is not at all examined away from water; a major focal point of reference in its treatment is The River Thames:

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights (177-179).

The natural (the river) cannot stand the cultivated, falsified notion of its genuine essence. That is, if sexuality is natural, it is the association of sexuality with the civilized, modernized contexts of sexuality, such as false cultural values of appearances, parties, clothing, and related signs of wealth and class, that are naturally irrelevant or abhorred.⁸ The city for the Fisher King is unreal because it is entirely physical lacking any spiritual essence, London hence being "[u]nder the brown fog of a winter dawn" (61). Indeed, both the Mariner and the Fisher King operate in different contexts, yet the outcome remains the same for each of them: that they are left in the lurch to grasp and reconstruct any moral system within such chaos, a system that is more in accord with water (river/sea), or the world of nature at large, rather than the city or civilization.

Recruited in its different shapes and states, water is employed in the two poems as a natural element to illustrate feelings of despair, desolation, and waste. Nonetheless, water is a major agent in the hands of nature, punishing those who threaten its order. The Mariner, feeling thirst within "the rotting sea" (240), is denied clean water to drink: "Water, water, every where,/ Nor any drop to drink" (121-122).⁹ It is the sea which makes the context, the void, of the Mariner's punishment where he is constantly reminded of his guilt, exposed to stressful loneliness. In the state of ice, water hinders the movement of the ship, another aspect of Nature's revenge against the Mariner (58-62). Likewise, water, even in cases of negative presence, is a major natural element in "The Waste Land" conjuring fear and a related failed resurrection: "Fear death by water" (55), a matter echoed several times in the poem, whether it is in the failed resurrection of the hanged man or Phlebas, and the stressful thirst in the water song which strengthens the Fisher King's straining thirst: "drip drop... But there is no water" (357-358), this last example definitely reminiscent of "The Rime" (121-122). As seen earlier, the River Thames has been subjected to pollution, Eliot's reference to it as "The Sweet Thames" (184), becoming hence ironic, recalling in fact precursor counter romanticized poetic images of it. As such, water becomes a witness on the symbolic modern degradation and pollution. And this is exactly the case of the sea in "The Rime", in both cases respect of water, Nature at large, is a prerequisite for harmonious life.

An essential aspect of an accord with nature is the respect of fertility rites which constitute a major part of the commencing and terminating of the quest in both poems. The Mariner begins and ends the narration of his story during the Wedding celebrations, which become as the background of/for his narration to the Wedding-Guest, oscillating

⁶ J. Paxman examined the role of the sea in shaping an English 'island mentality' evident in English literary imagination; for more on this see Paxman, 2007: 30-33; see also Canneti, 1962: 171; Whalley, 1967: 32-50.

⁷ For an exhaustive discussion of the image of the city as an 'Inferno' in modern literature, see Spears, 1970: 78, 66- 79.

⁸ Grover Smith underlined here an allusion to Elizabethan images of ancient fertility myths of nymphs and satyrs festivities, arguing that such images of provide a context for contrast between the past and present; for more see Smith, 1974: 84-85. for more on sexuality in the "The Rime", see McGavran 1995.

⁹ Alice Chandler noted that "Hotness and dryness" in "The Rime" are signs "of spiritual aridity" (1965: 405).

occasionally between the past and the present and suggesting hence the continuity of his narration.¹⁰ Similarly, "The Waste Land" recruits a modern rite of fertility represented firstly in the failed relation between the male voice and the "hyacinth girl" (36).¹¹ Thus, the Desolate and empty modern relation makes April "the cruellest month" (1), though it is spring usually recruits such rite to generate "fear" revealed to the listener, the Fisher King, in a "handful of dust" (30), creating a mixture of life and death, whereby the modern citizen leads a state of the 'living dead' in the contemporary waste land. This rite is repeated in the end, in "What the Thunder said", to indicate the Fisher King's representative contemporary frustration and hopelessness as he finds an "empty chapel" (388) and "Dry bones" (390), leaving him unable to achieve his objective.

