

(Trans-)Gendered Metaphors: On Transitioning in Nietzsche's Aesthetics

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Abstract: Hostility towards transsexualism has not only persisted in non-academic communities, but also in academic scholarships, based not only on identifications of gender with sexuality and sexual identity, but also on the linguistic conventions of dichotomies of matter and ideas. Nietzsche's aesthetics not only challenges this tradition of linguistically constructed dichotomies, but also the exclusive separation between genders and sexual identities. Referring to *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the article examines how Nietzsche's ideas of language as a system of metaphors contributes to an understanding of transgender respectively transsexual issues as non-regressive expressions of selfhood, challenging rather than confirming gender dichotomies.

Keywords: gender, sexual identities, transsexualism, metaphor, language

In her autographically shaped book *Whipping Girl* from 2007, Julia Serano writes about the challenges of being acknowledged as a transsexual woman. Difficulties for transsexual women to be treated like any other woman, she states, do not only emerge from essentialists, but also from social constructivists who insist that notions of femininity (and of course of masculinity) are solely an invention of society and have no necessary manifestation in human biology. Thus, one of the main intentions of Serano's book is to "break with the past attempts in feminism and queer theory to dismiss femininity by characterizing it as «artificial» or performance."¹

This does not mean, however, that gender designs an *a priori* value in individuals and possesses metaphysical

¹ Serano, 2007: 6.

qualities. Quite the opposite, Serano advocates that gender roles and gender assignments are socially practiced conventions. She thinks, though, that certain aspects of gendered attitudes and behaviors are commonly accepted rather by girls than boys (or vice versa), even before socialization becomes effective: “I argue that certain aspects of femininity (as well as masculinity) are natural and can both precede socialization and supersede biological sex.”²

Serano’s approach reminds us of Rachel Ann Heath’s engaged 2006 publication in the Praeger-series, entitled *The Praeger Handbook of Transsexuality*, in which she writes in support of the transsexuals’ claims for hormonal and surgical treatments for sex reassignment. She as well writes against any biological and social essentialism, such as against the belief that there are behavioral values assigned exclusively to men or women, or that there exist only two, mutually exclusive, genders and sexes. However, by introducing the reader to the notion of “brain-sex” as the brain’s sexual identity³, Heath designs femininity and masculinity as being categories which rely on an endocrinal congruence between gender and sexual identity. In the case of the transsexual person, this match is missing and can only be restored by attempts to change the body rather than the mind, “since brain-sex is more deeply rooted than are the bodily manifestations of sex.”⁴

While both Heath and Serano emphasize that they are far from advocating an essentialist approach towards gender and sexuality, many scholars remain uncomfortable with paying considerable attention towards the body as an endocrinal system. Traditional feminist scholars are often

² *Ibid.*

³ “Since the brains of men and women differ, men and women should also differ in their behavior.” (Heath, 2006: 41).

⁴ *Ibid.*

outright hostile especially towards transsexual women. Janice G. Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* denies the fact that transsexed woman are indeed women and characterizes them as misogynists, attempting to subjugate women by biological occupation. Rejecting the idea that it is possible for male-bodied individuals to become females⁵ (and the same counts vice versa, although her criteria against female-to-male transsexuals read differently), Raymond inadvertently slips into what she actually intended to avoid: she declares femininity as a biological characteristic exclusively assigned at birth and hence of ontological value. Her intentions to liberate women from a male-dominated world ultimately push women back into the categories of biologically assigned values. Accordingly, Serano notices how many feminist writers, in an attempt to battle male-to-female Transsexuality, end up writing in favor of a chauvinist approach towards femininity: "When people insist that there are essential differences between women and men, they further a line of reasoning that ultimately refutes feminist ideals rather than supporting them."⁶ Although supporting the idea of a natural disposition for women to practices of femininity, and for men of masculinity, Serano and Heath claim there is no line strictly separating male-bodied from female-bodied people. Scholars like anthropologist David Valentine or historian Joanne J. Meyerowitz argue for taking the needs and agendas for and of Transsexuals seriously. What remains, though, is the uncanny impression about the transsexual as threatening anti-essentialist humanities⁷. Also and especially in academic gender

⁵ "Transsexualism may be one way by which men attempt to possess females' creative energies, by possessing artefactual female organs." (Raymond, 1979: xvi)

⁶ Serano, 2007: 51.

