

The Sirens

VOL 1 // WOMEN'S BODIES, MADNESS, COLONIAL HISTORIES, AND COLLECTING

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A woman (Augustine) is led into darkness: a room. She is inflicted with a disease, presenting dramatic symptoms; the cause unknown. Inside, obscured in isolation, she is suddenly assailed by light. Shocked, her body freezes into a picture.

How fucking terrifying it must have been.

The picture is seductive (he thinks, "Sirens"). He took it, it compels him, the picture that is, not Augustine. He thinks he knows it, knows how to read it, and through it, he reads (invents) the dark corners of the female psyche: a project of identity, identical to his imagination.

You hear voices, so am I.

The collection of photographs was produced in the late fifteenth-century in the Parisian Institute for the Care of Women, the *Salpêtrière*. It received a title from its creator: the "museum of living pathology," presenting symptoms, objects, of exhibition.

On Tuesdays, accompanied by his hysterics, the doctor held his famous lectures, where they performed, over and over again, their famous attacks. The doctor loved to see it: his force, their bodies, obeying, like sweet automatons. At times, a fellow from the amphitheater's crowd—of mostly nonprofessionals—will yell: "Here, Monsieur, over there perhaps, yes, you, over there, go ahead, order her to do something, yes, anything at all." The doctor will oblige. After all, by then he had some competition; the circuses, the magicians, and magnetizers were displaying shows "based on Professor Charcot's experiments at the *Salpêtrière*." Provoking secrets, he moved their limbs, their bodies, that were subservient, as if they were only dolls.

If you ask me what I want I'll tell you. I want everything. Whole rotten world come down and break, let me spread my legs. 3

My love, I am asking you to consider yourself. Your identity—that which is not "another"—is always driven by identification (because you want me, and I change). To reiterate what our poststructuralist mothers claimed, the center of identity is nonidentity, and it is ok. It's wonderful. Then, let's also reconsider how we can address, differently, the politics of identities.

overexposing yourself to your image disintegrates you into darkness

Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief. 5

To listen; to speak echoes. To embody her, who spoke the endings of others' speech (since she knew too much, and shared her knowledge, she was punished and deprived of her own voice). Echo, whose desire was and will not be answered. Echo, who starves to death, in love. She who was hollowed out, her shattered selfhood haunts our identities.

How to: Avert Your Gaze

Ovid writes: "Imagine a ring of grass, well-watered and lush, and a circle of trees of cooling shade in the burning summer sunshine." If we were to draw the relation between Narcissus and Echo, it would be of two concentric circles.

At the edge of the pool, he is transfixed. Locking eyes with his reflection, his back is turned to the world, the world where Echo is.

And we have not yet heard enough, if anything, about the female gaze. About the scorch of it, with the eyes staying in the head. 4

The birth of psychoanalysis can be dated to Freud's 1885 trip to Paris, where he studied under a man who became his greatest mentor, Jean Martin Charcot, the Head Doctor of the world's largest mental hospital at the time, the *Salpêtrière*, a charity hospital for mostly women. Treating nervous pathologies, Charcot employed photography, believing, as Freud notes, in his special ability to see clearly, which, vis-à-vis photography, introduced order into an illness that "seems always outside of any rule," stabilizing the "instability, the mobility of its symptoms" into diagnosis. It is interesting to note that, upon Freud's return to Vienna he turned away his gaze, and began to listen.

I wrote that "I re-learned to eat food as to respect ignorance." I lied. I was defeated. I gave up on madness. I still give up on it, almost every day.

To recognize yourself by touching, hitting boundaries. How does one live this way? How can you live otherwise?

Since I left (you), I resist writing (I write). Clinging to the wish—my voice, your grain—I am afraid to hear it. It's miserable as much as it is pleasing. Maybe this way I will keep you here for a bit longer. I have so many others too.

"Dissociative disorders involve experiencing a disconnection and lack of continuity between thoughts, memories, surroundings, actions, and identity. People with dissociative disorders escape reality in ways that are involuntary and unhealthy and cause problems with functioning in everyday life. Dissociative disorders usually develop as a reaction to trauma and help keep difficult memories at bay." "Dissociative Disorders." (Mayo Clinic, www.mayoclinic.org)

Symptoms: fears, urges or cravings convulsions a monotonous repetition of an action or of words closed eyes expressionless face heat loss of consciousness bulimia teeth-clenching moisture wanting and wanting irritability dryness anxiety fainting spells anorexia insubordination displays of extreme emotion overheated mind nervousness and explosiveness spasms

Causes: moral impressions fears exaggerated religious practices untimely experience of hypnotization traumatism or nervous shocks earthquakes and lightning typhoid fever scarlet fever articular rheumatism diabetes syphilis chlorosis overwork hemorrhages masturbation venereal excesses tobacco camphor certain professions nervousness and certain races Israelites*

A bond was tied, of want and want. He desired pictures (of Hysteria), they desired his gaze. To earn it—his attention—they retained their illness. And then, they raised the bar, theatricalizing further and further their own bodies.