In relation to fertility rites, both poems incorporate notions of rape, whether of the female or of nature. In the "The Rime" the Mariner gratifies his hubris, violates nature, and in an act of betrayal and pride, kills the Albatross, the "Christian soul," (65) an act that "made the breeze to blow!" (96), causing an ecological disequilibrium in the relationship between man/male and nature/ female.¹² As Jonathan Cornwell argues, natural phenomena, according to the Mariner's perception, lose their equilibrium in terms of "Motion, sound, and light" along with color and, perhaps, size and shape, aspects that constitute the "basis of unity in Nature" (1973: 233). For instance, "The bloody Sun" (112), as now perceived by the criminal Mariner, is "No bigger than the Moon" (114). Relatedly, the Mariner's sense of (psychological) equilibrium vanishes as he comes to suffer agony and anguish, whereby he starts to experience different surrealistic visions; this lost internal harmony of the Mariner who, as Patrick Murphy described him, is a "biologically developed entity", is an outcome of the violation of nature (1995: 10).¹³ And the Mariner's lost equilibrium is only regained, though partially, after he appreciates nature and its diversity (612-17). Significantly, appreciation of diverse nature including 'man, bird and beast' comes also to include the frightening and disgusting 'water-snakes' (273), in an unusual manner:

O happy living things! no tongue

Their beauty might declare:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,

And I blessed them unaware:

Sure my kind saint took pity on me,

And I blessed the unaware, (282-287)

The Mariner now appreciates the beauty and joy of the ugly and saddening. He has now been granted entrance into the invisible realms of nature, as if inspired by some spiritual power, having become lead by rather than leading nature, and hence left himself to nature whereby he turns into an obedient subject rather than an unwelcomed intruder.

In fact, the Mariner's encounter with the sea snakes is an essential aspect of Coleridge's conception of redemption and understanding of the will, a matter that has been central in many studies (see, for example, Barth, 1987: 29-31, 182-85; Perkins, 1994: 189-204; Raiger, 2006: 71-73). As Russell M. Hiller argues,

Far from the human will being 'a petty Link' (*Aids* 86) between the soul and God and Nature, Coleridge holds that 'the spiritual in Man is the Will' (273). The human 'Will is in an especial and pre-eminent sense the spiritual part of our Humanity' (136) and, as such, the human 'Will is the condition of his Personality' (285), 'the ground-work of *Personal* Being' (286), and the '*spiritual*,' '*supernatural*,' and 'responsible' basis for either the soul's corruption or its redemption (251). (2009: 25)

As Seamus Perry sees it, "The Rime" is "a work poised between a blessed vision of unity and the catastrophe of chaos [. . .], between a cribbed nightmare of centripetal monomania and a redemptive resort to the free existence of other things" (1999: 281). Relatedly, Richard Haven discerns two antithetical universes, the one expressing "communion" and "harmony or oneness," the other "a universe without pity" (1969: 24-25). Thus, James Engell comments upon the poem's "discordant qualities" and underlines the Mariner's attainment of "a curious salvation," a mixture of agony and grace, which fails to provide any "moral or spiritual resolution" (2002: 145). Recently, Thomas Dilworth has illustrated how

¹⁰ Humphrey House proposed that such interruptions of the Wedding-Guest provide a contrast between the normal and abnormal and how they both interpolate or coexist (1969: 58).

¹¹ As revealed in Eliot's notes on "The Waste Land" (Eliot, 1968: 76), such a relation failed because both the male voice and the hyacinth girl could not transcend a rift between an ideal past and modern compartmentalized self, a matter supported by an allusion to Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*, which furthers the gap between past and present; see also Smith, 1974: 75-76.

¹² Critics related the Mariner's unjustified killing of the Albatross to Coleridge's philosophical preoccupation with the origins of evil (Boulger, 1969: 14; Jasper, 1985: 45; Warren, 1969: 27-28; 33).