⁷ For example, David Valentine observes how "different arms of feminism take up this latter point [of both upholding and subverting binary gender

discourses, there is a sense of uneasiness when it comes to the position that a transsexual's claim for femininity or masculinity is a non-essentialist, but nonetheless natural, since pre-socialized demand.

But the transsexual's claim for bodily alternations does not necessarily imply a backlash into traditionalized gender roles and assignments. I do believe that discourses about biology are not identical with biologist ideas, ideas that biology determines social values. To accommodate the transsexual's demand for biological alternations without accusing her or him of essentialism, it is not enough to analyze the key expressions and notions employed in the disciplines of women and gender studies – rather, it is necessary to re-analyze the use of language in general. Nietzsche's philosophy about the body and the woman as two instances of an overall metaphoric language use provides us with immensely valuable notions.

At first, it may appear strange to refer back to Nietzsche when it comes to the entertainment of discursive and practiced (trans-) gender equality. In his pseudo-autobiography *Ecce Homo*, he seems to design the woman as the incorporation of a disease, in desperate needs for the man to cure her from herself: “Has my answer been heard to the question how one *cures* a woman – redeems her? One gives her a child. Woman needs children: a man is for her always only a means: thus spoke *Zarathustra*.”⁸ However, Nietzsche is in fact not writing against women, but rather against an ontologization of the sexes, whether they are female or male.

distinctions, DVK], seeing on the one hand the embodied performativity of transgender identity as a site of radical gendered possibilities, or, on the other, the manifestation of false consciousness and the assertion of false patriarchal gendered norms in the individual body.” (Valentine, 2007: 107 f.)

⁸ Nietzsche, 1989: 267.

Language, for Nietzsche, is designed as a performative application of metaphors. What may still appear in his primary writings such as *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* as the perception of metaphor as a literary figure of analogy and transformation,⁹ is, in Nietzsche's later writings, increasingly developed into an overall metaphor which I want to call the 'transitioning metaphor:' the designation that all meanings and referrals are fluctuating and rely on an ongoing and artistic process to create and negotiate meaning.¹⁰

The artist, for Nietzsche, is every human being embracing his or her creativity as an element which deconstructs civic conventions as an enemy of the vital creativity: "In contrast to the memory of civilization, culture rings forth a «counter-memory» that unveils the illusory character of the truth of civilization. Under the rule of culture, the human animal forgets the moral and rational norms of civilization, and this animal forgetfulness, in turn, brings back to the human being the forgotten freedom of the animal and the human spirit."¹¹ This animality, which is not to be mistaken with raw bestiality, or barbarianism, is founded in an excess of human self-expression, an ecstatic outburst of joy, represented

⁹ "The stimulation of a nerve is first translated into an image: first metaphor! The image is then imitated by a sound: second metaphor! And each time there is a complex leap from one sphere into the heart of another, new sphere." (Nietzsche, 1999: 144)

¹⁰ Similarly, Tim Murphy employs the term *Übertragung* (transmission) for what I call the metaphor of transition, referring to it as the underlying concept for Nietzsche's theory of metaphors, at the same time challenging the idea that there is a fixed point of reference for this process: "From the viewpoint of Nietzschean metaphor [...], once interpretation is seen as an operation of mapping a text from one domain to another domain, that is, as an operation of mapping the text onto a particular domain which effect a specific meaning then the domains cannot go unchallenged - for they, too, can be mapped onto other domains." (Murphy, 2001: 17)

¹¹ Lemm, 2009: 12.

