

Dora Flees...

Is there anything left to say about hysterics?

Sergio Benvenuto

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Summary:

The author re-reads Dora's case, stressing how much in fact the psychoanalytic theory of hysteria in general has not solved the enigma of the hysterical form of life. He remarks also that by the word "hysteria" we can no longer consider just some specific symptoms--notably conversion or somatization--but rather observe a general vocation for a lack of satisfaction by a subject. The author tries to account for the reasons of this constitutive lack of satisfaction (a potential enjoyment which cannot become actual), highlighting the hysterical capacity for multiple identifications and role-playing. Reconsidering Lacan's approach to hysteria--which is focused on the hysteric's basic homosexual position--the author objects that hysteria goes beyond this position to occupy all the available identificatory and objectal positions.

1. "What the devil does she want?"

Is there anything left to say about Dora's Case, which Freud published in 1905? Hasn't everything already been said and written about the girl whom Freud saw for less than three months over a century ago, after what has been written since Freud? Isn't what's been said on hysterics in the 19-20th century enough on the whole? A century after the invention of psychoanalysis, born as a cure for hysteria, isn't it time to shelve, once and for all, this "magnificent child of psychoanalysis" (as Nasio calls hysteria) among the problems that have been solved?

But, after having read over several decades Freud's texts on hysterics, there is a *hard core* I still don't quite understand. At every re-reading, I have the inkling that something does not tally. This not only my personal feeling: as M. Csabai shows in this same JEP issue, both psychoanalysts and common readers, after having bulimically digested so many writings on hysterics, are still hungry and exclaim:

“But, in the end, what the devil does a hysteric want?”

The devil, in fact. In many languages one says “what the devil...” to convey something which vexes us because it is incomprehensible. Not by chance did 19th century medical discourse establish an elective affinity between hysterics and the devil. Positivist theory taught us that the poor witches burnt alive—including St. Joan of Arc—were actually women suffering from hysterical symptoms, just as those who Jesus cured as possessed by the devil were actually the mentally ill. Today, in light of the latest historical analysis (e.g. starting with M. Foucault), the witches=hysterics identification is out of fashion. Today we tend to distinguish the witchcraft’s theological discourse from the medical-psychiatric discourse on hysteria. But yet...

It is no coincidence that feminist thinking evokes both witches and hysterics as precursors of the *feminine question*. Both appear as emblematic figures of a fundamental feminine discontent. And both provoke, in men and women alike, the crucial question: what in the *devil* do they want? What if that is just what they want, *the devil?*—or maybe, “that’s exactly it, she wants a diabolic love”. After a century of Dorology—i.e., expert texts about Dora—we must still acknowledge her devilish dimension. Lacan expressed this “devilry” by saying that hysterics’ essential desire is to have an unsatisfied desire—a desire for *potential (in potentia)* but never acted out (*in actu*) pleasure. “The devil” the hysteric loves would thus be desire itself—and, if satisfied, would die as desire. Can we say that there is something outdated, almost medieval, in Dora?

2. An illness to feign an illness?

Hysterics—analysts say—today are no longer *topical*: they’re practically as rare as witches. Psychiatry today is interested in narcissistic personalities, depression, multiple personalities, panic attacks. DSM-IV has done away with the word hysteria, fragmenting it into different syndromes, one of which is *Somatization Disorder*, simply noting that the historical term was “hysteria” or “Briquet Syndrome”.

The disuse of the term *hysteria* is certainly related to *political correctness* in US, insofar as the term is derived from *usteron*, uterus—linguistic cleansing dismisses a macho term like *hysteria*. DSM-IV refers to Somatization Disorder as occurring in between 0.2 and 2% of women, and in less than 0.2% of men: the feminine nature of the disorder is admitted statistically, but repressed from the nomenclature. And while it is often thought that psychoanalytic thinking has also “disproved” the idea that hysteria is a female specificity, insofar as it speaks of male hysterics, it is also true that Freudian theoreticians claim that both male and female hysterics *have a problem with femininity*: in short, hysteric men don’t quite understand the exact meaning... of their being female. A human being with a penis can be hysteric, but for psychoanalysis hysteria indicates a problem with femininity.

Bollas justifies the publication of his recent book on hysteria with the fact that he was struck by the frequency of hysteria cases brought to him for supervision...

Again and again, even in my non-professional life, I am bumping into hysterics. The symptom known as “*bolus hystericus*” (sensation of choking) is part of everyday psychiatric experience. Yet psychiatry apparently is no longer concerned with hysterics because it considers them a solved case, thanks to Freud. Nowadays “how-to-treat-a-hysteric” is part of everyone’s know-how. So, in Chaplin’s *Limelight*, Calvero the clown cures a young hysteric ballerina, restoring her ability to use her legs using a quick Freudian interpretation. Of course, in the US at the time of the film (1952) psychoanalysis was all the rage, and even a clown knew how to act with a hysteric.

The Freudian theory on hysteria has apparently been wiped out by its own success. In old hysteria, what interested—and often irritated—doctors most was somatic conversion, that is a pseudo-organic disorder. Hysteria was an illness consisting in feigning an illness: each apparent sufferer was reintroduced into the diagnostic system as “a sufferer for appearances”. From Charcot to Freud, via Pierre Janet, hysteria has been identified with “suffering for mental representations”. But is the illness of not being ill as important to the hysteric as it is to the doctor? Does hysteria really *essentially* consist in a forged illness? In this case, medicine projects its categories and priorities upon the very existence of its patients--but as Freud already glimpsed, hysterics sometimes don’t even care about their conversion symptoms (their *belle indifférence*).

