

Aesthetic Hysteria

The Great Neurosis in Victorian
Melodrama and Contemporary Fiction

Ankhi Mukherjee

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Preface

Since Plato identified hysteria as a disease caused by the uterus, a voracious “animal inside an animal,” it has had very bad press: “suffocatio,” “suffocation of the uterus,” or, interchangeably, “suffocation of the mother,” “chorea lascivia,” “Maid’s, Nun’s and Widow’s Melancholy,” “the wandering womb,” “mysteria,” even “genital causes,” “*grand fallace*,” “fraud.” Even after Freudian psychoanalysis changed the somaticist orientation of hysteria studies into a mentalist one, and three decades after Hélène Cixous identified with the hysterical patient as “the Absolute Woman,” “hysterical” remains a misogynist epithet of opprobrium, ridicule, and abjection. At best, hysteria is understood as recuperating the materiality of the body from its deconstruction in language. At worst, it is an exhibitionist psychopathology, an over-the-top mode of excess and overflow that threatens reason, civilization, and consciousness. The proposed study on hysteria looks less at the “mad” corporeal body of hysteria than the body of language which surfaces in its lesions and breakdowns, and argues for a constitutive relationship between literature and hysteria. While writers from Shakespeare to Poe to Kafka to Woolf have preempted the symptomatology and metaphors of hysteria for their sheer histrionic potential, this project looks transversally through hysteria-as-literary-effect at a more insidious hysteria of the signifier in certain kinds of imaginative writing. When literature poses the question of hysteria, it seems to exceed authorial intention or agency to testify to unspeakable intensities outside language and consciousness. The hysterical symptom or diagnostic in literature becomes, in the words of Ellie Ragland, “a place of knowledge . . . that knows nothing of itself.”¹ This study examines a range of hysterical symptoms in literature, which are not readily interpretable symbols or metaphors of hysteria, but persist instead as gaps, feints, blind spots, and resistances within the text.

In 1994, hysteria was excluded as a syndrome from the fourth edition of the official register of mental diseases, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*

of *Mental Disorders*: for literary critics fascinated with hysteria, this was an exit as impactive as Ibsen's Nora's conclusive door-slamming on the Western cultural imaginary.² With this excision, hysteria lost its ontic register as it were to become a gleam in the eye of a curious assortment of academics: literary scholars, narratologists, feminists, psychoanalysts, social historians and historians of medicine, philosophers, anthropologists, and art historians. The historian Mark Micale notes "a burst of professional interest in the *history* of the disorder" in the past twenty-five years, "the very period that has witnessed the decline of hysteria as a medical diagnosis."³ *The International Classification of Diseases* and DSM testify to the gradual disappearance of the polysymptomatic forms of the disease, as recorded by Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud. Hysteria has been reconceptualized, in these directories, as the "factitious illness disorder," "histrionic personality type," "psychogenic pain disorder," and given other irreverent appellations. "Where has all the hysteria gone?" the psychologist Roberta Satow dramatically asked in 1979. My own intervention in hysteria studies follows the lead provided by medical historians and scholars in the humanities who reclaimed hysteria after psychiatrists hastily pronounced it dead in the twentieth-century.

In the late 70s, feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, and Christina von Braun saw in hysteria a model of disenchanting feminine subjectivity in a patriarchal culture. More recent feminist interventions describe what Kahane terms "the psychopoetics of hysteria" (xiv) and its implication in Victorian and modernist narrative discourse. Monique David-Ménard's *Hysteria from Freud to Lacan: Body and Language in Psychoanalysis* (1989), and *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, edited by Sander Gilman et al (1993), are key texts in what Mark Micale calls the "New Hysteria Studies," which trace the epistemological history of hysteria against the ideological contexts in which that history was written. Other influential work on hysteria in the 1990s focused on the extraordinary mimetic quality of hysteria, and its postmodern forms. According to Elaine Showalter, the "New Hysterics" constitute an eclectic and international group: alien abductees, victims of satanic ritual abuse, sufferers of the Gulf War Syndrome, the "incest camp" (which claims childhood sexual abuse on the basis of memory recovered in hypnosis), and the inheritors of racial and cultural traumas. Unlike Freud's "case studies," however, contemporary hysterical patients are reluctant to trace their disorders to psychological causes, and blame external sources instead: unknown viruses, sexual molestation, chemical warfare, satanic conspiracy, and alien infiltration. And this is where the "New Hysterians" step in to speak for hysteria, and make readable the scrambled codes of its own brand of social communication.

