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Hysteria and the postpostmodern novel

Solange Leibovici¹

Hysteria has been banned from DSM, where it has been replaced by “histrionic personality disorder”. But one might ask as does Juliet Mitchell in *Mad Men and Medusas*: “Is it hysteria itself or its classification –psychiatric, medical or psychoanalytic- that has become redundant?” (Mitchell 15). Hysteria has been studied by anthropologists as well as psychoanalysts, it is as broad and expansive as human culture (Mitchell 42). It certainly never disappeared from literature.

Freud’s famous case-study on hysteria “A Fragment of a Case of Hysteria in a Female”, (1905) about Dora, is a stunning literary text, a novella that reminds us of Schnitzler’s tales about fantasy and adultery. The most significant aspect of Dora’s hysteria, is that she exemplifies the propensity for easy and absolute mimetic identification with the characteristics or actions –real or imagined- of another person. This mimetic power seems to be the core of hysteria: Christopher Bollas stresses that the hysteric transforms herself into an event, her body becoming an erotic stage. The hysteric is always watching the self as a theatre, acting her part and being her own public at the same time. And enjoying it in a painful way, in what Lucien Israël has called “la jouissance de l’hystérique”. This is what Freud wants to learn from Dora: he repeatedly asks her what she gains from her involvement in the complicated family history of her father, her mother, Herr K. and Frau K. Like always, Freud is interested in the economy of the whole process.

What I would like to discuss is the role played by hysteria in a novel I have called “postpostmodern”, *What I loved* (2003) by Siri Hustvedt. In *What I loved*, hysteria is everywhere. It is present at various narrative levels and it represents what you could call the “libidinal economy” of the novel. I use this term in the way Slavoj Žižek does in an article called “The Thing from Inner Space: *Titanic* and *Deep Impact*” (Glen O. Gabbard, *Psychoanalysis and Film*). Žižek writes that, in the case of *Titanic*, “it is as if the iceberg hits the ship and the catastrophe occurs in order to prevent the much stronger libidinal catastrophe of two lovers happily being together and then seeing their union degenerate. This is Hollywood at its purest.” (Gabbard 161) In *Deep Impact*, the approaching comet is a metaphoric substitute for paternal infidelity, for the libidinal catastrophe of a daughter facing the fact that her father has chosen another young woman over her. Žižek writes that “the heroine’s helplessness and vulnerability should not deceive us. She is the evil spirit who, in the underlying libidinal machinery of the film’s narrative, pulls the strings, and the scene of finding death in the protective father’s embrace is the realization of her ultimate wish.” (Gabbard 166). The libidinal economy works like an internal mechanism or system that supports the narrative construction of the novel, it is also used as a tool that connects the different characters and episodes to each other. The word “economy” suggests there is some benefit, for the story itself, for the characters and -maybe - for the writer.

I will stress four aspects of hysteria: the mimetic identification with another person, the theatrical aspect, the seduction of the desired other, and the uncertain, problematic sexuality. All these elements (mimetic identification, theatrical tendencies, obsessive seduction and precarious sexuality) make hysteria so predominant in western cultures,

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where relations to other persons are characterized by mirroring, copying and identification, where television learn people how to turn their lives into reality soaps, where emotional emptiness and social fears lead to what we now call “borderline disorders” (according to DSM 6 to 10 millions Americans suffer borderline disorders). Borderline is also characterized by a highly dramatic personality and can be seen as a contemporary form of hysterical disorder. The characters in *What I loved* all have some hysterical traits, the most terrifying of them being Bill’s son Mark, who is a real borderline, and the novel is in a way a case-study of Mark’s evolution from a nice young boy to a sociopath. I am looking for hysteria as a form of libidinal economy, as the motor behind the actions that occur in the novel, the fuel that feeds the author’s “narrative desire”.

