**Transatlantica**
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

**2 | 2016**
**Ordinary Chronicles of the End of the World**

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**Electronic version**
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8328
DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.8328
ISSN: 1765-2766

**Publisher**
AFEA

**Electronic reference**
Claire Maniez, "An interview with Siri Hustvedt", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2016, Online since 19 September 2017, connection on 29 April 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8328 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8328

This text was automatically generated on 29 April 2021.

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# An interview with Siri Hustvedt

Claire Maniez

1 Siri Hustvedt is an American novelist and essay writer whose work has been translated into many languages. Her first novel, *The Blindfold*, was published in 1992, and her latest to date, *The Blazing World*, in 2014. She has published collections of essays on art (*Mysteries of the Rectangle* and the recent *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind*) and broader subjects, as her collection's title *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012) suggests. Apart from writing fiction, Siri Hustvedt is involved in philosophical and transdisciplinary research, as well as in teaching a seminar for psychiatrists.

2 On October 20th, 2015, Siri Hustvedt was in Grenoble to receive an honorary Doctorate from Stendhal University (now part of Université Grenoble Alpes). The following interview was recorded in my office on the following day, and was then edited via email over a few months, until the recent changes in American politics prompted Siri to add a personal note at the end.

Claire Maniez: Could you tell us the kind of work you do at the hospital, and how long you've done it?

Siri Hustvedt: I was a volunteer writing teacher at the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic at New York Columbia Presbyterian Cornell Weill Hospital. For about four years I went every Tuesday in the afternoon. I had an hour class with adolescents and then an hour class with adults. It was an extraordinary experience, and I am truly grateful that it was part of my life. At the same time, I'm glad I'm not still doing it. It was incredibly enervating. After just two hours, I was exhausted. But I learned a lot about mental illness that I couldn't learn from books alone—even detailed case studies. I stopped volunteering in 2010. This year I received an appointment as a lecturer in psychiatry at Cornell Weill Medical College. I teach a seminar in narrative psychiatry to psychiatric residents once a month. The doctors write, but they also read texts in the history of psychiatry.

CM: What is the purpose of the course?

SH: The purpose of the course is to reintroduce writing into psychiatric practice. In the course description, I included a quote from a psychiatric memoir by Linda Hart:

"Writing this journal has kept me on the edge of sanity. Without it, I believe I would have tipped over into the chasm of madness, from where I could not be reached." This is a dramatic statement that bears close examination, one to which the seminar will return as a guiding theme. [...] The seminar will address the therapeutic possibilities of writing from the perspective of both patients and physicians. Participants will be required to write texts for each meeting as well as read excerpts from memoirs of mental illness and theoretical papers. Close reading will be imperative. Among the questions to be addressed are: How does a theory of dialogue inform every written text? What are the assumptions inherent in first person as opposed to third person descriptions of mental illness? Can written narratives help establish a form of external cohesion for a person who feels he or she is falling into a state of disintegration? If narrative writing is impossible, can poetic or even 'word salad' forms serve as vehicles of therapy and insight for both patients and doctors? Reading assignments will include a couple of Artaud's letters to his doctors with their lucid descriptions of his slide into schizophrenia, alongside Louis Sass and Josef Parnas's paper 'Schizophrenia, Consciousness, and the Self," Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Mental Illness*, as well as Freud's reading of the Schreber case, a portion of John Thomas Perceval's account of his illness with Gregory Bateson's forward, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* through the lens of S. Weir Mitchell's concept of neurosthenia, and a chapter from Catherine Golden's *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on The Yellow Wallpaper*. So this gives you an idea. Perhaps more so in the US than in Europe, psychiatry has moved in the direction of diagnosis by symptom list. A physician checks off answers to questions such as: Is the patient capable of insight? Yes or no. Of course such questions don't always lend themselves to a yes or a no. Delusions don't preclude all forms of insight, for example... The young doctors who attend my seminar are people who are already interested in writing, in the history of medicine, and in the philosophical questions that necessarily accompany the act of making a diagnosis. No resident is required to take my course. If not exactly in crisis, I do think that psychiatry is facing a moment of upheaval. The optimistic belief that neuroscience research would finally solve the etiologies of mental illness has not come to pass. Criticism of the DSM (The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Illness) is rampant. Reductive solutions in psychiatry have begun to seem impoverished. Therefore, an approach that values multiple perspectives and models may be an improvement. I am trying to advance a pluralistic theoretical position that takes neurobiology into account but also values the dynamic properties of personal narrative. Every illness has a story and that story belongs to a person who has the illness. Moreover, the way a sick person understands her or his illness affects the course of the affliction itself. I want to bring narrative forward as a tool in medicine and give it a theoretical dignity that goes beyond the often condescending attitudes that surround ideas of art as therapy.

