Fictions of Origin

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All origins are fiction. Things in the world do not actually begin at some distinct point in time. They do not arise from nothing or out of nowhere but rather mutate from other things. At a certain point and under certain circumstances, we say that a thing has begun, and that declaration becomes its point of origin: it is in our saying so that a beginning takes place. Its transformation out of other matter, however, has been ongoing. Out of the stuff of constant change, we invent these beginnings. There would be no origins without the human intervention of naming them.

Yet we do name, and thus mark, new things as though having a distinct point of origin is in their true nature. Our desire is for things to have a clear beginning, and our invention makes it so—so much so that we come to believe in the fiction as true and necessary. This belief orients our perception of the world. We see it as comprised of things that come into being, and thus we stop the world's flux with signs of discrete meaning. In fact, *orient* and *origin* share the same Latin root, *orire*, meaning "to arise." To be oriented is to face what arises: the origins. Thus, to be oriented is to live in a fiction of beginnings—we might say the fiction of originality. As with Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, it is disorienting when origins are put in doubt. The human mind sees truth in the fiction of the new. Marking origins is an expression of the symbolic function: the essential human capacity to represent the world. It is through the act of representation, whether verbal, visual, or otherwise, that the fiction of origin comes about.

Granted, the Big Bang purportedly created all matter in the universe, but that phenomenon was of a different order. As cosmologists theorize, it was the one and only true beginning: the only time something came into being out of nothing. Aside from that event, if it should be called that, the coming to be of something new is a construction of the human mind.

This elusive character of origins has attracted attention since the beginning of recorded thought. In the *Grammars of Creation*, George Steiner recalls Plato's maxim that "in all things natural and human, the origin is the most excellent."[1] Plato was asserting that a thing is closest to its Ideal Form at its inception. However, it is that very time of inception that stands in doubt. It is one thing to say that the origin is most excellent; it is another to locate that point of origin. We generally speak of perfecting a thing as an act taken after its initial creation. A thing is begun and subsequent to its inception is refined and perfected. From this perspective the final form, rather than the origin, is the most excellent. But as Plato views all acts of refinement and perfection as the uncovering of a truth already present in the beginning, he sees the inception in the conclusion. Finally, at the end, the origin is the most excellent.

Plato's thoughts were not isolated but rather a contribution to an ongoing debate among several earlier generations of pre-Socratic philosophers over the relationship between repetition and originality. This debate, which involved Heraclitus, Parmenides, and their followers, was over the very possibility of something new appearing in the world. It seems that the original philosophical dispute within the history of European thought concerned the question of originality, a question that would return 2,500 years later in the discourse of modernism. As part of that discourse, Martin Heidegger addressed the concept of origin or inception in his

lectures on Parmenides. His view, like that of Plato, was that we can only come to the beginning of an idea or truth through a process of uncovering layers that obscure that inception. We discover the beginning at the end or, as Heidegger put it, "In essential history the beginning is last."[2]

This can be seen in the act of making a work of art and in the difficult matter of deciding when it is to be considered finished. It is only when it is finished that the art object begins its real existence as something new. It begins when the artist says it is done. This paradoxical moment is a matter of choice yet also appears to the artist as determined by an objective truth. The time to conclude is when the object can stand on its own and constitute a beginning. Even the form of a simple spoken sentence conveys this bidirectionality of original time. It is only when we conclude a sentence and utter the last word that the thought coheres and thus begins.

For the psychoanalyst, the question of origin arises with the object of desire. The objects of the world that are of interest to psychoanalysis are those that structure the subject's desire. As such, it is those objects that are experienced as both missing and longed for. Jacques Lacan refers to the longed for missing object as the cause of desire.[3] It is the object that does not exist except as absent.

In psychoanalysis, the origin of desire, without which there is no human life as we know it, is at stake when we speak of the origin of the object. Sigmund Freud addresses this notion in his well-known maxim: "The finding of an object is always a refinding."[4] All objects of desire are lost objects, even those at the very beginning. Paradoxically, a new object of desire represents an object found before and lost again. The origin of desire is therefore the search for the lost original object. However—and this is the distinctively psychoanalytic take on subjectivity—it is an object we never had until we experienced it as missing. We only know it for the first time as a representation of something absent. The object as cause of desire does not exist on its own. It is evoked by its initial representation as something once had and now lost. From this perspective, all creative acts are re-creations of a lost object with no independent being outside of that re-creation. This is the radical theory of representation, and of origin, at the heart of psychoanalysis. The object of desire originates only in its absence. The paradox is that we experience as lost something we never had.

Psychoanalysis is not the straightforward psychology of objective early experience that it is sometimes taken for, where early forgotten (repressed) events are taken at face value to be uncovered. Instead, childhood is a time already saturated with representations of the lost object that does not exist. The child comes into being as a human subject only through these representational acts. We are born of paradox and fantasy. It is not our biological needs and their satisfactions that distinguish us as human but rather our symbolic elaboration of them around the idea of a mythic object of satisfaction. It begins in infancy with the earliest symbolizations of loss and recovery and is elaborated throughout the fantastic and tragic make-believe life of the child. Psychoanalysis is distinct among psychologies in its attention to the formative effects of this symbolic and imaginary universe.

