The Language of Hysteria: A Misappropriation of the Master Narratives

Much Ado about Nothing

Though it might seem that the language of hysteria belongs to a past century, the wager I want to propose is that, once one begins to explore the murky interface between medical discourses on this psychosomatic disturbance and its cultural construction over the past centuries, this strangely resilient but also elusive form of speaking with the body continues not only to haunt but also to fascinate us. If a physician like Charcot came to call this mode of articulating psychic discontent 'much ado about nothing'—in part because no organic lesions can be found for the affliction, in part to emphasize the degree of simulation at work in hysteric self-presentation—what is, nevertheless, also at stake is the fact that, in hysteria, the afflicted subject has recourse to her or his body as medium of expression precisely because symbolic language for some reason no longer suffices. For this reason I suggest returning to the birth of psychoanalysis as one of our grand narratives, even while I also want to hold on to a certain discontent with the direction Freud's explanation of hysteria ultimately took. In the same manner as Jacqueline Lubtchansky I am compelled to ask: if sexual impressions and desires of love are at the origin of hysteria, is this enough to create neurosis? Like her, I would want to highlight that what one is most impressed by, while reading Freud's early case-histories, is that these narratives keep returning to painful scenes of lack, fallibility and vulnerability, to impressions connected to the death of loved ones, misfortunes and losses.[1]

Following upon this I suggest that it might be more useful to understand hysteria as a strategy of representation that makes use of multiple self-

1 See J. Lubtchansky, 'Le Point de vue économique dans l'hystérie à partir de la notion de traumatisme dans l'oeuvre de Freud', *Revue française de psychoanalyse* 37, 1973, 373–405.

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fashioning,[2] even as these self-representations are constructed over but also shield from radical negativity, from, one could say, the traumatic kernel at the core of all systems of identity, upon which all later repression, fantasy work and symptom formation feeds without ever directly touching it. In other words, in speaking about a language of hysteria rather than a psychopathology, I suggest shifting our critical focus to the way that the hysteric conversion of psychic trauma into a somatic symptom enacts a ciphered message about vulnerability, be it the fallibility of paternal law and symbolic bonds, the fragility of our fantasy work or finally the vulnerability of the body. To do so it is useful to appropriate Freud's initial theory of a traumatic rather than a sexual aetiology of hysteria. Because, in his early writings, Freud is particularly interested in the traumatic remains that cannot be captured by representation, invoking the notion of a foreign body of traumatic knowledge, which haunts the psychic apparatus but is nevertheless delineated from any psychic representations by a gap in the psyche (*psychische Lücke*), such that repression and the formation of symptoms occur not in response to the actual trauma but rather to a memory trace of it. Concomitant with the fact that any starting point of traumatic attacks and their conversion into symptoms of discontent is a psychic gap, Freud speaks of memories as protective fictions/blockages (*Schutzdichtungen*) which the subject produces so as to cover over the remains of the traumatic knowledge of its implenitude, incessantly reworking a memory of distress into liveable stories.[3] At the same time these personal narratives we tell ourselves in order to live are haunted by and indeed feed off the very traumatic material they also seek to block out. Thus, if traditional notions of hysteria keep returning to the image of much ado about nothing, I want to take this nothing and its relation to the resilience of self-fashioning engendered by the hysteric performance quite seriously. In this I suggest following Lucien Israël's claim that hysteria be seen first and foremost as a form of communication, an attempt to set up a relation with the Other, to broadcast a message about the fallibility of the symbolic and of the self.[4]

As one revisits the archive of medical literature on this elusive psychosomatic disturbance, what is particularly striking, however, is the manner in which hysteria came to make up such a fruitful field for nosological speculation because it could not be delegated to any one category of mental or physical disorder.[5] Instead, over the centuries, hysteria came to mark the 'x' which fits in nowhere, the wastepaper basket of medical nosology into which, according to the nineteenth-century French physician Lasègne, one could toss everything which would fit nowhere else. In other words, hysteria came to mark precisely that position which has no part in the universal claim of medical nosology, without which, however, this nosological system could not be fashioned. At the same time—and it is here that I wish to locate the resilient fascination hysteria continues to have for us culturally—the hysteric

2 See Stavros Mentzos, *Hysterie. Zur Psychodynamik unbewußter Inszenierungen*, Munich: Kindler, 1980, who reads hysteria as a mode of public appearance, in which the subject presents him or herself other than he or she is.