As Elaine Showalter points out in her 1997 monograph on hysteria, during the past decade, the “hysterical narrative” has become one of the most popular formulations in literary criticism. Showalter’s own *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (1991) and *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997), George Rousseau’s monograph-length “‘A Strange Pathology’: Hysteria in the Early Modern World, 1500–1800” (1993), Katherine Cummings’s *Telling Tales: The Hysteric’s Seduction in Fiction and Theory* (1991), Mark Micale’s *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (1995), Peter Logan’s *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in 19th-Century British Prose* (1997), Elin Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (1997), and Elizabeth Bronfen’s *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (1998) have successfully emerged from the crossroads of psychoanalytic theory, feminist literary criticism, and the history of medicine. Diana Fuss’s *Identification Papers* (1995) briefly examines the cultural production of (mass) hysteria, and Juliet Mitchell’s *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria* (2000) describes the universality and pervasiveness of hysteria. Finally, Rachel P. Maines’s entertaining and edifying *The Technology of Orgasm: “Hysteria,” the Vibrator, and Women’s Sexual Satisfaction* (1999), is a pioneering technological history of the vibrator as a medical tool for the treatment of hysteria.

Micale’s intriguingly titled *Approaching Hysteria*—will the quest hero “get” hysteria before it gets him?—is arguably the most encyclopedic book on hysteria in recent years. Micale, a relentless historiographer of hysteria, promotes hysteria studies for bringing about a happy collaboration between imaginative literature and psychological medicine. The bridge category of hysteria, he argues, is increasingly useful in understanding psychic disorders in an advanced psychiatric age. In his account of literary representations of hysteria, the interaction between psychoanalysis and literary criticism is mediated through “the talking body.” While Micale records the history of interconnections between fiction and diagnostic theory, he does not, however, elaborate on the aesthetic register of literary appropriations of hysteria. His approach is representative of other cultural reappraisals of hysteria in recent years in that while he upholds the centrality of the nervous body in modern writing culture, and illustrates the productive exchange between cultural representations and medical codifications of hysteria, he privileges the implicit purposiveness or truth-content of hysterical performance over its expressiveness. My project addresses this lack in hysteria studies by focusing on the hysteric as a recurrent character type in English literature from the nineteenth-century to the present, on the intertextuality of the medical and cultural scripts that influence literary scenarios organized around hysteria,

and the very nature of an aesthetic experience of hysteria. Literary examples include both postmodern thematizations of hysteria and more automatic, or less knowing, acts of hysteria in literature. I focus on three significant modes of hysterical acting-out: emotional overload and the speaking body (in Victorian melodrama), repetition compulsion (in Charles Dickens's autobiographical fiction and the postmodern phenomenon of canon revision), and traumatogenic verbal nonfluency (representations of stuttering and other anomalies in the flow of speech in war literature). The literary texts chosen for this exercise are sensationalistic and extravagant, albeit each in its singular way, and the heuristic I put in place to read such textual performances can also be termed sensational in that it provides a constitutive dimension for the theater of pleasure and pain, sickness and health, or repression and expression in hysterical narratives.

To add to the previous scholarship on literature and hysteria, I want to focus my analysis as specifically as possible on the hysteric model of desire, which is forever "wanting," and the hysteric mode of articulation, which presents without representing, or performs without symbolizing, converting a repressed thought or fantasy not to ideation, but to a corporeal condition. In the words of Juliet Mitchell, "beneath the flamboyant pantomime of the hysteric's seductive behaviour is the experience of a body that is not there."⁴ The problem of this absent body—as I discuss in detail in Chapter 1—explains the ontological uncertainty of hysteria. For the hysteric, the body has gone missing, due to improper sexualization or trauma, mental and/or physical. The hysteric however, does not acknowledge the loss, and circumscribe it with words. Loss or lack often leads to a compensatory representation, but the hysteric's *lack* of loss makes the body feel materially non-existent—because un-symbolized—but experientially existent, and excessive to a fault, returning to the site of its disappearance to exact its symbolic due. In hysteria the mind-body dualism collapses, for the hysteric experiences passions in the mind as well as the body. Conversion, as Freud understood it, implies this mysterious leap from mind to body, where a remark, which is felt to be like a slap in the face, actually results in a neuralgic twitch. So, in hysteria we have a substantial, embodied mind, and an abstracted body, which acts like the mind. Words are thing-like, pure idea is equivalent to pure sensation, and saying is doing, not a representation of doing.