CM: In the note, you mention poetry as an alternative for narrative writing. You started writing poetry yourself and then turned to the novel and essay writing. Why and how did this happen?

SH: I wrote short stories when I was fourteen, but turned to poetry when I was fifteen and wrote poems all through high school. I distinctly remember starting a novel in college. I wrote two pages, and I thought they were wonderful, but I had no idea where to go after that beginning: I remember there was a kite and a funeral [laughter]. I did not have the ability to go on. Some young people do. Even if they

write mediocre novels, they are able to master the form. I wrote a few one page short stories, but then retreated back to poetry. I did a lot of imitation, writing in classical poetic verse. I wrote sonnets, heroic couplets, villanelles. There was nothing particularly original or interesting about them, but they were very good exercises for me. I continued to write poems through college and wrote more poems as a graduate student. I became more and more serious, and I knew other poets at Columbia. There was a group of us, and we would share and criticize one another's poems. Some of my fellow writers were brilliant. I became interested in The New York School: John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and Barbara Guest. When I was twenty-three I finally wrote a poem I liked, sent it off to *The Paris Review*, and they published it. I published a couple more poems and then got stuck, really stuck. I just thought everything I wrote was horrible. And then, David Shapiro, a poet and professor of mine, said, "Siri, when I get writer's block, I do automatic writing." That did the trick. I sat down and wrote thirty pages in a single evening. It was so liberating, and then I spent the next three months editing it. I was in school so it wasn't as if I edited eight hours a day, but I just kept working on it. Part of it remained as it was, but I also pared away, cut, and moved some of the elements. I wrote another prose poem, but I never wrote in lines again. I had crossed a bridge. When I finished my dissertation, I wanted to write a novel or a long story. All I knew was that it had a particular feeling. It was driven by an *unheimlich* feeling. And when I finished the thirty pages of the story, I knew I wasn't through with Iris. So that was how *The Blindfold* began.

CM: One critic called *The Blindfold* four stories, but I don't quite agree, they are a novel, not four stories.

SH: I agree, but it's fair to say that I didn't know what it was when I began to write it.

CM: Which part of the novel was it?

SH: Mr. Morning, the book's first part. And then I went back to work on Iris, and I ended up with a novel in four movements.

CM: Have you ever considered really going into the short story form? From then on, you've written only novels and essays.

SH: I think the short story is a great form and when I read a good one, I am always impressed by how the writer is able to make much of a small space. Perhaps I will write stories at some point, but what happens to me with novels is that an idea generates musical repetitions and variations that end up needing more room to flourish. I know that what I am working on now needs to be played out in a particular way. I've been reading about time because the book is about time, losing time, which is a good theme for me because I feel a new urgency in my life to do as much as I can.

CM: Really?

SH: Yeah... [laughter] The wonderful French actor, Trintignant, did an event with my husband years ago. Paul was in his late fifties at the time. Trintignant was seventy. He said to Paul: "When I was your age, I felt older than I do now."[1] Paul never forgot it. It's possible that if I keep going and live, I will gain a different perspective by seventy. One can hope. [laughter]

CM: You mentioned the question of first- and third-person narration in your note for the seminar. In six novels, you've only used third-person narration once, for *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*. Why?

SH: The narration of Lily Dahl is what I call close or false third person narration, in the sense that it is almost first-person narration, close to Lily. I remember clearly that I wanted a third person narration because I have a very young, naive protagonist and by adopting the third person I was able to use a vocabulary that she couldn't use, and therefore move between positions of relative closeness and distance from her. Later, I came to believe (Henry James may be responsible or he may just have confirmed what I had begun to feel) that the first person is phenomenologically more accurate. There is always a first person. There is never a third person perspective hanging over us in our phenomenal reality except as an imaginative extension of the first person. When I wrote *What I Loved*, I was enamored of Leo's position as a narrator who is also an observer, an earthbound witness to what happens. Although he is deeply involved in the goings-on, he maintains a kind of distance and is able to see how narration can change, depending on perspective. His drawer game, a game of rearranging his sacred objects, turns on the drama of telling. In *The Blazing World*, I tore the whole business apart by employing nineteen different narrative voices, including an editor. Harry, the story's central character, is in continual dialogue with herself, and often writes to herself in the second person. I thought of the novel as an explosion of single perspective narration, one intended to destabilize all sanguine narratives about "how it was." I am working on a new novel, and the book's narrator sometimes writes about her earlier self in the third person as an other. At the moment I am deeply engaged in the philosophical questions embedded in first-second-third person leaps.