in artworks like the song or the dance. This is what Nietzsche refers to in his *Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, when the ecstatic outbursts during the Dionysian orgy are designed as expressions of an overflowing human and hence artistic drive, which disregards civilization's conventions, but nonetheless must be described via a conventional but nonetheless contingent means, language: "In the Dionysian dithyramb man is stimulated to the highest intensification of his symbolic powers; something that he has never felt before urgently demands to be expressed: the destruction of the veil of maya, one-ness as the genius of humankind, indeed of nature itself."¹² Vattimo refers to the unavoidable paradox implied here: the human being forgets the conventions of socialization, but has to employ one of the most conventionalized means of societal mediation: language and structural forms of communication: "[...] art must be described not in terms of a synthesis between Dionysus and Apollo, but as a "Dionysian Greek orgy," in other words as a festival of Dionysus, that, unlike the Barbarian one, gives rise to a world of forms and symbols."¹³ Both Vattimo and Frances Nesbitt Oppel refer to the Apollonian and the Dionysian as gendered notions. Vattimo characterizes the interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in artworks metaphorically as a competitive conversation between the male Apollonian, representing civilization, and the female Dionysian, representing human creativity and vitality.¹⁴ Nesbitt Oppel confirms that the Dionysian and Apollonian are metaphorically gendered, and also that Nietzsche prefers the 'female'-designed drive: "We

¹² Nietzsche, 1999: 21.

¹³ Vattimo, 2006: 108.

¹⁴ "The two principles, which were [...] compared to the male and female elements in procreation, have become brothers here. But their brotherhood is not in the least one of equals [...]." (Vattimo, 2006: 102)

know that the notebooks that Nietzsche kept as he drafted *The Birth of Tragedy* define «nature», «music» and «myth» in the feminine (nature is a woman; music is a mother; Sphinx is a female virgin, a myth, and a symbol of nature).”¹⁵ Finally, Zarathustra defines himself via bi-gendered language usage. In ‘The Dance Song,’ he refers to his wisdom as she, in addition to ‘my’: “And when I talked in confidence with my wild wisdom, she said to me in anger: «You will, you want, you love – that is the only reason why you *praise* life.» Then I almost answered wickedly and told the angry woman the truth; and there is no more wicked answer than telling one’s wisdom the truth.”¹⁶ This both gendered and sexed notion of wisdom as quality and female person is connected to the body as metaphor for self-confidence and physics. The human will and hence the human reason is, metaphorically speaking, a ‘part of the – physical - body:’ “The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd. An instrument of your body is also your little reason, [...] which you call «spirit».”¹⁷ For Nietzsche, true knowledge is attainable when we recognize the female principle in culture, and also in animality – not in the sense of brutality, but of a de- and re-contextualization of culture: “The challenge of culture is to bring forth not forms of life that are forms of power over life, but forms of life that are themselves full of life, overflowing of life.”¹⁸ The overflow of life is a metaphor for excess, and the very notion of excess rejects the clear-cut shape of beings and supports the blurring of boundaries and divisions instead, but cannot go without the male counterpart and its associated form-giving media, where the most important one is language. When

¹⁵ Nesbitt Oppel, 2005: 63.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, 1978: 108 f.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, 1978: 34.

¹⁸ Lemm, 2009: 11.

Nietzsche therefore speaks of the woman as a dangerous being,¹⁹ he does not speak of the woman as an individual, but rather as a metaphoric notion of a one-sided standstill.

In his essay *Spurs – Nietzsche’s Styles*, Jacques Derrida indicates that Nietzsche does not primarily write about the woman as an individual human being, but rather about the feminine as a creative principle often misused to foster gendered expectations. Derrida underlines that picking up the notion of woman as an ontologically essential principle as ‘*the woman*’ supports the idea that there is *one* essential way of being a woman and respectively a man, as well. With respect to woman, Derrida writes: “She knows that she would only find herself tapped once again in a phallocentrism – only this time it would be that of castration’s confederate, who has now become the inverted image of the pupil, the rowdy student, the master’s disciple.”²⁰ In fact, Nietzsche does not write with hostility about women when he refers to woman as an embodied metaphor for the feminine and the Dionysian principle, the principle designed as the carrier of culture, only effective in combination with the Apollonian, which is present through language. Woman as the metaphoric principle for human creativity is in complementary need for the masculine principle, should there really be the creation of the world as an artistic expression of mankind – and as nothing else but an artistic expression of mankind that the world’s ‘truth’ can be perceived: “Just as the musical sound appears as a figure in the