The first chapter is the theoretical introduction to the themes of my book. In this chapter I work through definitions of hysteria and touch on the medical-historical background from Freud to Lacan against which hysteria has been conceptualized and categorized. I focus in particular on Freud's understanding of hysteria as predicated on disgust. Freud's, and later, Lacan's,

definition of disgust is linked to their mapping of desire. Desire and disgust, in their foundational psychoanalytic work, are both messily related to an enjoyment in which the desire for incorporating the object (of desire) cancels itself in an aversion for incorporation. To use Kantian terms, disgust is a state of unslakable yearning, and like pure taste, it eschews actual tasting. Hysterical *jouissance* is a drive toward fusion that seeks to negate itself—it comes to nothing, destructuring itself over and over in intransitive repetition. Finally, I draw parallels between Adorno's conceptualization of the aesthetic sphere and Lacan's theorization of hysteria, and argue for a radical expressionism which is not easily homogenized and assimilated in the socio-symbolic.

The next chapter, "Too Much, Too Little: The Emotional Capital of Victorian Melodrama," looks at nineteenth-century illegitimate theatre. Victorian melodrama teems with subjectivities trapped in the discontinuity between the imaginary and the real, mad women and sometimes men suffering from unfixable desires or living out traumas. Melodrama is particularly visual: in the "acting out" of the hysteric—both verbal, as in syntactic displacements, and physical, as expressed by gestural language—one is provoked to read ideographs, locate signifying elements, and recuperate speech. However, instead of assuming an analytical position vis-à-vis the hysteric, and attempting to render the lack or gaps in her consciousness construable, this chapter addresses and evokes the alienation and scission in the field of language, the continual failure of self-representation, the failed self-identity of hysterical subjectivity.

In this chapter I also explore the possibility that melodramatic excess gives the slip to key tenets of psychoanalysis like oedipality, the splitting function of language, and the politics of sexual difference. Victorian melodrama gives us hystericized modernity: it has a metaphoric relationship to what Henry James characterized as a feminine, nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age. I begin my discussion with Douglas Jerrold's play for "minor" theatres, *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829), and trace the arc of melodramatic expressionism through domestic melodramas like *Masks and Faces* (1852), *Lady Audley's Secret* (1863), and the psychological "thriller" *Bells* (1871), to the theatrical realism of Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893). Melodrama's "more"—its characteristic overload of affect and hysterical inability to limit or close plot structures, its privileging of the plural over the universal, and subversion of the law—gives definition to a new cross-gender or confused-gender erotic and aesthetic.

In the third chapter, "'Missed Encounters': Repetition, Rewriting, and Contemporary Return to Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*," I link questions of narrative function theoretically to those of repetition and return in

hysteria. I look at Dickens's repetitious and hysterical writing in *Great Expectations* (1861), with its constant returns to the past, the returns of the past in the form of repressed material, and the vanishing point of the system of life-writing where it fails to integrate itself. Repetition here is not recollection, but a series of failed and missed encounters with history (and a past that inheres in the present). For Dickens, to write is to give over to the compulsion to repeat—that which is refused or repudiated in the formation of his bourgeois authorial subjectivity continues to determine it negatively. There is poetic justice indeed in postmodern reworkings of Dickens's great novel of returns and rewriting. In this chapter I look at extrapolations of the classic in Kathy Acker's *Great Expectations* (1982) and Sue Roe's *Estella* (1982) before reading Peter Carey's brilliant pastiche, *Jack Maggs* (1997), with Freud's and Lacan's differing notions of hysterical repetition.

The last chapter of the book, "Broken English: Neurosis and Narration in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* Trilogy," examines male hysteria and the link between hysteria and trauma through war narratives. This chapter revisits questions of repetition and the death drive brought up in Chapter 3 through a study of the anxiety neurosis of stuttering. Lacan relates trauma to one's identity, and relation to another, and an ethical responsibility to what he calls the "real," a palpable order of effects, which persists in language and being although it lacks an imaginary-symbolic language consciousness. Trauma is non-referential in the sense that it is not fully perceived as it occurs: in this formulation, one encounters trauma by belatedly enduring *and* surviving it in a series of recuperative departures. Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995) is one such departure, opening up a luminous space of knowing in the moment of movement from trauma to recovery. Barker fictionalizes the renowned Cambridge psychologist Dr. W. H. R. Rivers as a chiasmic figure who, while in charge of curing war neurosis, also suffers a non-passive endurance of the Great War. With references to famous stutterers in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* (1924), and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), I develop, in the course of my argument, an analytics of stuttering. The stutter is the performative in language, a speech act, a rupture in speech through which the body suppurates non-referential signs. In the context of war neuroses, I read that rupture at once as a private traumatic symptom and a mode of conveying a sense of shattered public or national identifications.