[I am not implying that somatization is unimportant in hysteria, but it should be seen in light of a larger picture of the hysteric specificity: that is, that the hysteric must confront *a void* (or lack, castration, frustration, loss) *in reality itself*. Certainly, the most handy reality is that of one’s own body, but it can also be found outside. Take for example a male hysteric who, despite being an excellent student, consistently failed all his University exams: his academic failure was his *conversion*. What counts, in hysteria, is that the subject experience a real *impotence*, a chronic lack of satisfaction, which can either be connected to one’s own bodily functions (for example, sight in hysteric blindness) or come from without, in the impact with a world which rejects him/her. As we will see, Dora’s main “conversion” is her impotency in re-gaining her father’s love and cutting off his affair with his lover. Dora suffers more for her father’s “betrayal” than for her somatic pains. The so-called hysteric conversion is just an aspect of what I would prefer to call a *missed conversion* of hysteria—just as we say that a country has missed its opportunity for *conversion* from socialism to capitalism, or from an agricultural economy to an industrial one.]

Freud was after all a doctor and grounded in the medical discourse of his time, when, like today, the diagnosis of an illness, defined by its *symptoms*, was essential. Philosophy, literary criticism and art history today use extensively terms like *symptoms* or *symptomatic*), but we should not forget that to speak of symptoms is to speak as a doctor. And the typical symptoms of hysteria are *conversions*, a *sine materia* handicap. DSM, talking of somatization, follows medicine on the issue of hysteria: the somatic appearance of disorders.

Freud, to make his etiological theory acceptable, needed *first of all* to prove

that he was able to explain hysteria's symptoms of conversion and to cure them. Freud aimed to prove that to-be-apparently-ill was an illness in itself, insofar as it was possible to be cured—the logical *consecutio* between illness and recovery was inverted, with recovery demonstrating that there had been an illness. Psychoanalysts have often taken the medical context of Freud's argument too literally, without noticing that at a certain point Freud was forced to leave the medical model behind, realizing that the medical symptomatology for hysteria was only the tip of the iceberg of *being an hysteric*. To define hysteria on the basis of conversion is a bit like defining Catholics as “those who don't eat meat on Friday”... Some women can be defined hysterics even in the (near) absence of any relevant somatic symptoms. It is important to see the whole hysteric iceberg. Like the Titanic, Freud's technique hit Dora's iceberg Dora—and this is what I will analyze here.

3. Dora's *besser Weg*

Dora's case—while the best-known--certainly does not owe its fame to hysteric symptomatology in the medical sense. Freud himself stressed that the theoretical interest of a case is not related to the gravity of the symptoms themselves:

No doubt this case history, as I have so far outlined it, does not upon the whole seem worth recording. It is merely a case of '*petite hystérie*' with the commonest of all somatic and mental symptoms: dyspnoea, *tussis nervosa*, aphonia, and possibly migraines, together with depression, hysterical unsociability and a *taedium vitae* which was probably not entirely genuine. More interesting cases of hysteria have no doubt been published, and they have very often been carefully described...

The important point is that Dora's father brought her to Freud not so much for her somatizations, as for her continuous requests that he end his relationship with the younger Frau K. (which he describes as a mere friendship, which no one believes). In fact, Dora disrupts her father's comfortable situation, and rather than bear her own symptoms, Dora initially comes across as her father's symptom—the pain in the neck, the spoilsport, the cause of his suffering. Her “*padre-padrone*” [father-boss]—he was a wealthy industrialist—did not say to the doctor “please, cure her”, but “You try now to set her on a better path” [*Suchen Sie jetzt auf bessere Wege zu bringen*]—more request for a rabbi than a doctor. In fact, the father saw things correctly: as we shall see from her dreams, Dora was undecided as to her *own path* as a woman. Her father is the first to doubt that “the thing” troubling the family is a somatization: the truth of the matter is that Dora hasn't chosen the rational, convenient, useful path that would be the easiest for everyone. And what should this *better path* have been? Not to disturb the adulterous relationship between her father and Frau K., and to keep the latter's husband Herr K. quiet by conceding herself to him.

Freud quickly realizes that, compared to her father's hypocritical reserve, Dora's description of the situation is far more exact. The main players in this erotic vaudeville make up a quartet: Dora, her father, Frau K. and her husband Herr K.

Dora's mother, described as disagreeable and not very intelligent, appears excluded from the often obscene swapping game insofar as she is "psychotic" (for Freud, the housewife [*Hausfrau*] who only takes care of the household, was a kind of psychotic). Dora's father and Frau K. have been lovers for years, behind the façade of a respectable friendship between the two families. Herr K. knows about the affair (he appears not to have had any sexual relations with his wife for quite some time) and says he hadn't asked for a divorce because he is too attached to their children. Herr K. has desired Dora sexually for years and his attentions to her (their long walks, his gifts) appear to be tolerated by her father, which may have led Freud and Dora to suspect that he would look at a possible affair between Herr K. and his daughter as something good--an exchange of favors between gentlemen. But it's a question of counting the chickens before they're hatched. Or rather, they didn't count the hysteric. So, when Dora tells her father of Herr K.'s unmistakable advances on the shore of a lake in a holiday resort (Lake Garda, Italy), her father pretends to believe—or deceives himself into believing—K.'s version, who not only denies any designs on the girl, but attributes her "fantasy" to her perversity and her sexology readings. It is after this "mother scene" on the lake, the crucial moment of this drama, that Dora "falls ill" and chooses the path of a vengeful war against her father, demanding an end to any further association with the K.s.

When I speak here of a quartet, it is a bit like Dumas the elder, who called *The Three Musketeers* a novel in which there are four musketeers. The quartet, in actual fact—as will become clear to Freud too late—is a quintet, because the analyst inevitably comes into play.

Freud charges himself with proving that Dora passionately loves all the main players of the quadrille—at the same time hating and fighting them. This erotic generosity makes her a champion of perversities, in the light of the criteria of the time at least: insofar as she's in love with her father she is incestuous, insofar as she loves Frau K. she is a lesbian, insofar as she loves Herr K., an older man, she is a little Lolita, to use a term from today. And insofar as she also loves Freud, she is... a patient in transference. For Freud, transference was also a form of neurosis, while today analysts tend to think it "normal". Freud's reconstruction finds in Dora, as usually in hysterics, many peculiarities today celebrated as ab-normality, as that she even comes across as post-modernist. If Freud appears to support Herr K.'s wish, it is because among all of Dora's crushes and counter-crushes, that on her rival's husband comes across as the most socially acceptable in the end—the *besser Weg* between the various perverse and neurotic paths over which our heroine is hesitating.