CM: So you will return to the third person. I understand that in your essays you claim the first person as a philosophical position, but in the novel it's very different, because the third person does open different perspectives.

SH: It opens multiple perspectives. I am a great lover of eighteenth century English novels with their personable narrators who speak directly to the reader. I played with that intimacy in *The Summer Without Men*. Not so long ago, I reread *Tristram Shandy*. I hadn't read it for years, and I had a great time. I'd say it's narration as *coitus interruptus*. [laughter] It's frustrating, funny, and smart. Locke and Hume are all over it, of course, and the philosophy was far more obvious to me on the second reading.

CM: You wrote that Norwegian still haunts your written English, and not knowing Norwegian, I find it difficult to find examples of that in your writing.

SH: I think it's probably less true now. But I think there is a music in Norwegian that has affected my prose. Norwegian is a word poor language compared to English and French. There are fewer words, but this poverty has also meant that Norwegian poets can play with the multiple meanings of a single word in ways that would look funny in English.

The deep answer to this question lies in what I call the "metrics of being"—rhythmic patterns established early in life between a caretaker and an infant—usually the mother, but it could be somebody else—and that dialogical music is in us and of us and is then refined and developed through multiple others over a lifetime. So the first words you hear, words that are emotionally powerful but have no symbolic

meaning, are part of a person's original music. My first language was Norwegian, quickly followed by English, but I suspect the rhythms of the Norwegian are primal.

CM: So you cannot give specific examples of that influence.

SH: No, but when I read novels in Norwegian, I recognize the music. I don't know how I would analyze that recognition, but it's there—a rhythm, a beat. I am glad I write in English nevertheless. It has an immense vocabulary and fantastic flexibility. French is more grammatically restricted than English, and therefore I think English affords greater opportunity for free play, but then you have Céline and Apollinaire; let's not forget all that can be done in French.

CM: The visual arts are very present in your work, where many characters are painters or photographers. I found that photographers are often sinister characters. I'm thinking in particular of *The Blindfold* and *The Sorrows of an American*. Could you comment on that?

SH: I think you are right, but I don't really know why. It may have to do with the problem of documentation, of photography as a mode of keeping an accurate record, when, as we know, it is only rarely that. A photograph isn't always staged, but it is always framed, and these framings of the world can be deeply misleading, even sinister. Photography is ubiquitous in advertising and used to seduce, deceive, or lure us. War photography involves genuine ethical questions about what it means to take pictures of dying soldiers or traumatized survivors. The famous Vietnam photo of the young girl—the running napalm victim—came to symbolize the brutality of the US in that country. Sometimes such a photo can aid resistance to an evil war, but that too may be ambiguous in ethical terms if one asks what it meant for her, the subject who was turned into a symbol.

I think I am both attracted and appalled by the idea of capturing an event or person on film without any other form of human interaction. This framing dilemma can apply to art as well. Art has its roots in life, of course, and in telling a story, one can be brutal or gentle, exploit or carefully develop the characters and the story. Much of the effort for me is feeling what's right and listening to characters as one would to another person. It makes me think of Giles in *What I Loved*, the bad artist who destroys one of Bill's paintings in a work of his own for the shock value. It came to me as a violent act that wasn't about flesh and blood violence but psychic cruelty. I may worry more about photographs than artworks because photos often have real, not fictional, subjects.

CM: Because you have so many artists in your novels, there are a lot of descriptions of visual art, most of the time nonexistent. Do you create them before you describe them, or describe them as you create them?

SH: I think it's a bit of both. Mostly an image comes into my head. This is similar to how some artists work—from mental images. The picture is there and then it can be tweaked as I work, although I am writing the image and transforming it into words on a page. Once I have the artist in place, whoever that person is, I find I can generate works for him or her. Bill and Harry are my two large artists, and they have a connection to each other and to the novel as a form. I am drawn to narrative works as a series of boxes or rooms, as a journey through time going somewhere.

CM: You draw yourself, don't you? The drawings included in *The Summer Without Men* are yours.

SH: I do draw myself. One of my fantasies is that a time may come when I devote myself to drawing for several months. The drawings in *The Summer Without Men* are

cartoons, simple drawings, but not illustrations. The four images depict the arc of the story as well as the encounter between narrator and her persona in the narration, but no reviewer understood this or commented on the images. It was as if they didn't exist.