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy titled "Eating Well" (*Who Comes After the Subject?*), Derrida compares the dominant schema of subjectivity to symbolic anthropophagy: in a world of exchange one devours the other and lets oneself be devoured by him. He characterizes Western subjectivist

metaphysics as eating, speaking, and thereby interiorizing the all-other. It is my argument in this book that hysteria studies has continued relevance in the humanities if only because the ontology of the hysteric remains one of the starkest reminders of a decentered and divided subject, and a negatively determined metaphysics. Hysteria expresses desire in terms of disgust, a turning away, turning its back on the homely wisdom of eating well. The hysteric “mouth” does not represent the logocentric expressive system, but that which it cannot include: the vomitive.

A theorization of disgust provides a valuable hermeneutic tool to imagine the end(s) of hermeneutics, and the inadequacy of theory. The “disgusting” is that which is non-readable, non-idealizable, unintelligible, and inassimilable: it stands for heterogeneous elements that give the lie to full and present meaning. Disgust is the name for an obscene intimacy with the object as well as a strenuously maintained distance from it. It is a sensuous moment-in-vanishing, the prototype of an aesthetic experience that finally surmounts its bodily character, of a desire that is intellectual and emotional. The shudder is a good starting place for theory, theory understood as a heuristic and not a fallacy that mistakes its own image for concretion, as Adorno cautions in *Negative Dialectics*. My readings of literary case studies of hysteria, whether expressed in the expropriativeness of emotion in melodrama, the anxiety of repetition in Dickens, or an eroticized death drive in trauma, all testify to a primal estrangement between subject and sign which subsequently becomes the terms of a transitive engagement.

Theory is a “desiring dialectic best exemplified by the discourse of the Hysteric,” claims Jean-Michel Rabaté in his extended meditation on the subject in *The Future of Theory*.⁵ Like hysteria, theory is an iterable discourse that commits a catachresis of identity and knowledge. In the conclusion to my book, I urge the necessity to rethink and remake hysteria studies, linking it to the “impossible” profession and possibility of theory.

NOTES TO THE PREFACE

1. Ellie Ragland, *Essays on the Pleasures of Death: From Freud to Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 123.
2. The DSM, published by the American Psychiatric Association, is the main diagnostic reference of mental health professionals in the USA.
3. Mark Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 4–5. According to Micale, “the final quarter of the twentieth century, it appears, is experiencing an efflorescence of

historical interest in hysteria to match the great medical preoccupation with the disease a century ago.” Micale notes that there have been roughly four hundred publications on the topic, all of them historical in nature, in the last ten years.

4. Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 34.
5. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 15.

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Chapter One

Introduction: “Stuck in the Gullet of the Signifier”: Desire, Disgust, and the Aesthetics of Hysteria

In their critique of Kafka in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari mention the emancipatory potential of writing “like a dog (but a dog can’t write—exactly, exactly)” (26). Mystifying and absurd as this suggestion is, it yields, on further reflection, a very savvy theorization of formless expressivity, or the practice of opposing “a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it” (19). Deleuze and Guattari here are discussing the possibilities of “minor literature,” a singular and minor usage of a major language. Minor literature does not necessarily rise from a minor language, and is rather that which a minority (though not necessarily an ethnic one) constructs within a major language.

he who has the misfortune of being born in the country of a great literature must write in its language, just as a Czech Jew writes in German, or an Ouzbekian writes in Russian. Writing like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow. And to do that, finding his own point of underdevelopment, his own *patois*, his own third world, his own desert. (18)

Writing like a dog, for Deleuze and Guattari, is similar to writing like a foreigner, sans entitlement or identity papers. When they enjoin us to write like an animal, the emphasis is not on *like*, but on *animal*, on metamorphosis, not metaphor or acting like something. It is a model of writing without subjectivity or agency, and of traversing zones of indetermination that lead to new synapses and new connections. The writer is not a master but an animal *and* a writing machine, aiming for perfectly unformed and materially intense expression, signs that do not designate. Like Kafka he makes a minor use

of a major language (Prague German). Like Artaud he wrenches cries and gasps from French. Like Woolf she wallows in a rich destitution, coaxing a schizophrenic *mélange* out of an arid language. The writer of minor literature is a foreigner, forced to live in a language not his own. Or she feels like an outsider in her own language, like a nomad or immigrant, inhabiting the margin without a sense of belonging in its cramped space.

