

BOOK REVIEWS

Small claims and large ambitions: some comments on
The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves, by Siri Hustvedt
and
What is Madness? by Darian Leader

Reviewed by Liz Frost

If I were the judge of the annual awards (as yet to be established) for ‘best contribution towards the psychosocial’, Siri Hustvedt would be a serious contender. A writer, thinker and teacher, her powerful, brilliant novel ‘What I Loved’ (2003) will be familiar to many and no doubt cited in more than a few personal ‘favourite contemporary novel’ lists. The tacit psychosocial nuances discernable in this become more explicit in the erudite ‘The Sorrows of an American’, (2008) in which an extraordinarily convincing psychoanalyst is the central character and, reputedly, much replication of her self and circumstances appear as fiction. In 2010 however she steps out from behind that screen altogether, and ‘The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves’ is autobiography, and much much more. Hustvedt goes in search of the reasons she has started to physically shake in certain circumstances. Her quest takes her through psychiatry and psychoanalysis, philosophy and neuroscience, family narratives, biography, case study and history, where she proves to be a judicious, enquiring and respectful explorer.

Having been a migraine sufferer all her life, with various other associated (or not) ‘symptoms’, Hustvedt had for some years been on the trail of understanding neurology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Her personal experience within the mind/brain system and outside it fuelled this quest. Already highly conversant with the subject area, whilst making a memorial speech for her father she experienced a bout of physical shaking, and the impetus to explore her own condition focused and personalised her already impressive learning. What we have here in this 200 page, rigorously footnoted volume, is an historical and contemporary review of ‘psycho-knowledge’, which her own biography serves to contextualise, exemplify and refract. Why has she become a shaking woman? She searches from Charcot to an MRI scan, from Damasio to automatic writing, from Crick and Watson to the brothers James and from ancient Greece to contemporary New York. She finds no

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answer, but the questions the reader is offered instead, the hints and insights and wisdoms interwoven here, are every bit as satisfying.

Darian Leader is a high profile psychoanalyst, writer and practitioner. Some of his readers know him, gratefully, for making Lacan both more accessible and demonstrably practical. (*Introducing Lacan*, 2000, 2005). He too has crossed between traditional disciplinary boundaries, messing up divisions between (fine) art and psychoanalysis particularly. (e.g. *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us from Seeing*, 2002). A seasoned campaigner in the battle against over-simplification, over-medicalization and over-rationalisation in psychiatry, perhaps only such a pro would dare to pose the huge question of ‘What is Madness?’, the title of this 2011 volume, and attempt to answer it in only 350 pages. The territory here is mainly Lacanian psychoanalysis, language and meaning. A fundamental theme: that hallucination and delusory thinking, ‘irrational’ belief systems and ‘mad’ behaviours are not the disposable symptoms of psychosis or schizophrenia, not symptoms that effective treatment should eradicate, but the signs of the individual trying to make something tolerable with their madness. The meaning systems they impose are the mechanisms for surviving, in relation particularly to libido and its regulation, the distance and closeness of ‘the other’, and the desire of the mother/other. ‘Being mad’, Leader argues, can be manifest in living quietly, and ordinarily for years and years; ‘acting mad’ can be the process of recovery and healing. Modern psychiatry fails to spot this, sees only the florid or overt as in need of treatment; has stopped really listening to and understanding its patients.

Both volumes offer a range of satisfactions: academic/clinical learning of course, but also the ‘hide and seek’ identifications of selves, patients and students that good writing on the mind allows us. Both reference popular culture and literature, with Leader particularly strong on picking exactly the film, the novel, the classic, that will illustrate his point. And both tell stories: Hustvedt her own and those of people in her life as a teacher, writer and a family member, and Leader those of historical and contemporary ‘madmen’ murderers like Harold Shipman. And both also retell tales of patients old and new: the famous case histories of the likes of ‘The Wolf Man’ for example. For Leader particularly fresh exploration of these infamous analysands becomes a significant part of the work.

Hustvedt situates herself in her work, rendering the book subjective and personal. This is clever: She is her own case study, by which she avoids the problem in ‘research’ of the amount one claims – too much or too little can be frustrating. Such issues are left up to the

reader. What does it signify? Is it generalisable? Does it apply to no one else or many people? Does it apply to me? The reader has to decide; the author is writing a history of *her* nerves. Of course the effect of this is much more complex and contradictory. The reader is included not abolished: invited to take part. And some of her more general discussion, the sharing of her considerable wisdom, for example on crucially understanding individuals as contextual, on the damaging impact of some social injuries, on the essential nature of ambiguity, on the strengths of neurobiology as adjunct to psychoanalysis etc. etc. are well grounded knowledge claims, if voiced with discretion. This strengthens an already remarkable book.

Leader's work is that of the expert, with the expert's level of knowledge in his subject and an impressive range of cultural knowledge to illustrate and elucidate this. His work is extraordinarily clear, even when it is at its most complex. This is the voice of a teacher with high level skills, and positioned as the reader and pupil one does feel 'taught' in a good way: stimulated to think more broadly and to learn new knowledge. The content of the work feels 'academic' in both senses though, and unlike the Hustvedt, the subjects of the text are distanced, easily viewed as 'them' not 'us'. Leader is not to be found, at least not in any easy way, in his work, and the people he discusses mostly stay as 'cases'. The socio-political context is also hard to spot. Gender and class, which seem so crucial in relation to, for example, understanding whether and for whom the past of psychiatric treatment was really a golden age, are hardly mentioned. However the book certainly does invite the reader to explore madness, and successfully meets its claim to explain madness and really should be compulsory reading for psychiatric practitioners (and all psychosocial peeps).

Siri Hustvedt (2010) *The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves*, London: Sceptre, ISBN 9780340998762

Darian Leader (2011) *What is Madness?*, London: Hamish Hamilton, ISBN 9780241144