I was once in an exhibition in Paris at the Musée d'Orsay. Writers and artists were asked to comment on drawings by famous artists. Although I am a writer, I decided to draw a response. I picked a small ink and watercolor rendering of a pot by Cézanne. There was something anatomical about the pot, and I turned it into a fat little woman bather (a comment on Cezanne's immense canvas where his bathers look more like objects than people). I remember after I had finished it, I thought to myself, "this isn't very good," but when I showed both pot and woman to my husband and daughter, they burst out laughing, and I felt reassured. The curator liked it so much he wanted to buy it. I happily gave it to him.

CM: You say that novel reading can be life changing. I wondered if you meant the same thing as William Gass when he repeatedly quotes Rilke's sonnet ending with the line "You must change your life," as the injunction addressed by the work of art to the reader or viewer. I often find there are echoes between Gass's remarks on reading and literature and yours, but I also see differences, so could you expand on that?

SH: Perhaps in Gass it's more emphatic and more didactic.

CM: Rather more threatening.

SH: I don't think my experience of reading that has changed me has been one of threat. Rather it's usually been about seduction and insight, although it's true that when I first read *Crime and Punishment*, I felt the world had cracked up—the sympathy and horror I felt for Raskolnikov was overwhelming.

I was once asked by a Norwegian journal to write an intellectual autobiography which eventually became "Extracts from a Story of the Wounded Self."[2] But when I had a first draft, I realized I had written a boring recitation of great books in the Western tradition that many people have read. It meant nothing. I tore it up and began again, and the resulting essay became both more personal and more emotional. The books that change us always have deeply felt resonance.

Perhaps books outside the canon, that act as bombs are more interesting to consider. Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* had a life-altering effect on me, a book decidedly outside the canon. Barnes wrote some lovely essays, but I am not a fan of her other novel, *Ryder*. I read *Nightwood* while I was a graduate student at Columbia. The book struck so deeply into the ambiguities of gender and desire, it turned me inside out. I have now read it four times, and the language is extraordinary, especially the language of Dr. O'Connor, the novel's great cross-dressing, suffering, blowhard.

Barnes is the only writer to whom I ever sent a letter. I was on the subway rereading parts of *Nightwood* when an older woman sitting next to me began to ask about the book. I said how much I liked it and she said, "Would you like to write to her?" I said, "Yes, I think I would." Her husband was a professor at Princeton, knew Barnes, and had the address. Two days later, a postcard arrived in the mail. I composed a brief, passionate and probably complicated letter of appreciation and sent it. A year and a half later, I received a reply: "Dear Miss Hustvedt, Your letter has given me great difficulty." I lost the letter, which grieves me still, but in a couple sentences she made

me understand that the difficulty wasn't altogether miserable for her. She died a month later.

CM: As I understand it, what William Gass means is that art can confront us with the meanness of our own lives, and this is what we can feel threatened by, in a way.

SH: Art can threaten our fundamental assumptions. Great books challenge what we take for granted. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* was such a book for me. Kafka's stories, Paul Celan's and Emily Dickinson's poems all shook me to the core. I had to rethink, re-feel. When I wrote *The Blazing World*, I wanted to throw the reader back on him or herself, as Kierkegaard said, to create a text as a moving target. I wanted to unsettle, challenge, tease, and play with the reader's comfortable paradigms. I think I succeeded but few seemed to understand what the book is up to. I read a lot of reviews because the criticism didn't touch me. I treated the reviews as extensions of the novel itself, part of Harry's experiment in perception—what she calls "proliferations." I felt more like godmother to Harry's masking project than the author. I may never be as untouched by bad reviews as I was with that book. But when reviewers were irritated, when they sided with one character or another, when they missed the irony or complained about the references to scholarship in various disciplines, I felt every single response had already been anticipated by, often even described in the book itself. I noticed with amusement how annoyed some reviewers were. They were threatened because there is no single truth here. There is ambiguity in all its richness. I had sympathy for some of them. If you allow yourself only a single perspective, whatever that perspective is, you won't be able to read the book.

CM: What has your research in neuroscience taught you about the creative process, if it has?

SH: I am fascinated by the biology of creativity. However, definitions of creativity in neuroscience are—primitive. For example, creativity is defined as "multiple solutions to a target problem." Or: "the production of something novel and useful within a particular cultural context." Emily Dickinson's poems were certainly novel. Were they useful? What does that mean? Such definitions don't hold up to much scrutiny. So I think the exploration must take place between the human biological organism and culture. This is a difficult territory to parse and analyze. I've gotten interested in genetics, and the more I read in genetics, the more complicated it becomes, so, for example, DNA is inert without its cellular environment. It is not a rigid linear code or blueprint for development. Those metaphors are misleading. Genes may be suppressed or expressed in relation to an animal's experience. To separate any creature from its *Umwelt* is not possible. And isn't creativity predicated on curiosity? Why are some people so much more curious than others? Even inside a university, where the professors have to be curious about their own fields, one finds that some people are far more willing to walk down new roads than others. Why is that? [laughter] You know what I mean, curiosity is unlikely to be genetically predetermined, although all mammals have a drive to explore their worlds.