4. Normality is not "normal"

Can Dora's hysteria be ultimately reduced to her non-complicity with her father's erotic strategy, as feminist scholars assert? Is Dora *only* her father's symptom? And insofar as Freud subtly tries to convince her that she loves Herr K.—therefore pushing her sweetly into his arms—is he not also an accomplice of the obscene exchange of women that the father-boss encourages? And as she was sent to

Freud against her will, was the therapy destined to fail from the very start? To answer affirmatively to these questions would be forcing things a bit too much. Dora accepts to undergo Freud's strange new therapy, it is because she perceives that something in her is wrong. Dora admits it to Freud:

Dora felt quite rightly that her thoughts about her father required to be judged in a special way. "I can't think of nothing else", she complained again and again. "I know my brother says we children have no right to criticize this behavior of Father's. [...] I can quite see that, and I should like to think the same as my brother, but I can't. I can't forgive him for it."

"I should like to forgive him, but I can't". This is what seals every neurotic's complaint: "I would like to, but I can't". Dora recognizes a certain malaise, but affirms its necessity.

Before continuing, something ought to be said about Dora's brother, about whom Freud says so little. Like his sister, he was to leave his mark on history. Otto Bauer (1881-1938), an eminent philosopher, Austrian Socialist leader and a former *enfant prodige*, became one of the main theoreticians of Austro-Marxism, a leader of the Austrian Socialist-Democratic Party between 1907 and 1914, and foreign minister in 1918. His historical role is today seen as negative: he was "blindly" opposed to an anti-nazi popular front with the Communists. After the *Anschluss* in 1938—which was also an effect of his mistakes—he escaped to France. Like his sister, Otto rejected paternal values, but in a way which, by our standards, would be considered emancipating, compared to his sister's sterile "hysterical protest". His tolerance of his father's adulterous affair—with respect to his sister's morbid involvement—seems today the correct path to emancipation. And yet, which of the two—the progressive reformer or the hysteric—really "failed"? Dora's failed emancipation poses a lot more interesting questions today than the "family jewel's" socio-political success, which ended up an historical failure.

Let's return to Dora, whose ego-dystonia—her feeling of something morbid in her—is expressed by these two affirmations: "I can't think about anything else" and "I can't forgive him". Here Freud places hysteria alongside melancholy, insofar as both are characterized by *over-intense* passions. Our heroine suffers too much for her father's erotic enjoyment. Freud puts into action his habitual "hermeneutic" strategy: a neurotic manifestation of an excessive or bizarre attitude is interpreted as a sign of an attitude that would be normal in another context. The melancholic behaves like someone who has suffered mourning—*ergo* melancholy is a form of mourning for the loss of a special object. "Dora is bereaved by her father's affair with Frau K. *like* a betrayed jealous wife—*ergo*, Dora *really is* in love with her father, as a wife would be". But then the problem is simply shifted: if Dora behaves as a betrayed wife toward her father, what lies behind the reactions of a betrayed wife?

This question may seem superfluous, because we think we perfectly *comprehend* the reactions of a betrayed and jealous wife who says, "I can't think about anything else" or "I can't forgive him". This reaction is comprehensible, but

it nonetheless deserves an *explanation*. What makes human beings jealous of certain people (and not only those they love)? Not all jealous wives manifest hysteric symptoms. The mystery of hysteria marks back, therefore, to the mystery of jealousy. Or, better still, the mystery of hysteria—*via* Freud—turns the perfectly understandable feeling of jealousy into something enigmatic. To question hysteria is to question normal affectivity. Herein lies the secret behind psychoanalysis' 20th century great success: it not just provided irrefutable explanations as to the causes of neuroses, but, through its explanations, allowed us to appreciate the inexplicable, neurotic side of everything that is normal.

5. A culture of dissatisfaction

But what does Dora's hysteria, or hysteria in general, consist of according to Freud?

I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable; and I should do so whether or not the person were capable of producing somatic symptoms.

For Freud, it is not only those who suffer from *somatization disorders* who are hysterics, but any woman who doesn't enjoy the normal, particularly sexual (whether hetero or homo), pleasures of life. Hysteria ultimately is a stormy lulling oneself with a *culture of dissatisfaction*. The background against which Freud considered hysteria was a woman's refusal to carry out the *ministerium* of a "real" woman to go to bed with the man she loves and bear his children. Today, we consider a lesbian's going to bed and living with the woman she loves a normal *ministerium*. If Dora is in love with Herr K. (as Freud believes), why doesn't she go to bed with him and give him some kids? And if Dora is in love with Frau K. (as, on the other hand, Lacan believes), why doesn't she seduce Frau K. away from her father? Dora does neither of the things she desires—provided she really does desire them. Hysterics' irritated refusal of a hedonistic prescription irritates us. "But what in the devil does this woman want?" When Italian males that "that one's a real hysteric", they mean "she irritates me because she won't put out".

Everyone tells Dora: "enjoy!" Everyone plays the role of the Super-ego of enjoyment. But she cannot, or doesn't want to, enjoy. The only thing that would give her enjoyment is impossible... Although everyone (including Freud) says "make love, not war!", oddly enough, she prefers a war against her father. Some feminist theoreticians have mistakenly interpreted hysterics as in revolt against male society that has prevented women from achieving themselves and enjoying. The opposite is true: late 19th century society was particularly fascinated by hysterics, because they seemed to incarnate a "challenging" resistance by women finally subjected to the implacable laws of enjoyment for all! These late 19th-early 20th century gentlemen were saying to their women "enjoy, just as we do", but the

hysteric chose to suffer. The hysteric avoids the enjoyment she is asked to achieve. For example, with her husband she was frigid. Today, as Marta Csabai has stressed here, hysteria takes on the form of an "eating disorder": in Western society, where people no longer die of hunger, the hysteric spits in the plate of oral enjoyment. Thus the hysteric annoys our society that wants to ensure the maximum hedonistic satisfaction for all, especially women.