3 See *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887–1904*, ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

4 See L. Israël, *L'Hystérique, le sexe, et le médecin*, Paris: Masson, 1976.

5 For an overview of the medical literature, see Ilza Veith, *Hysteria. The History of a Disease*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.

is a creative artist of sorts, telling tales and fabricating stories so as to please the analysts to whom her or his discontent is addressed and without whose nosological interest in this enigmatic and fugitive illness the entire game of self-performance could not be sustained. As Juliet Mitchell notes, precisely because these stories are about psychic reality, about seduction and fantasy, psychoanalysis came to use the language of hysteria so as to ground a theory and therapy of subjectivity on the question of who tells the story and to whom it is directed.[6] One could then argue that the hysteric is fully aware that the scenario she enacts does not only involve playing games but also employing deceptions. Her desire not only presents itself as profoundly enigmatic, but rather the hysteric is also a master in laying false traces, never forgetting that she is herself implicated in the deception of her interpellator. Even though she may define the rules of this game of desire and may shine in the role she has cast for herself, she also hides herself in the course of playing. As Anne Juranville explains, on the one hand she evokes the desire of the Other by offering to him her performance of a scene revolving around nothing, staging sentences that declare her implenitude: 'I don't know . . .', 'I can't . . .', 'I am not . . .' Yet even though the desire of the Other fascinates her, so as not to disappear in the lack she represents to her interpellator, she constitutes her desire as being unsatisfiable, preventing her desire from ever reaching its destination.[7] In other words, the hysteric's language is such that, even while she identifies with the symbolic father, accepts his interpellation and seeks to support his desire, she also self-consciously remains within the realm of dissimulation, betraying the very premise of deception her self-enactment is based on by performing the fact that she never fully believes or trusts in paternal truth. Indeed one could argue, by turning a self-dismantling masquerade of femininity into her symptom even while also having recourse to equally constructed notions of masculinity, so as to undermine the paternal authority she plays to, the hysteric's language proves to be a highly creative, enervating yet also compellingly resilient misappropriation of her master's grand narratives.

I want to position this discussion of the language of hysteria within a shift in critical theories that has occurred in the past decade. At the millennium we have begun to recognize that, even while we need to trouble critical concepts such as humanism, subjectivity, universalism, cultural values, so as to reveal the manner in which they are culturally constructed in response to very specific historical, political and social demands, we cannot fully relinquish them. Indeed at stake, it seems, is the question how we might use such categories as points of discussion about the relationship between subjectivity and the law: that is to say, the manner in which the position of the subject within the symbolic register must necessarily be one of constant re-negotiation. As Judith Butler has so forcefully argued, the question of the gendered subject requires a constant reiteration of given

6 J. Mitchell, *Women. The Longest Revolution: Essays in Feminism, Literature, and Psychoanalysis*, London: Penguin, 1984, p. 299.

7 See A. Juranville, 'Hysterie und Melancholie be der Frau', *Riss. Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* 4/11, June 1989, 53–80.

discursive positions. Or rather, because the question of gender is an unsolved and an unanswerable one, it should be thought of as representing a permanent question precisely in the sense that it has not yet and can never fully be formulated as a fixed articulation.[8] It is in conjunction with such a notion of reiteration that I want to link the hysteric's gesture of misappropriation of her master's discourse to an ethical moment, though in so doing I suggest thinking of the language of hysteria less in terms of psychopathology and instead rather as a strategy of positioning desire in relation to the constraints of cultural laws. Because ethics—and here I refer to Luce Irigaray's discussion—is linked to the question of gender in the sense that femininity is what produces astonishment in the philosopher writing under the aegis of humanism, forcing upon him an encounter with an enigma that can never fully be solved, even as it is what keeps the process of philosophic interrogation alive. The ethical gesture invoked by the unanswerable problem gender poses, in other words, forces us to ask how one can traverse alterity without effacing or occluding it, without taming its radically troubling potential. How can one continue to chart the traces of that quality which remains unsolvable without falling into the trap of producing protective fictions that satisfy by covering over a traumatic knowledge we seek not to recognize, yet whose traces inevitably and irrevocably trouble us?