Minor literature, thus, is an unlimited becoming, a “detritorialization” (16) which invents creative lines of escape for language. It dismantles subjectivity and disorganizes syntax to make it coincide simultaneously with “the barking of a dog, the cough of the ape, and the bustling of a beetle” (26). It brings language “slowly and progressively to the desert” (26), to its inherent underdevelopment, and attunes it to the polylingualism of repressed voices. This book looks at texts that practice the politics of what Deleuze and Guattari identify as minor literature, through representations of hysteria. Hysteria can be seen as both the consummation and ruin of the signifier. It signifies spectacularly through the symptom, yet cannot be interpreted away in the manner of other linguistic phenomena. The hysteric evokes ontological uncertainty, the terror that “behind the multiple layers of masks there is nothing; or, at the most, nothing but the shapeless, mucous stuff of the life-substance” (Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* 150). Yet we cannot look away, for, by its very constitution, the symptom implies the field of language and presupposes an interlocutor: the hysteric coerces the witness to get involved in the plot, and retroactively confer meaning to a staging where the agent of an action was also its object.

In this introductory chapter I catalogue psychoanalytic appraisals of hysteria and its wider significance as *aesthesis*—lived experience not solely mediated by intellection, which is, however, not entirely resistant to conceptualization. I chose to begin with an extreme example of the post-structuralist prioritization of non-identity over identity—writing like a dog. My interpretation of hysteria, as summarized in the following claims, evokes familiar Deleuzian themes: hysteria detritorializes the very language that it seeks deliverance in and supplants transcendental logic with a logic of multiplicities; it disinvests the body of fantasies of cohesion, language of stratification, and dialectics of narcissistic projection. But, if hysteria performs a critique of identity, and gives full play to its irreducible contradictions, it does not completely relinquish the subjective principle, and this is where it humanizes the impossible Deleuzian ideal. Rather, hysteria chooses what Adorno insists is the only option for the modern subject—it uses “the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity” (*Negative Dialectics* xx). Hysterical identity is predicated on and presupposed by moments of

non-identity, not eradicated by them: hysteria is in fact a prolepsis of identity that reveals identity to be nothing but prolepsis.

"There is aesthetics because there is art," I hear Jacques Rancière stating (*From an Aesthetic Point of View* 13), only to argue against the colonization of aesthetics by art. It is important that I clarify my use of the term "aesthetics," if I am to use it to describe not just (hysterical) narrative and art, but a more insidious hysteria of the signifier. Allow me a brief digression. If hysteria inspired the surrealism of Aragon and Breton, in the 90s it seems to have been reappraised to masquerade speciousness as substance. A few years ago, a label called "Hysterical Glamour" arrived on the sake-and-dance music-soaked catwalks of Tokyo. Fashionistas call its merchandise "terminally cute," roughly translated as that which is so cute that it is not cute at all, but knowing, ironical, and political. This brand of philosophical, if playful, activism, the same fashionistas warn, is a big no-no for anyone a day over thirty. An examination of literary representations of hysteria must, at some level, equate style and proliferating surface with substance, but while I draw attention to a lasting cultural fascination with hysterical performance and play, I also question the robust hermeneutic disgust of hysteria catalogued by the history of psychoanalysis. In this study hysteria is read as phenomenology *and* pathology. Hysteria has been associated for too long with a certain obdurate, debased materiality: this project is not about valorizing the (hysterical) body over its deconstruction in language. As I show in the following chapters, the corporeal body in hysteria has less substantial density than the body of language which surfaces in its lesions and breakdowns. I would like to say, as Maud Ellmann does of her book, *The Hunger Artists*, that this study is "concerned with *disembodiment*, not bodies" (4): the text follows the misadventures of metaphors, to borrow another phrase from Ellmann, or of the symbolic displacements of hysteria as metaphor.¹ I am also deeply ambivalent about projects that seek to reclaim hysteria for identity-mongering on behalf of disarticulated and displaced peoples. As a diasporic intellectual seeking a foothold in the Anglo-American academy, I see no merit in speaking in mangled tongues, cultivating a nervous disposition, or maintaining a permanent breach between the signifier and the signified in speech-act situations—definitely not recommendable for anyone a day over thirty.

William James, in his 1896 lectures, defined hysteria as the "hyper-aesthetic" disorder (Taylor 60). Aesthetics in this usage is much more than sensory cognition, or the sensory cognition of art: it can be placed in the tradition of Adorno, to signify, in the words of Martin Jay, "a certain type of relation between subject and object" (*The Dialectical Imagination* 66).