¹³ Ecologically, the Mariner is similar to the Wordsworthian characters, the Wanderer (*Excursion*), the Pedlar (*Ruined Cottage*) and shepherd (*Preludes*), all of whom achieve humility and wisdom after gaining "direct access to nature" (Bate, 1991: 65).

"The Rime" adopts a "spatial form" with two sets of "parenthetically paired images" (2007: 529) or events, one converging upon the killing of the Albatross and the other upon the Mariner's blessing of the sea snakes. Dilworth considers this spatial arrangement an indication that the killing of the Albatross "is off-centre and excluded from ultimate importance" and possesses a "lesser, local, negative focus" when compared with the blessing, "the most important act in the poem" (2007: 516). That is, the Mariner's blessing rests at the heart of the poem's message about both "animist natural community and the Christian valuation of love" (2007: 529); in Dilworth's words: "Spatially, the structure of this poem implies that the predominant centre, blessing or love, is deeply everywhere and always accessible" (2007: 530).

Similarly, the cause for sterility and chaos in "The Waste Land" is attributed to the vulgarization of sex in the modern society, as reflected in the graphic images of the typist and the clerk, who, in "The Fire Sermon", engage themselves in a sexual encounter full of "undesired" responses and emotional "indifference" (238-242). In what may be the least obtrusively allusive episode in Eliot's poem and, perhaps for that reason, the most memorable, Tiresias witnesses "the typist home at teatime" (222) having meaningless sex with "the young man carbuncular" (231). The young man acts merely as an agent of lust, without any emotional or moral reactions, a matter that is linguistically supported by the absence of the subject in sentences in which he acts: "Endeavours to engage her in caresses" (237) and "Bestows one final patronising kiss" (247). Hence, "she is bored and tired" (236) and the word "indifference" (242) sums up her feelings. These people act as automated machines, deprived of emotional, psychological, and spiritual essence; he is like "a taxi throbbing waiting" (217), and she "smoothes her hair with automatic hand" (255), in association with her typewriter or her gramophone. Commenting on sex as a major issue in "The Waste Land", I.A. Richards attributes that to Eliot's "persistent concern" about sex, to present that as "the problem of the our [modern] generation" (1991: 233), where the *stripped* creative essence of the poem is reflective of modern notions of impassioned physical gratification which one may find in the relationship of Albert, the husband, who "wants a good time" (148) and Lili, the wife, who avoids sex for fear of procreation: "What you get married for if you don't want children?" (164). As such, the fertility rites in "The Waste Land" are undermined by a modern society lacking vitality and dominated by "urban nihilism and fashionable despair" (14).¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is the recognition of such vulgarization and degradation that endows the modern self with a futile tragic sense. It is here where Eliot's desperate vision of modern society attempts to find any sign of hope even within the hopeless, as can be seen in his essay on Baudelaire where he argues that:

So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing. It is true that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation (Eliot, 1980: 429).

Quite enigmatic, though, is whether Eliot suggests by 'damnation' the act of corrupting or of undermining the corrupting/corrupted. In the second case, his hope stems from a belief in the efforts of the poets who demoralize the corrupting/corrupted; that is, he singles poets out of the futile modern community, poetic creativity (creative sexuality) providing the surrogate for normal sexual behavior.

Philip Sicker examined Eliot's perception of sex as either a means of reinforcing the "male's force or of female seduction" (1984: 423). In fact, this might be behind the nightmarish appearance of the Lady of Death, the *Femme fatal*, evident in both poems, stressing a parallel notion of life-in-death. In "The Rime" the Lady of death of the specter ship, capable of sucking "man's blood with cold" (194), takes a major role in the Mariner's ordeal after the ecological disequilibrium caused by his sin. She causes the death of the sailors leaving the Mariner to suffer loneliness and guilt. In "The Waste Land", fear is generated by the image of the woman who tightly pulls out her black hair and plays hysterically upon her hair as strings of a musical instrument (377-378). She is a reminder of the modern waste land where people suffer neurosis. In both poems women are de-romanticized, whether it is the lady who is "Life-in-death", a nightmare embodiment in "The Rime", or as in "The Waste Land" in which Marie, the hyacinth girl, the lady of situations, the typist, and others are all portrayed as either emotionally wrecked or physically violated, though, Grover Smith argued, not on a scale comparable with the supernatural experience of the Philomel who turned into a beautiful object, a nightingale (1974: 79-83).