Along these lines Butler has suggested that gender should be thought of not as a thing, a fact or a presupposition, but rather as the subject's desire for a renewed articulation that never fully disappears, even as it never fully reveals itself. In that sense a discussion of the way gender might fruitfully interrogate grand narratives, such as the humanist project, touches upon what, in relation to hysteria, I have been calling the foreign body of traumatic knowledge upon which self-representations feed, even while they never fully assume this knowledge. I am interested in this double rhetoric of a renewed articulation—which hovers uncannily between disclosure and a recognition that any articulation always misses something—precisely because this may be a way of making use of such troubling critical categories like humanism and universality without re-installing the exclusions, marginalizations and notions of deviancy that have gone hand-in-hand with this cultural project. I suggest that in part this might allow us to articulate the incommensurabilities upon which any theory of what is truly human relies or, put another way, the fact that, as gender studies has so poignantly illustrated, there are always mutually contradictory descriptions of reality we must bring into a troubled but also a necessary dialogue. But perhaps more crucially at stake is the issue of including that which has been excluded from what we have traditionally known as humanism, and doing so precisely in the name and in the interest of the cultural project based on this exclusion. For such a renewed articulation may allow us to explore useful and

8 See J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

viable conceptualizations of agency, cultural values, codified laws, precisely because they include a recognition of their own fallibility and impermanence.

Thinking through what such a reiteration of the humanist project under the sign of gender might look like also means recognizing that there is no untroubled definition of humanism. As Tony Davies has pointed out, at stake is always why and for whom a particular notion of what is truly human is produced:

> On the one side, humanism is saluted as the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity, standing alone and often outnumbered against the battalions of ignorance, tyranny and superstition . . . On the other, it has been denounced as an ideological smoke screen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalisations and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak, even, through an inexorable 'dialectic of enlightenment', for the nightmare of fascism and the atrocity of total war.[9]

Of course any humanist project can only posit certain values as being central by implicitly constructing others as being eccentric, marginal or not authentic. At the same time—and this is the grand narrative Lyotard and Barthes have so persuasively dismantled—this notion of what is truly human is presented as being an essential quality, so as to cover over both the fact of its cultural construction as well as the fact that these narratives serve to deplete the represented person or situation of historical specificity. In relation to the humanist project, aimed at universalism and essentialism, what this means is that it actually combines under its aegis a multitude of highly contradictory positions that cannot be happily aligned with each other. Davies thus concludes:

> There will not after all be, nor indeed could there be, any tidy definitions. The several humanisms . . . are not reducible to one, or even to a single line or pattern. Each has its distinctive historical curve, its particular discursive poetics, its own problematic scansion of the human. Each seeks, as all discourses must, to impose its own answer to the question of 'which is to be master'.[10]

It is precisely because at the millennium we need to think this paradox, not cover it up, that I invoke the language of hysteria as a strategy which might help us explore means of articulating the impasse by always keeping the question open, supporting the master's desire for a coherent narrative, playing to it, only to abandon it and thus showing that it is nothing but a useful and viable protective fiction.