In running away from those she loves, Dora annoys Freud as well. Through Freud's kaleidoscopic mirror, she is *the fugitive*. She escaped: first at 14, when K. kissed her in his shop; later on the banks of Lake Garda, when K. started making proposals; and finally from Freud, by interrupting therapy. In the first of two dreams she recounts Freud, she speaks openly of escape, and in the second of an escape *à l'envers*: escaping from a desired sexual relationship, and from the psychoanalyst's scientific "grasp". Hysteria has a primary relation to *escaping from what one wants*—which in turn has a paradoxical connection with the impossibility of escaping family life.

Neurotics are dominated by the opposition between reality and phantasy. If what they long for the most intensely in their phantasies is presented to them in reality, they none the less *flee* [Benvenuto's italics] from it; and they abandon themselves to their phantasies the most readily where they need no longer fear to see them realized.

All neurotics are hysterics deep down, insofar as they *flee from putting things into action*, from the possibility of being caught by satisfaction, from being *closed* into a bond of satisfaction—thus they even flee from the theory which com-prehends, "closes" them in an intellectually satisfying gate.

6. The impotent doctor

Today Freud is blamed for being too sure of his method. As often happens to ambitious researchers, Freud, impassioned by his hypotheses, didn't hesitate to strain even the most minute details in the Procuste's bed of his interpretative system, just to make things tally. But he didn't realize how many oversights he needed in order to make things tally.

For example, Lacan highlighted the strange way Freud "explains" Dora's itch in the throat and her periodic cough. Earlier Freud had concluded that somatic hysteric symptoms could all be traced back to expressive imitations of sexual acts. At one point, Freud wrings a confession out of Dora: that she considers her father impotent (*unvermögend, impotent*). But then, Freud asks her, how can she accuse him of having a sexual affair with Frau K.? Dora replies that she is aware that penetration is not the only way one can make love. At this point, anyone might think of cunnilingus, the way a man typically satisfies a woman when he can't manage it. Freud, instead, thinks of fellatio from Frau K. Why such an obvious oversight on Freud's part?

Freud *must* explain the coughing and itchy throat as a corporeal *mise-en-scène* of fellatio (the penis, not the clitoris, reaches the throat). Freud is so enamoured of his explicative system that, a bit like Dora with her father, he “can’t think of anything else”, he doesn’t notice what any unbiased maid would see right away. And he fails to notice that Dora’s innuendo is towards *something else*.

Today we can view Dora’s kind concession of symptomatic improvement during analysis differently. Dora seems to consider other men as *impotent* in satisfying her desire, and not just sexually. She mocks doctors (at the time exclusively male) as impotent in curing her; they cannot give her what she feels she *truly* needs—including Doctor Freud, whom Dora makes sure gets the message. When a male exhibits his potency, her game is to quickly get him off his high horse, which is what she does with Herr K., when he tells her he gets nothing out of his wife. Freud points out that Dora plays the cock tease who encourages and withdraw. She sends out encouraging messages, but at the crucial moment—on the banks of Lake Garda when he makes his declaration—she slaps him. With Freud she behaves more as a *knowledge-teaser*, exciting knowledge, giving Freud’s cognitive phallus a hard on and at the crucial moment putting him in a therapeutic check. Freud reacts spitefully by writing his famous text, as if he were trying to elaborate on a setback to his therapeutic and theoretical power. Writing seems to give him back the *interpretative potency* these diabolical hysterics often put into question.

Freud is a member of the male series—father, Herr K., doctors—and so he has the brand of impotency set on him. This becomes clear when, fifteen months after the cure was interrupted, Dora reappears. It doesn’t escape Freud that Dora reappears on April 1st—and he considers it an April fool’s joke. Dora suggests that they resume their relationship and, to “seduce” him, gives him information that ought to send him into rapture: she tells him of her reconciliation with the K.s and, apparently, even with her father. She had made Frau K. admit her affair with her father, and made Herr K. admit that he really had tried to seduce her that day on the lake. The whole business seems to be over at this point, since hasn’t she said enough to make Freud feel fully satisfied? Obviously Dora is telling him all this to signify: “see how good you’ve been? Thanks to you I got what I wished for.” But Freud doesn’t believe this April Fool’s joke.

In fact, Dora complains again of two annoying symptoms: an aphonia that had lasted six weeks, and a facial neuralgia on her right side which had lasted a fortnight--symptoms which are quickly connected to the fact that she was confronted with the two non-family men in her life once again: Herr K. and Freud. Aphonia began after a chance street encounter with Herr K.

She had come across [Mr K.] in the street one day; they had met in a place where there was a great deal of traffic; he had stopped in front of her as though in bewilderment, and in his abstraction he had allowed himself to be knocked down by a carriage.

Just as Herr K. was left “speechless”, she too is left speechless after this confrontation, as if she were repaying him for the incident. The facial neuralgia

ensued after reading in the newspapers that Freud had been nominated Professor extraordinarius at Vienna University. Her somatizations appear as the trail of two encounters which aroused once more her passion to humiliate men, and as the price of her triumph over the male (a kind of an “eye for an eye” law) in the double quality of love claimant and therapeutic claimant—but in both cases triumphs over *males claiming to penetrate her*.

Freud interprets the facial neuralgia as a metaphor of the slap given to K., which she now regrets—and in doing so he elliptically admits having been slapped by Dora himself, not as a claimant to her femininity, but as a claimant to her hysteria. But her regret is an April Fool’s joke because in fact this double reappearance—before Herr K. and Freud—changes nothing. The two men who wished her bite the dust. Because, if K. loved her because she was a young woman, Freud loved her because she was an hysteric who ought to have opened up the casket of the unconscious for him.