The postpostmodern novel seems to get along pretty well with hysteria. But first, what is postpostmodernism? According to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the primary meaning of postmodernism is “what comes after modernism”. Well, postpostmodernism is what comes after postmodernism. It is difficult to define precisely what literary postpostmodernism is because a broad theoretical discussion has not find place yet. Typical postpostmodern novels are *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, *House of Leaves* by Mark Danielewski, and Dave Eggers’ novels, and also novels about family histories, like Jonathan Frantzen’s. What they have in common is the need to show that postmodern creative freedom has become a claustrophobic, erratic wandering about, where the writer is imprisoned in networks of virtualities. Paul Auster’s *The Music of Chance* might be read as a metaphor of this attempt to escape postmodernism and search for new directions and new goals. Postpostmodernism is what Hal Foster calls a “turn to the real”, a new movement in art and literature where the artist is seen as an ethnographer, where there is a desire to localize the subject in a daily social reality. This explains the predominant role of identity, of witnessing, of trauma. There is a will to get involved, to understand the other and identify with him/her. This identification can be called mimetic, physical, even hysterical.² In postpostmodern literature we also find very strong autobiographical elements. The creation of fiction is no longer the author’s main desire: to him reality is more complex, more fascinating and more frightening then the invention of stories.

Siri Hustvedt is Paul Auster’s wife. He writes about her in *The Art of Hunger* (1997): “Then, early in 1981, I met Siri Hustvedt, the person I’m married to now. We took each other by storm, and nothing has been the same since.” (313) When they write, they are most of the day in “that strange space of the novel”, as Hustvedt puts it. For Paul Auster, writing is not an act of free will but a matter of survival: “Writing, in some sense, is an activity that helps me to relieve some of the pressure caused by buried secrets. Hidden memories, traumas, childhood scars –there’s no question that novels emerge from those inaccessible parts of ourselves.” (295). In 2003, Siri Hustvedt published *What I loved*. In the same year, Paul Auster published *Oracle Night*. These are two totally different stories, written in different styles, and I don’t believe Auster and Hustvedt willingly copy or even influence one another. There is something else going on.

In *What I loved* we follow art historian and narrator Leo Herzberg and his friend artist Bill Wechsler for twenty-five years, with their lives in the New York art world, their successes and failures, their marriages, their wives and children. The key character is a young woman, Violet, a French history specialist who writes about hysteria, eating disorders and cross-gender and also has been Bill’s favorite model. Bill and her fell in love

² Maybe this is what we also see in the involvement in postcolonial theory and Holocaust literature.

and he left his wife to marry her. Later Leo will discover he has also fallen in love with Violet. *Oracle Night* is the story of writer Sydney Orr and his wife Grace. Sydney buys a blue notebook in a Brooklyn store. He fills it with stories, scenarios, newspapers articles, footnotes and references, adding embedded stories that take place on different levels of reality. Within the novel, another novel called *Oracle Night* emerges, and the line between reality and fiction becomes blurred. Sydney discovers that Grace has had a relationship with his friend also writer John Trause.

Now let's look closer at *What I loved*, especially at Bill's art. He abandons painting to create boxes, each representing scenes and people from his family, to move on to what he calls his "hysteria constructions". Last year in Arles, Georgiana Colvile did a paper on Siri Hustvedt, and she noted that Violet, who writes about hysteria, feeds the subjects she's working on into Bill's "corresponding plastic creative drives." Between Bill and Violet, there seems to be a kind of creative symbiotic relationship. In the case of Auster and Hustvedt, I'd rather call it a transitional space. For Winnicott, the transitional phenomenon develops in a space between the subjective and the objective, it forms a transition between fantasy and reality, and it is related to cultural life. T.A. Ogden describes the transitional space as a process "in which opposing elements each create, preserve and negate each other; each stands in a dynamic, ever-changing relationship to each other." This is where we find what Paul Auster calls "the fictitious subterranean autobiography", where the words are no longer only symbols, but passages to the unconscious. What we look for here is, beyond the narrative structures of the fictional work, what Murray Schwartz calls "the more inclusive realm in which and through which both the data and ourselves are constantly interacting and combining in new configurations." (Rudnytsky 60) In the polyvalence Auster wants to achieve, some of the voices are Hustvedt's, and in Hustvedt's novels we find Auster's voice. In the case of *What I loved* and *Oracle Night*, the transitional space can become perceptible when we analyze the two novels simultaneously.

