

The Mind-Body Dilemma or the Case of the Shaking Writer

by Barbara J. Novak, M.D.

Her voice began to tremble, echoing in the microphone, through the hall, as she clutched the podium, white-knuckled. “I have come to think of my books as echo chambers or halls of mirrors in which themes, ideas, associations continually reflect and reverberate inside a text,” she read, her words a presage of her behavior.

Her shaking visibly increased, her voice resonating with the movement of her body, and I began to worry. *Uh oh, not a good sign. What if she does this at our conference? What does one do with a shaking presenter?*

Siri Hustvedt, anticipating my thoughts and probably the thoughts of others in her audience, interrupted her reading to explain, “I’m shaking.” She smiled, audibly exhaled, and continued. “You have to forgive me. This has happened to me before and is happening again. I’m going to get through this statement and it usually goes away.”

What a disarmingly direct way of dealing with this anxiety, I thought. But she said “usually” it goes away. What happens to her if it doesn’t go away? Is it worth the risk? What’s the back up plan?

Highly recommended as a possible panelist to round out our conference on neuroscience and psychoanalysis, I have googled a year-old video of her presentation at the Adelaide Writers’ Week in Australia. By watching the video I am hoping to get a sense of her style and her potential “fit.”

Tall, lithe, blond, with large, deep-set doe-like eyes, her looks betray her Norwegian heritage, though she was born and raised in Minnesota. I think I can hear the

slightest sing-song lilt of a Minnesota/Norwegian accent as she begins to read excerpts from her book, a fictionalized memoir and tribute to her dead father.

Poised, beautiful and charming, I reflected. My initial reaction to her presence was quite positive. Since the rest of her talk went smoothly and she seemed both psychologically attuned and extremely knowledgeable about neuroscience, psychoanalysis and literature, I decided it would be worth the risk to invite her to be a part of our conference.

Once I'd contacted her, she spontaneously offered that her new book would be out in the spring. I asked the title. She proudly announced, "It's called The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves."

"Perfect," I said, "That's perfect."

Any lingering doubts I may have harbored have long since been replaced with enthusiastic gratitude that Ms. Hustvedt accepted the invitation to participate in the October 30, 2010 Interdisciplinary Symposium - Pain, Poetry and Perception: A Symposium on the Convergence of Neuroscience, Literature and Psychoanalysis. Ms. Hustvedt's intelligence, charm and evocative thinking about the complex connections among these seemingly disparate topics will add much to a rich program. Also featured are world-renowned neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux and BWCP psychoanalyst and child development researcher Michael Jasnow.

Ms. Hustvedt's book is a personal exploration of several puzzling episodes of shaking, not dissimilar from (and including) the scene I have described above. She does not stop at personal introspection, but uses her subjective experiences to further develop

and understand the particulars as they relate to a wide variety of interconnected disciplines of thought and science.

To inform her investigation she calls upon her relevant experiences: as a New York Times blogger on migraine headaches (from which she has suffered much of her adult life); from her volunteer job teaching writing to inpatients at Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic; from her several years of attending monthly lectures on neuroscience at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and participation in a neuropsychology discussion group lead by Jaak Panksepp and the late Mortimer Ostow; and from the research for her novel, The Sorrows of An American, whose protagonist is a male psychiatrist and psychoanalyst practicing in NYC.

In this relatively short yet comprehensive, engaging, and highly accessible memoir, Ms. Hustvedt broaches a history of mental illness and the beginnings of psychoanalytic treatment of mental illness, contemporary psychoanalytic thought and treatment, philosophy, neurology and neuroscience, to mention just a few of her many scholarly references. This book could easily serve as a primer for beginning students as well as for the more advanced scholar, a stepping off point to whet one's appetite with an extensive bibliography serving to guide connoisseurs to feasts of knowledge and investigation.

Within days of the book's release in early March, and after reading The Shaking Woman, the head of the Sigmund Freud Foundation extended an invitation to Ms. Hustvedt to give the 39th Annual Sigmund Freud Lecture in Vienna on Freud's birthday, May 6th, 2011. Of course, the intrepid Ms. Hustvedt accepted.