Subsequent commentators have often accused Freud of peevishly rejecting Dora when she proposed a resumption of her analysis: Freud behaved as a betrayed lover who concedes himself revenge against an “ex” who had slapped him. Dora’s lack of seriousness is seen as an alibi: Freud is simply slapping his patient back--unlike K., who was overwhelmed by her gaze. It has also been insinuated that Freud behaved a bit like the deprecated Breuer when, confronted with Anna O.’s attempts to seduce him, interrupted the therapy and escaped to Venice with his wife. Here too Dora offers herself—as a patient—and Freud rejects her, behaving with her in the same way as she had behaved with K., tit for tat. All this makes sense, but Freud had good reasons for not believing Dora’s good intentions: he had understood that *her real, deepest wish was to make manifest to the male his own impotence*. Had he accepted her back into therapy, he would have sooner or later found himself in a situation of impotence.

7. First Dora’ Dream

Let’s have a look at how Freud exercises his interpretative power Dora’s two dreams. In the first,

A house was on fire. My father was standing beside my bed and woke me up. I dressed quickly. Mother wanted to stop and save her jewel-case; but Father said: “I refuse to let myself and my two children be burnt for the sake of your jewel case.” We hurried downstairs, and as soon as I was outside I woke up.

Each time after waking up she had smelt smoke.

I shall skip the various phases of Freud’s well-known interpretations of this dream and consider only the final interpretation: “The temptation is so strong. Dear father, protect me again as you used to in my childhood, and prevent my bed from being wetted!”. In her dream, Dora is supposedly defending herself from the temptation of accepting K.’s proposals and would like her father to help her escape this erotic

temptation (“wetting her bed”). This interpretation sees *the fire* as a metaphor of sexual excitement, and the *jewel case* as a metaphor of female genitals, both worn-out metaphors common in colloquial German.

Metaphor aside, it is a dream of escape. As in life, even here Dora doesn't stop fleeing. Her father's household is metaphorically burning and Freud thinks he knows why: it's red-hot with illegitimate or secret erotic passions that stir all the characters therein. There's no doubt, as Freud guesses, that her escape from her father's house plays out her desire to escape from an *erotic siege*, not only Herr K.'s, but also her own desire's. In other words, her dream plays out her desire to escape from desire, and represents the desire not to desire. But this is the mere corollary of Freud's dream theory in general, that a dream is *always* the fruit of a desire to escape from desire—if it weren't, the sleeper would wake up. The dream aims at having one's cake and eating it too, satisfying the desire for sleep, as well as to some extent those desires that awaken us.

Today, the interpretation of dreams tends to include transference: the person to whom a subject describes a dream is included in the dream. From this point of view, Freud here can take the father's place: Freud wakes Dora from her hysteric sleep.

But why must Dora free herself from temptation? After all, no one (including Freud) wants to stop her from having an affair with Herr K.—to the contrary. Hence the paradox: Dora oneirically asks her father to free her from the temptation of satisfying her father's wish... Thanks to the interpretation of this hysteric dream, we are referred back to hysteria's basic enigma: “why in the devil does Miss escape from an affair she apparently desires?”

Usually, we awaken from a dream when there are no chances left to saving ourselves; waking up signals the failure of the dream, according to Freud's theorem, because the dream no longer succeeds in turning the impertinent desire into representations. So why does Dora awaken from her nightmare only when she manages to leave the house and is safe? Here, waking up signals the dream's success: Dora manages to reach safety from the fire, and the whole family along with her. There is something baroque in this redundant waking up.

It is a “17th-century art” dream: a dream within a dream, recalling those 17th century paintings entitled, for example, “Views of Rome,” in which we see a painter's studio, and within it successive paintings portraying views of Rome... Dora dreams of her father waking her from her dream, and then wakes up from the dream of this awakening. It is an awakening raised to the second power. What can these Russian dolls mean?

The fire, the escape from the house, the awakening are all ambiguous and two-fold: insofar as Dora runs away from the house she actually remains there; insofar as she escapes from the fire she actually stirs it; and insofar as she comes out of the deceptive dream of childhood incest she actually stays in it. When she awakens from her dream of a dream, it is still in the house-that-in-the-dream-is- ablaze that she awakens... The true danger thus not lies so much in the burning house, but in the escape from it. Dora escapes from the danger of running away

from home. In other words, she flees as a danger her desire to flee from home.

The house, which also appears in the second dream, is a container, an empty space gathering life and death. It is like an uterus with which Dora identifies: in the first dream she escapes from it, in the second she returns to it alone. The house is what I would call *the central void* every hysteric is fixed: a void to which corroding her very life, but to which she seems to remain pigheadedly faithful.

Perhaps hysteria is actually about not being able to leave the house, not being able to abandon the void. Even when one has left it materially. An hysteric is unable to leave the house burning with passions, in which she participates with her soul, but not yet with her body--because, in the end, the hysteric wants to remain a child, therefore incestuous. She doesn't want to become *other* than the child she is no more. She doesn't cut the link with home, because she doesn't cut away her childhood. Because she has never really removed herself from her childhood, she takes every sexual proposal as an attempted act of pedophilia. She's in her lost childhood up to her neck, and when she dreams of fleeing it... it's to eventually return there.

8. Second Dora's Dream

To the second dream.

I was walking about in a town which I did not know. I saw streets and squares which were strange to me [I saw a monument in one of the squares]. Then I came into a house where I lived, went to my room, and found a letter from Mother lying there. She wrote saying that as I had left home without my parents' knowledge she had not wished to write to me to say that Father was ill. "Now he is dead, and if you like, you can come." I then went to the station [*Banhof*] and asked about a hundred times: "Where is the station?" I always got the answer: "Five minutes." I then saw a thick wood before me which I went into, and there I asked a man whom I met. He said to me: "Two and a half hours more." He offered to accompany me. But I refused and went alone. I saw the station in front of me and could not reach it. At the same time I had the usual feeling of anxiety that one has in dreams when one cannot move forward. Then I was at home. I must have been travelling in the meantime, but I know nothing about that. I walked into the porter's lodge, and enquired to our flat. The maidservant opened the door to me and replied that Mother and the others were already at the cemetery [*Friedhof*]."