9 T. Davies, *Humanism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 5.

10 Ibid., p. 131.

The Music of Barred Maternity Persists

Let me illustrate this movement of double articulation that questions the law of paternal infallibility it also supports, dismantling the exclusions upon which the grand narrative of humanism is based, by turning to a text from the historical moment Michel Foucault designates as the birth of the bourgeois family and with it the birth of the hysteric daughter's broadcast of her complaint,[11] namely Mozart and Schikaneder's *The Magic Flute*. In doing so I am interested in two issues. First, how does this text about a rite of initiation, which requires a full subjection of the hero and heroine under its strict and fully mysterious laws, mark the crisis in paternity with which we are still faced at the millennium, even if our response to the recognition of the fictionality of the big Other, meant to afford consistency and authenticity to our symbolic order, has shifted these days to rather more paranoid conspiracy narratives? Second, I am interested in marking the navel of the operatic representation where, in the sense discussed by Freud in his specimen dream of Irma's injection, the narrative stages its own representational failure, which is to say the inclusion of a detail that performs the very impossibility of any totalizing exclusion of the foreign body of difference so manifestly supported by the humanist project. Or put another way, I am interested in locating the point at which the text performs its own unreadability, in the sense of articulating a non-soluble difference, which would allow one to speak about a play of humanisms, brought forward in the name of the concerns posed by this project. But, rather than having recourse to the rhetoric of exclusion, these moments of constructive unreadability work by virtue of a rhetoric of constant renegotiation, whose aim is to celebrate the act of troubling, dismantling and reiterating tacit presuppositions. In this libretto, in which the question 'which is to be master' is so viciously played through, the class, race and gender exclusions upon which the grand narrative of Enlightened emancipation are based, become quite self-evident, given that Sarastro's world is grounded on slavery and a xenophobic disregard of everyone considered to be 'other'. Indeed, as Catherine Clément has pointed out, this libretto offers a family narrative in which, typical for the emergence of the bourgeois family around 1775, those gendered voices which will not be subjected to the heterosexual bourgeois paternal law are silenced.[12] The Queen of the Night, whose coloraturas bespeak a language of pure affect, both brilliant and terrible, is excluded from the portals of wisdom, along with her ladies in waiting and the black slave Monostratos. Her daughter Pamina, initially bravely questioning the authority of paternal sagacity represented by Sarastro, ultimately allows herself to be subsumed under her alleged master's mysterious commands, while her independent voice is

11 See M. Foucault's discussion of the birth of the bourgeois family in *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction*, New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

12 See C. Clément, *L'Opéra ou la defaite de la femme*, Paris: Grasset, 1979.

totally consumed by the harmonic chords with which the second act closes.

My critical rereading of this opera plot, however, is less concerned with insisting upon the way this grand narrative about a successful *rite de passage*—on the basis of which Sarastro's paternal authority can legitimize itself—requires the violent exclusion of gender difference. Rather I am more interested in exploring how nothing can escape the grand narrative of humanism. For, even while this grand narrative posits certain identities as non-human, so that these bodies might come to stand in for all those values which, because they are considered to be unworthy, must not be included under its auspices, such a gesture of exclusion is precisely what founds this humanist project in the first place. Exclusion, one could say, is its inaugural gesture. Given this, an analogy unfolds itself to the way the language of hysteria is posited as that which has no clear place within medical discourse, the wastepaper basket for everything which doesn't fit, even while it is this site of refuse—marking an unresolvable difference, articulating the traumatic remains which fit no single and unequivocal definition—which allows for the entire process of nosological categorization to take place at all.

It is, therefore, worth pointing to the two dramatic breaks around which the libretto of *The Magic Flute* revolves, so as to illustrate how these disruptions perform the fissure, which invariability inhabits the grand narrative of humanism. For, even while in the end a harmony has allegedly been achieved under the aegis of Sarastro's temple of the sun, the libretto quite self-consciously articulates the violent sacrifice of alterity, which is postulated as the prerequisite for any grand narrative about paternalistic social foundations. At the same time it also quite self-consciously traces the scars that remain after the ritual staging of symbolic parturition and rebirth. The first of these breaks occurs between the first and the second acts. Initially the Queen of the Night is presented as a mother rightly concerned with the well-being of her daughter Pamina, who had so violently been stolen from her, and thus fully legitimized in sending Tamino on a mission to save her. Then suddenly, and without any motivation, she turns into a representative of evil, a shift which the libretto never fully explains, so that this disjunction—this unsolvable difference—resonates well beyond the moment her maternal voice falls silent. For the present with which she arms Tamino against her enemy—the magic flute—is an instrument which endows its owner with the omnipotent gift of transforming human passions such as hatred, pride and sadness into love and friendship. At the same time we discover from the Queen's monologue that Sarastro is everything but a benevolent ruler. His realm contains slaves and prisoners that are tortured and executed (though only off stage) even while his main guard, Monostratos, not only seeks to rape Pamina but is equally willing to betray his master. Violence is even inherent in the initiation rite itself, although this