Critics often write about Amy Sillman's work in terms of psychology and psychoanalysis. The dream-like aspect of certain images and the often ambiguous state of her figures, which have the capacity to appear, disappear, and morph into each other in ways that threaten the boundary of representation, evoke a surreal universe that invites psychoanalysis along for the march down the "royal road to the unconscious."[5] Likewise, the two fundamental Freudian drives (sex and death) celebrated by surrealism's avatars are often evident in Sillman's work.

Surrealism and psychoanalysis have a long intertwined history, and insofar as Sillman evokes the one, she evokes the other. The same is true for her work's common association with expressionism. Growing historically and conceptually from the same soil as psychoanalysis, expressionism's suggestion of an interior landscape calls for a psychological reading. However, I would like to consider something else: Sillman's relation to questions of *origin* and *orientation/disorientation*. This is a less obvious connection to psychoanalysis, but one that has rich and interesting implications.

The fragile emergence of figures along the boundaries of representation is the most powerful characteristic of Sillman's work. In both its method and its result, her work is the study of origin (*orire*), of arising, or orientation and disorientation. The interplay of abstraction and figuration, and the ambiguous status of the figures (almost there, almost absent), is an expression of her using origin itself as the object. For Sillman, it is the thing arising that is of interest, and thus she paints its before, its coming to be, its transparent and fragile being, and even its disappearance. It is the thing appearing, not the thing in itself, that matters.

The boundary of interest to psychoanalysis is the one that exists between the conscious and the unconscious, and her work suggests this boundary. This relation to psychoanalysis is the most meaningful aspect of Sillman's art. At its best, psychoanalysis does not privilege representations of sex, violence, or even dreams over their associated thoughts. Psychoanalysis is concerned with signifying acts wherever they lead: the things appearing, not the thing in itself. Sillman, like an effective psychoanalyst, directs attention to the emergence of the

Fig. 10 **The Plumbing**, 2006. Oil on canvas, 80 x 69 inches (203.2 x 175.3 cm). Private Collection

represented object, whatever it may be. The fiction of origin, whereby the subject constitutes itself again and again, is the focus of psychoanalytic attention as well as the focus of Sillman's art. It is true that overt images of sex and violence are concerned with beginnings and ends, but so are faces in the crowd or birds in the hand.

Her best work elicits that state of attention in the viewer. We hover between sense and nonsense, finding them both compelling, but especially finding the play between them of real interest. As in *Psychology Today* (2006, plate 12), our gaze is drawn across the boundary of representation into the application of paint and then back into the field of figures in a way that successfully represents the impossible moment when something comes to be. This impossible moment that can never be, yet without which there is no being, is the subject of Sillman's work.

In psychoanalytic thought and in psychoanalytic work, this moment of the object's emergence is marked by anxiety ("the affect that never lies," according to Lacan).[6] Desire is structured around the object, and thus its emergence (its origin) both arouses and puts into question the status of desire and with it the subject's very being. Sillman's strongest work likewise triggers a certain anxiety precisely because of how it operates at the point of origin, and how it explores the elusive status of the emerging object.

There is perhaps subtle irony in Sillman's use of sex and violence to evoke moments of origin. Both sex and violence are concerned with the boundary between existence and non-existence. The frequent appearance of animals similarly suggests the boundary between speech and silence, the origin of language. The animal is a being that knows but does not say what it knows. It represents the possibility of speech that is not realized and hence the very edge where language arises.

However, Sillman's imagery need not have any conceptual link with origin for this dynamic to be at work. Since it is the essential character of representation, its ambiguous status at the boundary of existence is really doing the trick. It happens with the arm and the sack in *The Plumbing* (2006, fig. 10), the little sphere in *Get the Moon* (2006, plate 6), and the vaguely trunk-like figure in *Elephant in the Room* (2006, plate 8). They somehow evoke the emergence of things.

In *Untitled (yellow w/ bird)* (2007, plate 15), Sillman depicts a small brown figure surrounded by a field of yellow. The figure is poised both in its pictorial space and in the space between representation and abstraction. Alongside is a complex play of gray, brown, and red shapes and lines that is as highly wrought as the little brown figure is bare and simple. It is in this contrast and juxtaposition that the moment of arising, of origin, is suggested. But whether it is done (as it is here) in an almost entirely abstract language, increasingly the case in Sillman's recent work, or whether identifiable figures are brought in, the effect of origin is the same. Sillman paints time at the beginning, a fiction of the new.

1. George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 2.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 1.
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).
4. Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in J. Strachey, ed. and trans., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7 (1905; reprint, London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 125–243.
5. Ibid.
6. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, p. 41.