This second dream seems a mirror overturning the content of the first: it is no longer a dream of fleeing from home, but of returning home from a far-away, non-familiar location. Here, her mother and father make their appearance, but *in absentia*: the former through a letter, the latter is dead. While in the first dream she escapes with both parents, in the second it is their absence that stands out, and she returns from her flight.

Today's analyst would not interpret exactly as Freud did, seeking the anatomic sexual metaphor in the dream's every detail. For example, reading into the nymphs in the background of a thick wood—a pictorial image Dora evokes in talking about the dream—a reference to the lips of the vagina, which were known as *nymphs* in

the gynecological language. Freud was obsessed by sexual metaphor. And yet, a modern-day analyst would read what Freud did in this particular dream: a metaphorical transposition of the lake scene, of her escape from amorous temptation and consequent return home. Her vagina remains unpenetrated, and she herself returns to the homely void. The dream loosely articulates Dora's never-ending fluctuation between a desire for full femininity and "a retirement to childish pre-genital relations", as an orthodox analyst would say. For modern-day analyst, nymphs in the wood would evoke a wild and unleashed feminine sexuality, the exact opposite of the Sistine Madonna Dora pauses before for two hours in the museum of Dresden.

This dream and everything that happens to Dora in the nine months following the lake scene, seems to play out an alternative story to the real one, bringing to mind Peter Howitt's film *Sliding Doors* (1998). There two parallel stories develop featuring the same woman—one if, on a certain day, at a certain time, she hadn't missed her train in London's tube, and the other if she had. The two lives are equally possible and never cross paths. Like the woman in the film, Dora seems to live another possible parallel virtual life: if on that day at the lake she had succumbed to Herr K., she may have gotten pregnant, may have given birth nine months later, etc. The dream somehow ties together two parallel lives—the imaginary and the actual—producing this mythical return home following her father's death.

In the interpretation of this dream, the much-commented episode of Dora's visit to the Sistine Madonna in Dresden emerges. On the occasion of that visit a male cousin, whom we suppose to be about her age, offers to accompany her to the picture gallery, but Dora prefers to go alone. She remains for a couple of hours in ecstasy before Raphael's S. Sixtus Madonna—particularly attracted by the Madonna herself. The events evoked seem combine to form a metaphor of her relation to Herr K.: in both cases she refuses to let a man accompany her, going off alone to contemplate virginity. However, the Sistine Madonna is a virgin with child: again, Dora seems to be bringing an imaginary child to life while remaining a virgin. But wherein lies her desire to be both a mother and a virgin?

In Raphael's painting, the Madonna with child is venerated by two figures at her feet: an aged St. Sixtus and a young St. Barbara. It's hard not to think of Frau K.'s two worshippers when considering these two raphaellesque characters—Dora's father and Dora herself. Frau K., a woman with children who was certainly not a virgin, had become the object of Dora's worship. Yet Dora had constructed for herself a theory according to which her ego ideal (as Freud would have called it) was chaste: she avoided her husband's bed, and her lover was impotent. Dora's father didn't penetrate Frau K., he worshipped her by licking her vagina. A mother worshipped chastely by a man and a young woman. In the Madonna, the Jewish Dora imagines an idealised figure, at once mother and chaste: an impossible dream.

In the Sistine Madonna, Dora obviously idolises femininity that can generate without a male contribution—a pure feminine *potency* that leaves the body untouched, by the other, a purely endogenous maternity, an autarchic femininity

with no penetration, laceration, or occupation by the penis or any other intruder. It is a dream of narcissistic integrity in which it is possible to produce without any need of the other. After all, that's what hysteria is all about.

9. Dora won...

After a century of psychoanalysis, the enigma of hysteria remains intact, despite success in treating hysterics. Why do hysterics flee from the satisfaction of their desires? Answers Freud tries to elaborate, even in this text, leave us perplexed.

On page 84 of the *Standard Edition*, Freud finally tries to explain why Dora rejects Herr K. and renounces the pleasures of the flesh. As Dora believes that all men are libertine rogues—her nanny had convinced her of this—according to her, Herr K. has a venereal disease, just like her syphilitic father. It was a realistic fear then, like AIDS today. But even if this fear of syphilis were true, why does Dora extend her refusal of sexual contact to embracing and kissing?

A few pages later Freud tried to explain the mystery.

There was a conflict within [Dora] between a temptation to yield to the man's proposal and a composite force rebelling against that feeling. This latter force was made up of motives of respectability and good sense, of hostile feelings caused by the governess's disclosures (jealousy and wounded pride...), and of a neurotic element, namely, the tendency toward a repudiation of sexuality which was already present in her and was based on her childhood history.

Freud's ultimate explanation—presented modestly in a 1905 footnote—is really disappointing. That Dora is cautious and complies with common decency is hardly a satisfactory reason, because on other occasions she doesn't come across as either cautious or decent. Today caution and decency are no longer feminine ideals, yet hysterics haven't disappeared. And while the nanny's gossip may excite jealousy and wounded pride, these feelings hardly hamper sexual attraction—in fact, just the opposite. What's left is what Freud calls “the neurotic element”, an aversion to sexuality, which was somehow what really needed to be explained. The ultimate explanation comes across as somehow circular: hysteric aversion to sexuality is caused by... a fundamental neurotic aversion to sexuality. It's as if we were hearing Molière's laughter in the background when he has the old fogey doctors say: “opium causes sleep because of its *virtus dormitiva* (sleep-arousing virtue)”.

The fact is that Freud was not only defeated on the therapeutic plane, but his theory proved impotent as well. The hysteric enjoyed a double triumph—both clinical and theoretical.