The doctor and his patients enter into a dance, a whirl of transference.

Diagnosis: -The doctor found true pleasure of using the flash, at the time a fairly new technology. -The doctor equally enjoyed painting and retouching his photographs, achieving sculptural effects.

You see. You recognize. You find pleasure. You name it. You find pleasure. You find Order. You find pleasure.

The doctor declared the photographs to be of a medical necessity and value, but they ooze with cravings of the gaze. Holy, sinful, innocent and insidious, the "pathologies" display virginal positions and the filth of sex.

With pictures, the doctor silenced the hysterics' "delirious" verbal flow. What a pleasure it must have been, to look at tongue-tied photographs, away from the "incessant babbling" of women.

"What are transferences? They are new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic for the species, that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician." (Sigmund Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," 1895)

I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another. 2

By his own account, the doctor had a "nature of an artist," he was a "visuel," a "man who sees." Staring at his photographs, the doctor "used to look again and again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day, 'til suddenly an understanding of them dawned on him." Then, suddenly "in his mind's eye," "the apparent chaos presented by the continual repetition of the same symptoms then gave way to order: the new nosological pictures emerged, characterized by the constant combination of certain groups of symptoms." (Sigmund Freud, "Charcot," 1893) The doctor found order, he found pleasure.

Writing about narcissism, Freud turned to the image of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection. Aside from that picture, he pretty much ignored the myth, and, most importantly, he shut his ears to Echo.

The photographs depict women. Frozen, contracted bodies, gripped by anguish, extreme emotion, or confusion. The collection is hysteric—the outcome of an unregulated want—nervous, and explosive.

To be, to be constituted, without reflection, no mirror. To doubt your image (your relationship with it is torturous, exhausting). To renounce Narcissus.

Hysteria (n.) Pathology. A functional disturbance of the nervous system, usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties (Also called colloquially hysterics). Women being much more liable than men to this disorder, it was originally thought to be due to a disturbance of the uterus and its functions: cf. hysterical adj. and n. and the German term mutterweh. (Oxford online dictionary. Entrance: July 12, 2019)

Former names: vapors, hysterical passion, women's asthma, melancholia of virgins and widows, spasms, nerve aches, nerve attacks, uterine suffocation, womb suffocation, uterine epilepsy, uterine strangulation, metro-nervy, metric neurosis, metralgia, ovaralgia, utero-cephalitis, spasmodic encephalitis.

right measures, moderate tones.

full sentences. At any moment it all can be erupted.

I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able. 1

Hysterical neurosis was removed from the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, in 1980(!). Today, hysterical symptoms are considered to be manifestations of Dissociative disorders.

You keep falling. Your legs give up; the sciatic nerve goes into spasms. It repeats itself because of your betrayal. Your body rages against you like an abandoned child that demands attention. Before this you didn't know that "blinding pain" is not a metaphorical description. When you fall, the pain strikes with sound, a high pitch note, that in its peak turns into silence; a heavy, full silence. It blankets your insides and hollows you out: you cannot think, you cannot see, you cannot move. Pain now became your body.

Eve was the first to know, not Adam. I want her knowledge, and at times I have it (like now, for example). This knowledge, it goes through me; it causes pain if I don't address it. It paralyzes.

So I attend to it daily, peeling its layers slowly, as if I am peeling the delicate skin of garlic.

I listen. I do not look. And it speaks, like Eve, her name, it speaks "to live," it speaks "to utter."

I wrote elsewhere, that I was (still am?) an anorexic (reading it—the word—I choke). I was in love, deeply in love against my body. I ate hunger, consuming and being consumed by the desire to eat my desire away. I felt so strong and pure as I got weak.

A secret. What caused Hysteria? Charcot did not know. He knew so much, but not the cause of his beloved illness. It is quite astounding that he imagined so many causes, aside from one. As a result, the women were denied the comprehension of their own knowledge. Their fragmented testimonies of repressed sexual assault were heard as "incessant babbling." Their bodies, their sensations, memories, their very own existence, they were forced to deny. And they denied it gloriously.

I want you to pause, and grasp the fact that psychiatry and neurology began on stage, and in the dark rooms, where women rehearsed their violation, over and over again, in front of men.