CM: It's certainly something that's very much culture bound…

SH: Yes, but exploration requires security. Secure children are those who feel free to investigate what's around them. Insecure children hang on to the legs of their parents. We, all of us, go through periods of security and insecurity. A leap into the unknown is then followed by retreat back to Mother and Father.

At its most fundamental level, creativity is the same. It does not matter if one is doing physics or writing poetry. My favorite quote from Einstein addresses this question. Jacques Hadamard, the mathematician, asked Einstein how he worked, and he answered that his essential creative work had nothing to do with signs, either mathematical or linguistic. That part came later. His deep work, he maintained, was visual, muscular, and emotional. Einstein was interested in *Gestalt* theory and it is evident in his response.

Most of our work process eventually becomes automatic. Typing ceases to be conscious once learned. But other far more complex modes of thought also become unconscious once mastered. Creative surges arrive when unconscious material a person has thoroughly digested takes on new forms. It might appear as the theory of general relativity or as *Wuthering Heights*. It depends on the individual's particular underground.

Emily Brontë's novel is a literary wonder, by the way. Recently, I taught *Wuthering Heights* to graduate students—just one class. The book's narrative structure is so complex it awes me. It has the startling economy and overdetermined character of a dream. It is not a psychological work in the ordinary sense of the word. In the book, human beings and the rest of the natural world have leaked into one another so the boundaries are obscured or even nonexistent. A great book written by a 28 year-old. She died a couple of years later at thirty. How did she do it?

I've read some criticism of the book, but there's no consensus among scholars whatsoever. Some books keep generating criticism but there's a certain agreement. Here, as far as I can tell, it's one different view after another. People have analyzed the structure, but I think it's far more diabolical and ingenious than any analysis I've read.

CM: We've spoken about narrative, which to me is very much linked to plot. Is plot important for you when you start a novel?

SH: You have to have somewhere to go. That was the problem with my kite/funeral failure. [laughter]. I had a nice beginning but nowhere to go. So story is an unfolding that will take the reader somewhere else. I have often had an idea of where a story will go and in fact it leads me elsewhere because the characters take charge and suddenly you're on a road that you hadn't planned to be on; but that's what story is for me, a place to go. I always have a plot of sorts in mind, and usually some notion of an ending. I do believe books should be compelling that the reader should want to know what will happen. If you don't have a seductive motion, you might as well give it up. I don't regard my imaginary reader as infinitely tolerant. She or he needs a journey. And so for Harry [in The *Blazing World*] I chose a fairy tale, three masks in the form of three men, but I also borrowed from classical tragedy: I wanted to come as close to tragedy as is possible in contemporary fiction. My books begin with images, feelings, something inchoate that then grows into a story.

CM: Speaking about *The Blazing World*, in what ways is Harriet a tragic heroine?

SH: She has a flaw as they taught us in school [laughter]... I spent an entire semester when I was in gymnasium in Norway reading *Macbeth*. My English teacher was a stolid woman in her sixties who knew *Macbeth* inside out. I'm sure she still haunts me. Macbeth and Harry share a flaw: ambition. Harry has an unquenchable desire to be seen and known. But I wanted to root her need in her family, her father, in particular.

Harry's desire to be recognized comes from a primal need for paternal love that wasn't met to her satisfaction. But coinciding with her psychic wound is the real and chronic neglect of women in the art world. Harry is possessed by a fantasy she's desperate to feed and by a genuine complaint, but she's unable to see the difference between them—a familiar psychological dilemma. I wanted the emotions of tragedy for Harry. I wanted their purity. I wanted to return to Sophocles's *Antigone*, to big important emotions. But I also wanted a story rooted in the ordinary world to inspire those same feelings. In *The Blazing World* it's rage. Ancient theatre did rage pretty damned well [laughter]. Harry says, "I am Medea." It was fun to write, but scary, too.

CM: So it would be a mistake to consider this book as a feminist novel.

SH: It's a feminist novel, but it's not agit prop. I stay far away from that world. But to say that it's a feminist novel that critiques the way women are perceived in the world is absolutely true. The masks enhance Harry's work simply because they are credited to men. The first masked work, the naked Venus with art all over her body, is a joke and may be seen as an image of the most shallow possible reading of the novel itself. And then with each subsequent masked work, the reader is asked to go deeper, to entertain more complex readings of the novel he or she holds in his or her hands. I was fully conscious of the book's many games, and I had a tremendously good time with them. Yes, on one level it's absolutely a feminist novel.