Today we are fundamentally convinced that psychoanalysis's masterpiece has been the treatment of hysteria, but that's precisely because psychoanalysis hasn't managed to cure it or eliminate it... Hysteria is still intact, seized but not penetrated by analytic knowledge. But thanks to its failure, psychoanalysis has allowed one truth about the hysteric to emerge, i.e. the impossibility of naming the *devil* she wants.

10. Lacan on Dora

However, we can focus not only on what Freud understood of Dora, but perhaps also on what we can grasp, making use of a century of reflection.

Lacan's reinterpretation of hysteria—starting from Dora's case—is particularly prestigious. According to him, an hysteric woman is basically a “masculine” homosexual who doesn't fully acknowledge herself as that. Hence the difficulty an hysteric has in accepting herself as a sexual object for men. According to Lacan, Frau K. is our heroine's true and ultimate object of desire—because a woman is the hysteric's “object of real interest”. Lacan believed he had at last found *the ultimate truth* of hysteria behind its phantasmagoria of symptoms. “Dora's fascinated attachment to Mrs. K.” has as its object “not an individual, but a mystery, the mystery of her own femininity, let's say her corporeal femininity”. Lacan underlined Dora's subsequent identifications with her father, Herr K. and finally with Freud, all male characters, but her true *object* was Frau K. In other words, Dora wonders: “what is it that makes her desired and loved by men?” Dora abandoned treatment because Freud supposedly failed to take into account the homosexual link between his patient and Frau K. through an identification with the latter... because the hysteric identifies not only with subjects of desire (men), but also with their object (woman).

Freud didn't see into Dora's privileged link with her father's lover. “It's because he put himself too much in Herr K.'s place... that this time Freud didn't manage to move the Acheron”. How should Freud's footnote stating that treatment failed because Dora's transference was not taken into account be judged? For Lacan, the key to any transference is actually the analyst's counter-transference: Freud sided with one of the characters and, above all, wanted Dora's good too much. For an open-minded person like Herr Professor, what could this good be for an 18-year-old girl from a good family? To have a more “mature” lover and to satisfy her legitimate heterosexual drives. But the analyst should never want the subject's *normality*, and identify it ipso facto with her good.

For Lacan, the crucial proof of Dora's mirroring love for Frau K. consists precisely in that famous lake scene when K. proposes and she, after slapping him, runs away--the scene from which Dora's “crisis” derives and which pushes her into Freud's analytical arms.

Many a scholar has meditated on Dora's slap on Lake Garda, one of the most well-known slaps in European literature. Certain feminine smacks have attracted the attention of philosophers precisely because of their anodyne “grammar”, so problematic to translate into conceptual language. Freud, therefore, reads Dora's cuff a bit as if he were reading into a dream: it has manifest content—the rejection or expulsion of the male—and a latent one—the declaration of her love. This feminine attack “betrays” her: it *reveals* the woman's true desire while at the same time *masking* it, forcing it to take on the opposite shape from that of love. But then what does that fatal smack “betray” of Dora?

Freud wonders: “why does this woman reject Herr K.’s offers in this way when—as we know from other signals—she was not insensitive to his charm?” Common sense convinces Freud of Dora’s love for Herr K., hence the idea that the slap represents a fit of jealousy. In actual fact, a few days earlier, Dora had found out that Herr K. had also made sexual advances to the housekeeper, whom he had tried to convince by resorting to the same words he would later use on the banks of the lake with Dora, “*Ich habe nichts an meiner Frau*”, “I get nothing out from my wife”. Dora feels she is being treated in the same way as the allured maid and—jealous as well as humiliated—responds to the proposal with an outburst of anger.

On the other hand, according to Lacan, the fact that she smacks her gallant man is equivalent to a message along these lines: “if your wife is nothing for you, who will you ever be for me?” For Dora, in fact, Frau K. encloses within herself the very mystery of femininity. As soon as her husband confesses that his wife means nothing to him, Dora’s entire identification with him collapses. All of a sudden he slips into the position of a “dummy”—Dora can no longer identify with him. He devaluates Dora’s true love object, and thus offends her femininity (even her own), which she connects to the mysteries incarnated by Frau K., the woman her father desires.

It is odd that Lacan—who often rightly criticised the inaccuracies and mistakes in French translations of Freud—trusted the French translation of the time on this occasion. This translated Herr K.’s aforementioned sentence as “*vous savez que ma femme n’est rien pour moi.*” It’s not an incorrect translation, but it is not very literal. *Ich habe nichts an meiner Frau* is a typically Austrian expression elliptically meaning, “I no longer have any sexual relations with my wife”—and certainly, by extension, it also implies that wife no longer means “wife” to who utters the sentence. Herr K. clearly tells Dora that he hasn’t had sex with his wife for a long time, and Dora must have thought: “As your wife no longer makes love to you—and instead makes love to my father—you now expect to make love to me! Who do you think I am? Your housekeeper, who has no higher hopes than going to bed with you?” And the slap ensues.

Lacan’s interpretation—and therefore his theory of hysteria—is certainly not erroneous and adds considerably to our understanding. But, like Freud’s theory, his too is only partial, precisely insofar as it aims to profess *the ultimate truth on hysteria*. Male identifications and questioning on femininity are certainly relevant aspects of hysteria, but there are others as well. There are also feminine identifications—the Virgin Mary in Dora’s case, for example. As Freud revealed, not only does Dora love all the main players in the drama—and come across disillusioned by them—she also identifies with all of them, even if in different ways. Dora imitates—i.e. identifies with—anyone, a bit like Zelig in Woody Allen’s film of the same name (Zelig always takes on the look of the person closest to him).

What if hysteria’s ultimate truth were not *one* of the identifications in play, but rather the oscillation between these identifications? In such a case, hysteria wouldn’t be the festival of the hundred-thousand masks harking back to *one* single face, but rather, the hysteric face is truly one, none and a hundred-thousand masks.