Nonetheless, the two poems contain phenomena that are mixtures of natural and supernatural visions. While the Mariner goes through an experience that is "strange, even in a dream,/To have seen those dead men arise" (333-334), the Fisher King, on the other hand, envisions many resurrected dead people: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (63). In addition, both poems focus upon life-in-death, describing the lifeless, dehumanized, mechanical movements of bodies and facial expressions. In "The Rime" the spirit-weathered sailors who are "a ghastly crew," (340) "groaned", "stirred", "uprose", and "Never spake nor moved their eyes" (331-2), while in "The Waste Land" the mob "sighs," "Exhaled" and fixed their "eyes" (64-5), along with an ironic reference to their "human engine[s]" (216). In both cases, the individual (and consequently the community) is de-personalized, denied individuality and spiritual essence. Certainly "The Waste Land" is a criticism of life since it reflects, Richards claimed, "the plight of a whole generation" (1991: 233),

¹⁴ Adam Kirsch linked this with Eliot's perception of the decadence of the bourgeoisie in modern society.

while "The Rime" is "a criticism of life", reflecting, as C. M. Bowra suggested, a "familiar experience" about "the good and evil actions of men" and the "rewards and punishments" thereby incurred (1976: 55-56).¹⁵

To conclude, major modern texts are based upon quest as a structural motif—causing metamorphosis, artistic or psychological—similar to "The Rime". There are works such as *The Open Boat*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Pincher Martin* and many more that manipulate water domains (river, sea, or ocean) as a test tube to examine human values and norms of behavior. In literature, Jonathan Raban reckons, Sea/water is "supremely liquid and volatile element... a space to be traversed... a waste, and sometimes a rude waste," as in the case of the Mariner, who becomes an emblem of "that archetypal solitary outsider" (1992: 3-5; 13). Thus, the journey into the natural and social setting may inspire the traveler. Likewise, the journey into an artistic/poetic landscape may generate prophetic outcomes. That is, perhaps Eliot's journey across the indifferent realms of the Waste Land continues, or even discontinues, the piscatorial journey of Coleridge's Mariner. The Mariner's solitary experience within or against the elemental forces of nature emphasizes the establishment of a private evaluation of the civilized world. Like him, the Fisher King is an emblem of the archetypal solitary outsider/traveler who struggles with a morally and physically chaotic social system indifferent to nature, leading to an ultimate personal reevaluation of the disastrous consequences of man's departure from his natural roots, or his violation of the codes of a respectful relation with nature. It is within this notion of a respectful relation with nature that one may think of artistic continuities and discontinuities, literary landscapes bearing a parallel relation of respect or disrespect, both notions marking 'the influence of anxiety' modern artists/poets feel towards their precursors, as the one suggested in such a relation between Coleridge and Eliot, posing a question hence on the boundaries of Eliot's overemphasized anti-Romantic attitudes, despite his possible influence by Romantic poetry.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Similarly, Daniel Watkins underlined a conflict in "The Rime", between "self-defined notions of humility, virtue, and integrity" and "demonic forces" (Watkins 1988: 24). And according to Eliot's notes on the Waste Land, (Eliot, 1980: 78), "all women are one woman", the situation being hence a representation of a collective condition of women in modern society.

¹⁶ We speak of the aftermath of a state of 'anxiety of influence' calling it hence the 'influence of anxiety'.

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