CM: But not only that.

SH: No, not only that, I would never do that. I am too attracted to complication and ambiguity.

CM: Should we consider the novel as a whole as one of the mazes designed by Harriet?

SH: Yes, yes. Sometimes ideas are generated unconsciously, but then you become conscious of them. The book is itself a maze, and it features an actual maze artwork. Harry's maze that she creates for Rune is, as I said, a metaphor for the book itself. If you don't pay close attention to what you are reading, you won't make your way to the end of this book without getting lost.

CM: But the last voice in the novel is Sweet Autumn's.

SH: She is the counterpoint to the games and puzzles. There are many puzzles in the book, in terms of perspective—the many conflicting views of the same story—but there are also philosophical quandaries. Richard Brickman is the voice of multiple layered irony. When Harriet is writing as Brickman, she has outdone herself. She creates a parody that retains the veneer of serious scholarship and is dense with real theory, but its complexity pushes the borders of the reader's comprehension. Even Hess, the editor, doesn't really understand what's going on. This play or dance comes out of my reading of Kierkegaard, who wrote himself into ironic knots that scholars have been trying to untangle ever since. My history with S. K. has been one of increasing understanding and at the same time increasing despair. And I think that's just the relation he wants to have with his reader. He forces you to enter a position of despair, which should move you to Christian feeling and toward the jump. It didn't work for me [laughter]. But that is where he hopes to push you.

Sweet Autumn is my holy fool, my fairy tale being, the one the hero or heroine meets on the road or deep in the woods, the one who has magical powers. In Kierkegaardian terms, she is a person of more immediacy than reflection, but that is her gift. She is genuinely moved by what she experiences with others and she has an uncanny ability

to read emotions in a room. She knows what's transpiring among the people around her because she feels their connections as a kind of weather. She's not articulate and has silly, mystical, New Age explanations for her gut feelings, but I came to understand that she has an essential dignity. It is Sweet Autumn who is open enough to feel what Harry has made. The novel ends with her because she recognizes the emotional, animated force of the art in front of her.

CM: You've spoken about your influences when it comes to philosophy or thinkers generally, but you rarely mention literary influences. I don't like to use that term, but are there writers you feel close to, either in the past or the present?

SH: There are many. Henry James is always with me. Charles Dickens too. Jane Austen. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hawthorne, Kafka, George Eliot, from the first moment I first read her in Junior High. I was one of the few children who loved *The Mill on the Floss*. But she also served me as an intellectual model, a woman who translated Spinoza... *Middlemarch* remains a beloved book, another book I've read four times. I read it not so long ago, again. I didn't remember everything, but as I read, it came back to me again, and I began to remember and anticipate, but the tone of the narration has become more and more subtle as I age, as have the characters. This is a great tribute to a book. As you age you are able to appreciate aspects of the text that you simply didn't comprehend when you were younger.

George Eliot is a towering person, and the fact that she existed in English letters is a wonderful thing; and unlike Emily Brontë, Eliot didn't die young. She left behind a body of work. I recently quoted her anonymous essay, "Silly Novels by Silly Lady Novelists."[3] Near the end, she writes that we can be reassured that in literature women can be just as good as men. But it's not clear that women are perceived as equal to men in literature. I think often they are not.

CM: I'm not as pessimistic as you are about that.

SH: There are of course women in the canon, but there are many fewer than there should be. A woman's text is judged as softer than a man's, even when it's hard. This is part of Harry's story and it isn't a fantasy: it is more difficult for women to be taken seriously. Louise Bourgeois said "A woman has to prove over and over and over again that she can't be discounted." There's something to it.

CM: There's a question I would like to ask the Morandi expert. I'm currently working on Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, which is on the syllabus for the Agrégation...

SH: Don read my essay. I think he sent me a note, or perhaps he just mentioned it at a dinner, but he said "I'm very interested in your Morandi essay, and I've read it very carefully," and he said a Morandi work was going to appear in his book. He borrowed insights from my essay.

CM: Which essay is that? Is that the one in *Living, Thinking, Looking*?

SH: I think it was the first Morandi essay that Don read. He might also have read the other one, there are two. The second one is more about phenomenology, it's about how Morandi worked. But the first one addresses bottles and the city, still life as architecture.[4]

CM: But in the second essay, there is a sentence in which you say the bottles become buildings, and it's what Martin says in the novel.