Oracle Night has been called a postmodern novel because of the many embedded stories and subtexts which present virtual realities en comment on the main story. In *What I loved*, these short texts are replaced by the paintings, collages and installations Bill Wechsler creates in different periods of his life. Space is one of Paul Auster's obsessions, and his work always shuttles between open spaces and hermetic spaces. Hustvedt translates this into the artistic space of the boxes. I'll give one example.

The boxes are all about three feet by four feet. Bill uses flat and three-dimensional figures, he combines real objects with painted ones, and he uses contemporary images to tell old stories and perverted fairy-tales. The small boxes draw on the fascination people have with peeping into dollhouses, but "the content of Bill's small worlds subverted expectations and often created a feeling of the uncanny." (WIL: 113). There is a dark-skinned and dark-haired Sleeping Beauty, laying in a coma in a hospital room, with tubes and the wires of a heart monitor entangled with life-sized floral arrangements: "gigantic gladioli, carnations, roses, birds-of-paradise and ferns that choked the room." In a later scene, "a cutout of a naked man with an erect penis hung in the air over her bed as she slept. The man held a large pair of open scissors in his hand." (WIL 114). The scenes are constructed like dreams by means of displacement and condensation. The Sleeping Beauty in her hospital bed reminds us of Auster's protagonist Sydney Orr, who is recovering from a near fatal illness. But in Auster's novel there are also dark-skinned ladies, who stand for lust and adultery: Sydney has an erotic encounter with a black prostitute. Paul Auster also

has a dark skin and dark hair. The man with the erection and the scissors is a figure of desire: of sex, of castration and revenge. The life-sized flowers which seem to almost choke the Sleeping Beauty symbolize anger and violence.

The boxes also show Hustvedt's fascination for cross-gender (the hysteric's uncertainty about sexuality): there is one called "The Girl Who Pretended to Be a Boy", where the princess finds her trials have transformed her into a boy, "at her crotch was the unmistakable bump of manhood." (WIL 114) The small boxes are embedded in the story like Auster's subtexts, because they tell stories which are related with the main narrative but also give other, three-dimensional information, mostly at an unconscious level. Hustvedt seems to stress Peter Rudnytsky remark about art as a transitional object: "Art, like play, must be situated in both a *temporal* and a *spacial* dimension, as Winnicott does with his concepts of transitional objects and potential space." (Rudnytsky XIII) The uncanny comes from the fact that characters are usually placed in spaces where they walk from one room to the other and change the world they live in. Here the small figures are trapped in little frozen stages, rooms that are not locked like Paul Auster's, but from which they cannot escape.

What Hustvedt does is transforming the postmodernism in Auster's novels into postpostmodernity. In the first place, this has to do with the fact that she uses representations or images instead of language. Then there is the involvement and identification and the will to become part of Auster's fantasy world and traumatic experiences. Christopher Bollas writes that these skills –identification and representation– can be developed to a remarkable degree by hysterics, who show uncanny abilities to gain access to the other's desire and then to represent it. (Bollas 54-55) Of course this doesn't imply Siri Hustvedt is a hysteric, but that she is able to work with and even transcend the hysterical qualities she possesses. We see this when she describes how Violet aggressively seduces Bill into leaving his wife, how she desires total fusion with the man she loves, even wanting to smell like him. When Leo takes Violet in his arms, he notices: "I smelled Bill –cigarettes, turpentine and sawdust." Violet also represents the hysterical attempt to deny the lack by taking possession of the phallus. After Bill's death, she says to Leo: "There was always something I couldn't get to in him, something remote, and I wanted that thing I could never have. It kept me alive and it kept me in love, because whatever it was, I could never find it." (WIL: 351)

The transitional space can also be used as a fictional weapon against the claustrophobic closeness of the symbiotal relation. In *Oracle Night*, the narrator's wife Grace is nearly killed and she loses her baby. In *What I loved*, Bill, the only man Violet will ever love (and a heavy smoker like Paul Auster), is sentenced to death by Siri Hustvedt. One day, Violet comes home and finds him laying on the ground, with the portfolios with all his designs, his unfinished paintings against the wall, and the boxes with their uncanny scenes stored on shelves above it.

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