It is precisely this polymorphic quality, this hesitation between identifications and their correlative objects, that seems to me really crucial in hysteria. The ultimate truth of hysteria is its lack of an ultimate truth—hence its “modernity”, even if hysteria is as old as the hills. Dora—like every other hysteric—doesn’t allow herself to be caught by ultimate interpretations (including Lacan’s and Freud’s very acute ones) but, as in her dreams or on Lake Garda, she flees... from psychoanalytic knowledge as well, which never possessed her but rather, I would say, embraced and immortalized her. The hysteric frees herself from the grip of psychoanalysis, which owes much of its prestige to this eel-like woman. Perhaps the “ultimate truth” on hysteria is its oscillation between several fundamental truths without ever making a decision. In Aristotelian terms: hysteria is the impossibility of moving from potential enjoyment to actual enjoyment, from the potency of desire to giving oneself up to enjoyment.

The Garda scene can be reconsidered in this hermeneutically liberal key. Dora’s postponement of a relationship with a man—her living a *potential* femininity—comes up against a wall when Herr K. “seriously” proposes to her, and she is faced with a real *decision*—whether or not to go from potential to action. Her reaction is to flee a heterosexual relationship and “return home” to her father’s metaphorical arms, aggressively claiming his love. Her crisis, which takes her back to Freud, is a delayed train of this long flight. For two years she exasperatingly asks her father to put an end to any relations with the K.s, i.e., to close the family into the shell of an autarchic incestuous bind. Her two dreams act out on the one hand the need to leave the house and head towards the Other, accepting to “give it [her sex]” as a woman, and on the other, the impulse to return to an empty house, isolated from external exchanges—double movement making up hysteria’s *Falsche Bewegung*, false movement.

Hysteria thus illustrates a pure *potential* for identification and sexual investment, which is never—if ever—*acted upon*. The hysteric is an inhibited heterosexual, an ideal homosexual, a polymorphic pervert, but never *in act*. Her being consists in not-yet-being, as well as no-longer-being—not yet a woman and no longer a child. No longer a female and yet not a male--while a male hysteric cannot manage to be fully a female, and he needs the presence of another male in order that the female attain enjoyment.

Today, a spontaneous sympathy for hysteria can once more be found, because our age also feels that the putting-into-action is impossible, because what they want is impossible.

11. Hysterics’ potency

Hysterics want to keep their potentials, that is their *power*, open. This is why they never *open* their sex to the other’s *action*.

One of psychoanalysis’ limit is not to have expounded on the impact of power as central to sexual life—with the exception of the clichéd reference to omnipotence, put into play as the ultimate delusion. Nietzscheans like Foucault and Deleuze found

it easy to reconsider Freud's conclusions by appealing to forces born from power conflicts. But power, potential, potency, impotence, omnipotence are all connected: those in power can make use of a potency they can choose to act out or not. Yet analytic practice has shown that in the hysteric universe—more than men and women— there are rather strong and weak, potent or impotent individuals. For the hysteric woman, the male is above all *he who disposes of strength and power*, thus her act of force against him to make him, or reveal him as, impotent (one reason why hysterics many feminists, with their critique of male power, find a good resonance in hysteria).

In hysteria, women live in fairy tale-like scenarios, in order not to have to “act out”—sexually above all—and thus preserve their potency. Consider Dora's symptoms after the lake scene—her dragging right leg, pains in her abdomen, etc.— which Freud interpreted as an acting (an act of the body) pregnancy. For nine months after the lake scene, Dora lives a “virtual” sex life: instead of running away from Herr K., she goes to bed with him, he makes her pregnant and she gives birth... But Dora's second life is not actual—it is a fiction thanks to which she preserves her virginity. She preserves the *potency* that centuries of Christian cults have attributed to virginity.

But autarchic potency allows the hysteric to neglect her *ministerium* as a woman.

Minister comes from the Latin *minister*, who was originally a servant, the *ministra* the house-maid. In the wider sense, *minister* also meant priest, he who serves God. *Ministerium* is thus a service, be it low-level (the attendant) or high-level (priest, civil servant, the modern-day minister of a government). Insofar as the hysteric gives up her *ministerium*, she becomes the minister of a *mysterium* called hysteria.

To fulfil our adult sexual *ministerium*—finding a partner, raising children—we must all deal with those desires and fantasies that are unwilling to accept this *ministerium*. We might say that Freud, through hysterics, discovered the *gay* part in all of us. Today, *gay* means homosexual, but at one time in English it actually meant *libertine*, someone who practices his sexuality freely—without making it the servant of a legitimate family. Freud helped us to tolerate our own libertine desire.

People in analysis mostly complain of two things: their inability to work and/or love (marry, stay with their loved one, honor the coitus, etc.). They can't manage to be ministers, to serve. Through analysis they sometimes realize that they are unable to serve because they want the impossible: on the one hand, that the world serve them, that they not serve anyone or anything, but on the other, that they can be of service. The hysteric doesn't want to comply with sexual obligation to a man—but neither does she want to become a nun, a servant of Christ. The neurotic is basically someone who yearns for *privilege*. While the neurotic, like the child, doesn't want to serve, on the other hand s/he does want to fulfill her/his *ministerium* and thus be like everyone else. Herein lies the impossible *double-bind*.

Freud's mistake was wanting the good of his patient—he didn't send her to work because in those days bourgeois girls didn't work, but he did want to send her

to bed and to sexual enjoyment. Lacan was right: Freud's counter-transference—he wanted Dora to be of service as a woman—was the basis for Dora's transference. But for any analyst, proof of clinical improvement is when a client can work and make love like s/he is supposed to. Analysts don't preach it, but they practice it. In practice, the analyst adapts a child-subject, who cries because s/he wants the impossible, to the only possible services that our lives have in store for us. Analysts adapt their patients *de facto* only by giving up on adapting them. But adapt to what? To serving. This is the only *grace* that life allows: being thankful to others because they have allowed us to be of some service...

This is why the hysteric is so attractive today—to women and feminists in particular—because she paradigmatically embodies women's journey today, in an age which forces her—because of historic changes—to abandon the comfortable and oppressive House of the Father, and to head for an unknown house, where she will awaken from the dream.

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