SH: Yes, he took it... And there's another family story Don borrowed for *Falling Man*, but then forgot the source. My niece, Juliette, went to school only three blocks north

of the twin towers. September eleventh was especially traumatic for many of the children in that school. Anyway, about a week after the towers fell, we deliberately had dinner downtown in a restaurant that was open to patronize the devastated area, and Juliette, who was six or seven, was drawing a picture of a man with a beard. Paul said, "Who are you drawing, Juliette?" and she replied, "I'm drawing Bill Lawton". Don nabbed that from Juliette, which is what writers do, of course, but Don forgot about Juliette. My Morandi thoughts were imported into Don's novel because he was thinking about the city and its buildings. He made a conscious movement from my essay to *Falling Man* and then, unconsciously, he remembered Paul telling him about Juliette's confusion of Bill Lawton and Bin Laden. She got the name wrong; she was just a little girl. There you are, intertextuality at work! [laughter]

CM: Would you say that *The Sorrows of an American* is your 9/11 fiction?

SH: The theme of trauma runs through the different generations in that book. 9/11 was a catastrophe for everyone in the city, but it had many different effects, depending on how close or far from the event you were and the configuration of your personality. No writer can set a book in New York City during that time without addressing it. A German scholar included an essay on *The Sorrows of an American* in a book on 9/11 novels, so it has been identified as one of many books that took on the mass murder in New York. But the story treats other traumas too: my psychiatrist narrator, Erik, has a father who had traumatic experiences as a soldier in the Second World War. Erik works with traumatized patients. I never regarded 9/11 as uniquely horrible. Many Americans did. The first thing I thought to myself when I understood we were under terrorist attack was "Now it's come to us." I'm sure my attitude was shaped by my mother's experiences in Norway during the Nazi occupation and by my father's as a soldier in the Asian theater. The horrors—it's almost a cliché—but the horrors of war were part of my inner being, even though they weren't my own. I didn't want to isolate 9/11 as a peculiar event, but rather I wanted to treat it as one of a many traumatic events, both private and public, that have severe psychological effects on human beings.

CM: I would like to ask about the character of Miranda in *The Sorrows of an American.* Could you comment on her?

SH: I'm so glad you're asking, because nobody has talked about her. For me she was a huge character. Sophie's nanny, Edna Thelwell, who took care of Sophie for eight years, was Jamaican. We became close to her and to her husband, George. After Edna left her job, the friendship continued, and they were a fund of Jamaican stories. I talked to Edna a lot about her childhood—she was raised by her grandmother—had a dog named Brownie, but she also gave me insights into social and family relations in Jamaica. I read a lot about Jamaican history, especially the Maroons. I became captivated by their history of resistance. I have a whole section in my library on the subject, perhaps 25 books. Miranda was very important to me. She is Erik's love object, the beautiful "other," but as the novel goes on she becomes more concrete. And I do love her daughter, Eggy, who's a mixture of my own child, my niece Juliette, and another niece, Ava, a mingling, but Eggy also has qualities that are hers alone. The trauma of slavery lurks in Miranda's story. I am deeply interested in the legacy of slavery and the effect it had on families across generations. Rape was integral to the institution of slavery. It is present in the very idea of ownership, in the terrible reality of owning the body of another human being. This is an American story that

has never been dealt with. As I often say, where is the museum of slavery? Why is there no museum of slavery, the way there is a Holocaust museum? These people were bought and sold. Our country was built on slavery, on their bodies and their blood and suffering. I feel very strongly about this.

Miranda, named after Shakespeare's character in *The Tempest*, is idealized by Erik at first. She is seen through the eyes of a liberal white man, a sensitive and kind man, who is also depressed. He carries a legacy of depression from his father. Depression has double meaning, depression as illness and the Depression of the rural Midwest in the 1930s. All the characters in the novel are carrying the past. When you get to the end you realize that Miranda's uncle was murdered in Kingston because he was gay. The homophobia in Jamaica is terrible, just terrible. And then you have Eggy, who is the result of Miranda's affair with a white man, who is not a terrible person, but he is ambiguous and perverse. He toys with Erik's vulnerabilities. Lane photographs Erik and that picture ironically becomes a vehicle for insight. When he looks at the image, he sees rage, his own unexpressed rage.

The end is a kind of Buddhist ending. And you know the mysteries in the book are there but they're never really uncovered. The secrets are, at some level, intact at the end.

CM: You tackle all these questions about the history of America in a very subtle way.

SH: Yes, it's true, I have a real resistance to message fiction, or didactic fiction, but I have to say, the only person except you who ever asked me in an interview about Miranda was a white man married to a black Jamaican woman. So he was delighted to talk about Miranda and Jamaica, but otherwise white critics, white interviewers acted as if the whole theme of slavery and Miranda and color just didn't exist. They're afraid of it, I think, which is strange to me.