ritual is meant to present Sarastro's triumph over the Queen as representative of superstition and irrationality. For, as Tamino discovers, many have died in the course of the *rite de passage* which he is in the process of undertaking. Finally, even Sarastro's interest in Pamina is not entirely wholesome, given that the text implicitly points to the surrogate father's incestuous desire, for example, when, after Pamina's failed escape, he admits to her that he will not force her to love him although he will also not grant her freedom. From this one can conclude that Sarastro's grand narrative of enlightenment and emancipation is as tainted as the Queen's narrative of superstitious magical power and that, in its harshness and inflexibility, his paternal law is nothing other than the mirror inversion of her equally harsh demand for revenge in the second act. Indeed, as he explains, only those who will fully subject themselves to his commands, and do so without questioning his law, are worthy of being included in the community of the temple of wisdom. On the basis of such a totalizing law of universality the Queen, her three attendant ladies and Monostratos—once they have clearly been designated as being non-human and thus, by extension, as evil—are all successfully barred from the realm of reason and plunged into eternal darkness.

The second disruption of the enlightened master's narrative in turn involves the unsolvable difference inherent not in the rhetoric of exclusion but rather in that of inclusion. This is played out in the manner in which the discontented daughter Pamina is contained under the bourgeois marriage bond, which is staged as a prevention of her suicide but at the same time quite explicitly articulates that the alternative to tragedy is a totalitarian harmony, seeking to exclude all gender difference. Only because she is willing to subject herself unconditionally to the ritual and the prohibitions of Sarastro's grand narrative of emancipation—and this is tantamount to giving up her individual voice—she is considered worthy enough to follow Tamino in his walk through fire and water and be initiated along with him. I emphasize the question of Pamina's relinquishing of her individual voice because it is so explicitly performed by Mozart's score. Before the two lovers embark on the last examination, they sing a dialogic duet, during which Tamino and Pamina never sing in unison but rather appear as two complementary yet also contrapuntal voices, supplementing each other, while Pamina is also allowed to embellish her song of joy with grace notes. Once the two lovers have entered Sarastro's realm they only sing together in perfect harmonic chords, supported by the armoured men as well as the orchestra, so that what was initially dialogic is subsumed into one voice.

Nethertheless, what allows me to locate a seminal fissure in the libretto and score is the fact that a certain discontent remains with the audience. Not only are we perturbed by the fact that the *rite de passage* of Tamino and Pamina has so forcefully illustrated the way in which the grand narrative of

enlightened emancipation requires the violent exclusion of all representatives of ethnic and gender difference, given that their voices cannot be subsumed under the dominant harmonic chord which this project insists on achieving in the end. Rather, a trace of difference also remains in the sense that this alleged humanist harmony, and the symbolic system of laws and codes whose foundation it supports, continues to be fallible in relation to the mechanisms of exclusion upon which it is based. Because if one looks at what remains after the symbolic act of parturition—ritually enacted as a walk through fire and water so as to symbolize the cutting of the umbilical chord between Pamina and her mother, or rather the severing of the two lovers from the realm of nocturnal superstition and magic—one encounters the uncanny flute. On the other side of matricide this instrument not only serves to tame wild elements of nature. Rather it also refers to those other elements that are foreclosed by Sarastro's masculinist order. In other words, functioning as the representative of this unsolvable difference, the sound of the flute gives voice to the barred maternal alterity, not least of all because it so resiliently recalls her coloraturas of love for her daughter, as well as the coloraturas bespeaking her anger, her despair and her call for revenge. This flute remains an ambivalent instrument, because it will enchant, regardless of who its master might be. And just because in this instance Tamino uses it to assert himself successfully against the Queen of the Night, there is no guarantee that at some later point it might not find itself in the hands of a different master.

