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Jamieson Webster

I Am Not A Muse: Disappearance of the Hysteric Today

*'Where is she? Where has she gone?' they ask as if a question of presence or the evocation of absence surrounds her, such that, watched by their vigilant gaze, it can finally be resolved. But that's just the psychoanalysts muttering to themselves, an equally questionable clan with troubles similar to the ones mumbled about— Where are we? Are we on our way out? Who wants us anymore? These questions are so difficult because they seem so obvious, because they seem like they deserve a simple answer. And all the anxiety about disappearance, elusiveness, and ambiguity is concealed in this demand. Does she even want to be found or found out? Freud wrote, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, "writing to begin with was the voice of the absent". Contrast this with his famous statement about 'the finding of an object always being a refinding.' In order to refind her, perhaps we have to allow her to write this voice of absence. There is something to be learned from the disappearance of the hysteric today.*

So I'd like to put aside for the time being some of these questions we perennially ask as analysts about the hysteric. To answer them is, to my mind, to open the door to an overly theoretical agenda that only reaffirms my place, my necessity for thinking the hysteric, when the point is to address a point in time— the hysteric today— and what the question of hysteria even means now. In particular, what hysteria means now when no one is even really asking a question about her anymore; now, when her intractable irrelevance is no longer the result hatred, radical suppression, or even indifference. Now, when the engines of fascination have run down and we approach something on the order of radical erasure. I say this without saying it critically or mournfully. I say it with reverence, and with a sense of respect that I'd like to convey to you today.

We no longer even know what the word means— hysteria— and yet it is part of common lexicon, an adjective, seamless with the blah blah blah of everyday chatter. Part of the name of an old New York experimental theater that feels dated. The name of new pilot TV show free on Amazon.com that is part graduate school lecture on hysteria from witches to boarding schools, part Law and Order/ Dr. House medical mystery serial television. Something Lacanians talk about with a special aura— the hysteric— which already implies some kind of knowledge, whereas in its everyday sense, hysteria isn't something we need to know. It is equivalent to the idea of being really emotional, like totally emotional, which is to say empty of anything really. Epitomized by the emoticon in a text messages. You don't ask about it. It's just there. Someone crying. Someone pulling at their hair, or with an exaggerated expression on their face, cheeks turning red or with hearts for eyes, sweating or surprised. Even Munch's scream is now an emoticon: awash, excessive, but silent. Content without content, like women on reality TV, who only talk about what it means to be a woman by screaming or talking really fast or being fascinated by one another's bodies. Hysteria reduced to a look or a gesture or pure performativity. It's perfect really. It takes us back to the very beginning. Charcot. Augustine. And it's August for the psychoanalysts who've also all disappeared, because having gone back to the beginning, or 'back to basics' as people like to say, what we have 'done' or contributed becomes a very serious question.

We are moving toward a point where a question about what all of this will mean—our history as a discipline and the discipline of diagnosis— is reaching a critical juncture. The word everywhere but emptied, has no weight. Weightless, it is unburdened of history. Excessive and then erased; monumental then subdivided and dismantled. Mantled and dismantled in a single movement. Perhaps that's the point. The form, this spreading surface of hysteria, carried along by the currents of history, is more true than any content could ever be, could ever have been. And the two ends of the circle of the story of hysteria meet at this point X. Hysteria realizes itself in this act of erasure, in the gathering and dispersal of desire. Desire is rendered as pure form and formal movement, set adrift, creating in its wake a demand for this drift and a counter-demand set against it.

Such is the aftermath of the hysteric's disappearing act. We might wonder about her place in this, her desire. If, orchestrating her disappearance, she has found a way to exist a little easier, outside of any demands? Perhaps this is always where she felt destined to go, while *we* imagine some abuse of a barbaric present or the travesty of contemporary medicine; an imagination set loose, so we think, on her behalf. But, beyond our imagination, in exiting, perhaps she has found a little room to breath, to be even more hysterical, a grand hysteric, a hysteric without a name. Finally! A gift for the one who always wanted to be without a name, who evoked the image only in order to be more fully herself, somewhere else. The label, the doctors, they were always such a burden weren't they? Whether she was on a pedestal or locked away in a sanatorium, it was too much to live up to. Unburdened by history, history dissolving into this unnameable and formally beautiful point X— beyond words, beyond labels, beyond injunction, beyond meaning; her pain, her smile, her silent name that belongs to no one. Then all the rest can remain quiet or confounded. 'I have nothing to do with you. I am not a muse.'

I often forget that the word hysteria also suggests amusement, laughter, comedy, another important, sedimented, iteration of the word in common usage. That's hysterical! It's hysterical! I like this one a lot; as if the world has recognized that there is something important about humor and the hysteric. As if the pathos of hysteria flipped into its other, more manic self. Her 'inappropriate' giggling that annoyed so many of the doctors early on. And what did they say about it— that it was out of step with what she was saying, that it was defensive, sexual, seductive, that it was the result of too much internal tension. That it was, well, hysterical. What a tautology! She's hysterical because she's hysterical.

I wonder about the humor of hysterics? Not with an anxious worry in the face of it— what does it want and all that— but about the laughter in-itself. If it's insular, knowing, comical, slapstick, punning, word play, or nonsense? Nonsense seems right. Something about the slide toward nonsense, the limits of love and knowledge, reaching towards those limits, the limits of sense as both a break in sense and an amusement with sense itself, what is idiotic in trying to make sense of anything. Hilarious. Delightful. Laughter is the best punctuation. It requires nothing more. I'm always hugely relieved of any demand to make sense— something I struggle with in session— which happens most quickly when a patient laughs, when they've said something absolutely hysterical. Finally no-one has to say anything else; the silence is not an imposition that is either mine or theirs. Hysteria disappears in what is hysterical.

So, I am well aware of the contradiction in speaking about her while trying to render her in another space outside or beyond our discourse. I wish I could find another way. But, I'm trying to follow her lead, following her as she takes up different quarters while walking the streets all the same, with her self-same intensity. How can we allow her to come to us in this way, so that if she is looking for an ear, she can do it secretly, slip past the door, nestle down in a chair, all eyes, all anticipation? With what words! Our ear might open a little more easily. 'Who is this strange creature I have before me?', the analyst thinks. 'Why do I want to say anything to you?', she questions herself. Wonderment travels in both directions. There is no script. These two— speaker and listener— need not be afraid, even when this is the purest condition of fear: address, call, voice, desire. No one is really trying to gain the upper hand. It was NEVER about that to begin with. Such is the reprieve in being lost. Of finding a place where there is no 'was' or 'will be' but only the always of, 'I always knew that one day I'd have to leave in order to finally come to you' or 'I was always going to be the one who couldn't say that saying everything would have to be unnecessary' or 'I have always been looking for someone who could ask me without asking for anything, most of all to make sense of

myself’. We forgot how astonishing she is when finally decides to speak. What we don’t know is if she ever forgot, or if she was just waiting until we did.

Bio:

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