

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Dec 5, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/sharon-kivland-a-case-of-hysteria-london-book-works-1999/>

Julia Borossa

## **Sharon Kivland. A Case of Hysteria (London: Book Works, 1999)**

### **BOOK REVIEWS**

A hundred years on and at least as many academic and clinical papers later, the story of Sigmund Freud's recalcitrant hysteric Dora continues to fascinate us. We can easily recite all the salacious details of the case, invoke the sacrifice of a daughter's innocence for the sake of the pleasures of a diseased father, reflect upon the daughter's own polymorphous desires. We remember the duel of wills between Freud and his patient and the masterful ways in which Freud extracts a series of great psychoanalytic insights from the gaps of an incomplete narrative. Faced with yet another work making claim to such a familiar terrain, our first questions as readers may well be "why Dora again? why Dora now?" But this one reader, even before she reached the end of Sharon Kivland's astonishing work, came to the conclusion that such questions are actually quite beside the point.

A Case of Hysteria is, in my understanding, only nominally about Freud's famous case study, a departure point for a much broader, as well as a much more personal kind of reflection. In some ways, this might seem a rather perverse take on a book which, in its language and its form sticks closely to the letter of Freud's text, repeatedly and slyly quotes it, mimics its original structure, borrows the intonations of its voice. Let me explain. What A Case of Hysteria does is make strategic use of Freud's "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria" in order to argue a series of very important points about, on the one hand, what constitutes a case study, and on the other, about writing and the creative process itself. Case studies in general, whether legal, medical or psychoanalytic, function within a dialectic between the particular and the universal. A singularity –whether a crime, an illness, or (more paradoxically) an intersubjective encounter between an analyst and an analysand spread over weeks, months or years– becomes the basis for an intervention in the realm of the general. This process demands the production of a kind of fiction of a fixed and exemplary truth. In the psychoanalytic case, however, the problematic nature of such a "truth" becomes part of its very fabric. Kivland speaking with Freud acknowledges this from the outset: "I have not entirely restored what is missing (...) unlike a conscientious archeologist, I have omitted to mention in each case where the authentic parts end and my constructions begin" (p.6).

Repression, as well as the unconscious of subject and object of the case alike, ensure that the story told remains fragmentary, contradictory and confused about its temporality, at odds with the instrumental unity and authoritativeness imposed by the very purpose of the genre of the case. This is very well captured here, as the Dora case is presented to us from every conceivable angle until it starts unraveling under the weight of the evidence. Some of this evidence is archival and even photographic: a wealth of historical detail is unearthed and presented to us. Freud, his patient Ida Bauer ("Dora"), every member of her family, the Zellenkas (the "K.s") all are given their say, events retold from their different perspectives. An elaborate, lengthy and witty staging (literally: a short play within the book) of the voices of dozens of the critics who over the years commented on the case, is also included.

But then a strange thing happens: the second, allied meaning of the term “case”, the investigative meaning, irrupts into the narrative under the guise of imagined self-presentations of a series of female detectives, paving the way for the full emergence at the end of the story of the author, herself. A case study is always the story of the one whose task it is to confront the problem of knowledge and of truth, the one who must tell the tale. “I have found all the graves I could, I have found all the houses lived in that still stand, I can do no more than this and none of it, none of it at all, tells me anything. I will not, I’ve told you already again and again, I will not make a fiction out of what is not there” (p. 290). But of course, psychoanalysis teaches one that the negotiation of presence and absence, construction and reconstruction, the subjective nature of psychic truth, the adoption of necessary fictions, is the stuff of human existence. And in these terms, human existence is a creative enterprise. As an artist (her photographs, amongst other archival ones, illustrate the text; the editor guides us through allusions to her exhibitions), Sharon Kivland is in a strong position to illustrate such universals. And thus, we are back to the very problematic of the case. General/Particular. Whose story? Hers and ours. “Am I the author?” (p.274).

A book which is highly original and demanding of its readers, it has important things to say about the elusiveness of the intersubjective encounter versus an iconic status of Freud’s text. It is moreover extremely well produced, and a fine, lucid and erudite introduction by its editor Forbes Morlock draws us into its complexities and invokes the responsibilities and the risks we must take if we are to be creative readers of *A Case of Hysteria*. For in the end, it does not make allowances for the reassuring fiction of a cure for the very split which defines the human condition, a split here characterized as hysteria. “Enclosed within this case, lying within these pages – still unfragmented and without analysis is hysteria. As you turn them, the leaves of this book may both effect one cure and preserve a second illness. Caveat lector. You have been warned.” (p.xv).