¹⁹ Such as indicated in the earlier quotation from Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* and the indication of childbearing as a taming of the woman, or in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche writes about woman as seducing, and weakening, the creativity of the thinker: “The sick woman especially: no one can excel her in the wiles to dominate, and tyrannize. The sick woman spares nothing, living or dead; she will dig up the most deeply buried things [...]” (Nietzsche, 1989: 123)

²⁰ Derrida, 1979: 61.

sand, so the mysterious «X» of the thing-in-itself appears first of a nervous stimulus, then as an image, and finally as an articulated sound.”²¹ In his later writings, Nietzsche omits the metaphysical allusion of a “thing-in-itself”; however, the metaphorical description of *Übertragung*, transformation, or, in other words, transition, remains valid and vivid, for example when Zarathustra refers to his wisdom as designed above, and when he performs his song to the girls’ dance: “Do not cease dancing, you lovely girls! No killjoy has come to you with evil eyes, no enemy of girls. God’s advocate I am before the devil: but the devil is the spirit of gravity. How could I, you lightfooted ones, be an enemy of godlike dances? Or of girls’ feet with pretty ankles?”²² Zarathustra is definitely designed as a male – in fact, he is construed after the historically verified Persian priest Zarathustra or Zoroaster –, but his body and performance are described metaphorically as the incorporation of the female and male competition, as already in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Here, in the highest symbolism of art, we see before us the Apolline world of beauty and the ground on which it rests, that terrible wisdom of Silenus, and we grasp, intuitively, the reciprocal necessity of these two things.”²³ Zarathustra embodies the metaphor of the transitioning body, but of a transitioning body without a beginning or an end of this process, such as Kristen Brown argues to refer to Nietzsche’s body and gender metaphors as a “relation without relata”.²⁴

²¹ Nietzsche, 1999: 145.

²² Nietzsche, 1978: 107 f.

²³ Nietzsche, 1999: 26.

²⁴ “I categorize the images and metaphors that configure a symbolic body as ideational. And my concept of Nietzsche’s dynamic non-dualism reveals that the ideational, by definition, is not purely idea. It overlaps with the psycho-somatic and socio-physical.” (Brown, 2006: 8)

The body is both a physical and a metaphoric expression of the continuous act to negotiate the self. It is also both the physical and the metaphorical expression of the female and the male drive, being culturally productive and effective because of their gendered conflict. We can now understand the transsexual as physically incorporating and symbolizing the metaphoric battle of the gendered drives, through her or his body as medium. The metaphor of the gendered body does not lose its value because of its materialization, but rather turns into a signification to challenge conventions, such as described within Nietzsche's aesthetics.

We can now read Julia Serano with a closer understanding of what she means when she says that a combination of social constructivism and ideas of femininity and masculinity as partially intrinsic gender conceptions is beneficial to transsexual as well as feminist affairs. With Nietzsche as well as (gender) theorists like Serano, Valentine, Meyerowitz, and the later Judith Butler,²⁵ the body as a physical reality AND as metaphorical expression denotes a desire to express an individuality which recognizes its necessarily gendered mode, and which again is expressed by Nietzsche via the metaphorical expression of the "bodily will", such as it has been elaborated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche vehemently argues against the ontologization of woman, which would also and necessarily imply an essentialization of man and the fostering of gendered roles and expectations as biologically based and backed – in both directions. Both Nietzsche and most transgender theorists reject the idea of embodiment as a teleological undertaking. This

²⁵ "Although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way, there is nevertheless a desire that is constitutive of gender itself, and, as a result, no quick or easy way to separate the life of gender from the life of desire." (Butler, 2004: 1f)

underlines what is important when we are arguing in favor of a comprehensive acceptance of transmen and –women as autonomous individuals with a right to determine what their real sex and gender is. Sexual readjustment and endocrinal transitioning is both a metaphorical and bio-physical expression to challenge gendered and sexual limitations. While it is oriented towards socially mediated ideas of femininity and masculinity, the transitioning process at the same time questions a pre-determined and irreversible gender assignment via biologic factors and the implications that femininity and masculinity are of predetermined, intrinsic values. Together with Nietzsche’s aesthetics of the body, transgender studies are able to show that talking biology is not necessarily talking biologics.

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