The Ethic Effect of Unreadability

Let my, by way of conclusion, return to my wager that a depathologized notion of the language of hysteria might allow us to interrogate the presuppositions upon which a grand narrative like humanism is based, so as to explore a productive and viable re-articulation of this project. What I am concerned with is the return to a discussion of ethics in which at stake is the tolerance and acceptance of difference—both in the sense of accepting that there may well be several mutually contradictory descriptions of reality as well as in the sense that we would want to maintain and indeed invigorate a debate about the validity of cultural laws, about the question 'who is to be master'. In other words, at stake is not simply an investigation of what has been excluded from and effaced by the grand narrative of humanism, but rather an exploration of what else the humanist project might in fact also contain: interrogating the notion of universality inherent in the humanist project and reiterating it on its own terms. Although I am fully aware that in concrete case-histories, hysteria does engender tremendous anguish, what the hysteric's gesture of constantly resisting and defying any one fixed

interpretation performs is quite closely aligned to what I have been calling a re-articulation of the grand narrative of humanism. For the hysteric subject not only constantly reposes the question of its own relation to power. Rather the hysteric forces her or his interpellator to ask which is to be master. In the name of another grand narrative, that of human sciences, the hysteric subject is to be healed. But by definition hysteria forbids precisely such curing, given that, owing to its highly enigmatic and equally volatile symptoms, it is irrevocably excluded from the clear categories of medical nosology. Indeed the hysteric keeps producing new symptoms, exchanging one disturbance for another, once a proposed interpretation promises a cure. If we read this positively we could say that the hysteric resiliently performs a lesson in the ethic effect of unreadability. For the hysteric subject confronts her master with his or her own fallibility. The nothing about which the hysteric makes so much ado articulates the fissures inherent to any system of meaning. It refers to the inconsistencies at the heart of any symbolic institutions and in so doing performs the ineffaceability of difference.

At the same time the language of hysteria is not positioned beyond cultural laws. In so far as the hysteric, in the course of her misappropriation of her master's narrative, points out to her interpellator his fallibility, she does this while fully believing in his power and making a claim to his authority. The paradox is such that she trusts in paternal law, given that her duplicitous symptoms take as their starting point the fantasy that a situation of happiness is possible, be it the intact family bond, an all-knowing figure of authority or generally valid cultural laws. But precisely the inconsistency of symbolic reality calls upon her to interrogate incessantly paternal laws and to insist that any given situation is not the realization of her expectation of happiness. Thus her broadcast of discontent is not aimed beyond cultural codes. Instead, her critique is formulated by making her claim in relation to the laws whose authority she also seeks to dismantle. Rather than covering up the violent exclusion and effacement inherent in the grand narrative of humanism, the hysteric uses her creativity to launch a complaint about the inconsistencies of the very symbolic institutions which also determine her self-definition. Yet this critique is voiced in the belief that the laws she dismantles should also be preserved. One could say the language of hysteria is one that refuses the refusal of a knowledge about discursive dead ends, impasses and inconsistencies inherent in symbolic agencies of power and authority. By insisting on articulating its difference with precisely the symbolic laws that also constitute it, the language of hysteria performs a strategy aimed not just at tolerating the fissures that are so constitutive of any symbolic bond but, more importantly, articulating this lack constructively. In so doing the language of hysteria insists on privileging the process of change over and against any finalizing solutions. This brings me back to the relation of gender and grand narratives, for if gender marks the difference

that inhabits the grand narrative of humanism, the language of hysteria—given that it is also perhaps the most famous articulation of feminine discontent with humanist culture—could perhaps offer a solution to the mechanisms of exclusion upon which this project is based. By so resolutely insisting that the way to human happiness requires a constant renegotiation of 'which is to be master', as well as a constant rethinking why this power and authority matters, the language of hysteria admonishes us to remember that the true import of the grand narrative of humanism must consist in seeking not to efface this difference.