CM: Well, as you say, people try to forget about it.

SH: And they dismiss it by saying, "Oh well yes, slavery, that's in the past." In *The Sorrows of an American*, the past travels; the sorrows of one generation become the sorrows of the next. The transgenerational nature of trauma has long been observed, but now there are epigenetic studies that suggest that after DNA replication, molecular changes can be induced by stress to the organism, changes that remain fixed in the following three or four generations. There may be physiological changes that affect gene expression in the offspring of traumatized people, although exactly how this works in human beings is not clear.

CM: What is your next book? What are you working on right now?

A: It's a novel about... time. I'm returning to traumatic experience and the flashback. I've written about it before.[5] I was in a car accident and afterward, I had flashbacks for four nights in a row. Not long ago, many years after the accident, I woke up at night because my husband was snoring, and I crawled into another bed in the house and later in that morning, I discover the house is exploding or there's an earthquake, a deafening auditory experience. I wake up, collect myself, and after a couple of minutes, I understand that I have had another flashback of the crash. Because it occurred so long after the accident, I could no longer link my experience to the crash. When I had it immediately after, it was obviously a reenactment. Usually, there's a precipitating event that reactivates the trauma, a death, a move, divorce, retirement. Snoring is not enough. There are cases of soldiers who had repeated flashbacks after

the war, which then vanished, only to return much later in life, after they retired, or moved, or lost a spouse. I have no idea why I had a reoccurrence.

Another essay, which is in my new collection, "Remembering in Art," addresses the peculiar time of the flashback through Merleau-Ponty's idea of vertical time, which is in opposition to time as horizontal movement, in most Western countries from left to right, an idea that seems natural but which turns out to be based on our reading habits. Arabic speakers reverse the motion of time.

I have been working toward understanding *The Visible and the Invisible,* a work Merleau-Ponty never finished. At the end there are only working notes. Nevertheless, it's plain that the vertical time of "wild being," *être sauvage*, has nothing to do with the serialized time of reflective self-consciousness that allows us to live the melody of life as forward motion. I am thinking about a novel that includes vertical time. Again I have an arc, I have my opening, I know how it could happen. I have a pretty clear idea about what the next chapter is, and then I have a place to go, but we'll see what happens.

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3 Addendum February 2017

What actually happened after I gave this interview is that the book changed. I wrote and wrote and was deeply dissatisfied and unhappy with what I had written, and so I threw it away and began again. I am now writing a book called *Then* and am enjoying my work. It seems to be working. Time and memory are still important, but the book is very different from what I had imagined! The world changed too. Trump is in the White House. We could lose the republic. I have been writing political articles. I demonstrated in Washington in the Women's March. Resistance is now imperative. Time can never be taken for granted.

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## NOTES

**1.** This episode is narrated in Paul Auster's *Winter Journal* (Faber and Faber, 2012, p. 29).

**2.** Published in A Plea for Eros (2006).

**3.** The actual title is "Silly Novels By Lady Novelists."

**4.** Siri Hustvedt's first essay on Morandi, "Giorgio Morandi: Not Just Bottles" was published in 2005 in the collection *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, so it obviously is the essay read by Don DeLillo, since *Falling Man* was published in 2007. The second essay, "The Drama of perception: Looking at Morandi" was first delivered as a lecture at the Metropolitan Museum of New York in 2008, and then published in the *Yale Review* in 2009 before it was collected in *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012). In the first essay, Siri Hustvedt quotes several critics who have compared Morandi's still lifes to architecture and expands on their remarks: "[The art critic David] Sylvester is reported to have said that he thought Morandi's late paintings were more closely related to the cityscape of

Bologna than to still life. I carried this astute comment with me to Venice. The division in the painting with the three boxes does seem more closely linked to the horizon than to any tabletop. Even in its coloring, it is like the line between sky and ground The boxes and bottles have an architectural feeling to them, as do the objects in many of the canvases. The painting with three boxes in front of three bottles and a pitcher, for example, looks like towers behind squat buildings. Apparently, Sylvester was not alone in this insight. The critic Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti is quoted in the show's catalogue as saying that Morandi's still lifes are 'wholly architectural, so much so that it should prompt us to think of cathedrals rather than of bottles.'"(*Mysteries of the Rectangle: Essays on Painting*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2005, p.126).

**5.** In *The Shaking Woman. A History of my Nerves*, pp. 43-45.

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**Subjects:** Reconnaissances

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