

WRITING SELF-DISRUPTION IN *THE SHAKING WOMAN OR A HISTORY OF MY NERVES*, BY SIRI HUSTVEDT

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RESUMO: Como proposto por Sidonie Smith, “o narrador de autobiografia que descreve um colapso a partir de uma posição declarada de recuperação é sempre suspeito” (2010, p.145, tradução minha). Portanto, é relevante questionar como os memorialistas autorizam-se enquanto escritores de pós-colapso. Em *The Shaking Woman or a History of my Nerves* (2010), a romancista e ensaísta Siri Hustvedt narra a sua busca pelo diagnóstico para as violentas convulsões que sofreu pela primeira vez enquanto fazia um discurso. O seu primeiro autodiagnóstico foi de transtorno conversivo dissociativo, anteriormente conhecido como histeria, uma condição associada à institucionalização de muitas mulheres ao longo da história. Depois de ser diagnosticada com diversas possíveis doenças mentais, a autora decidiu fazer uma pesquisa e compor uma história da psiquiatria e neurologia, focando na relação entre o corpo e a mente. O objetivo desse trabalho é entender como a autora entende a luta entre o corpo e a mente, como a representação tanto da mulher “normal”, quanto da histérica moldam a construção da narrativa e a construção da identidade da autora.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: autobiografia; Siri Hustvedt; histeria.

ABSTRACT: As stated by Sidonie Smith, “the life narrator describing a breakdown from an asserted position of recovery is always suspect” (2010, p. 145). Therefore, it becomes relevant to question how memoirists authorize themselves as postbreakdown writers. In *The Shaking Woman or a History of my Nerves* (2010), American novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt reports her search for a diagnosis to the violent seizure she first experienced when making a speech. Her initial self-diagnosis was of “conversion disorder”, previously known as hysteria, a condition associated to the institutionalization of many women throughout history. After being diagnosed with various other mental illnesses the author decided to carry out a research and put together the history of Psychiatry and Neurology, focusing on the relationship between the mind and the body. The goal of this work is to understand how the author figures the struggle between body and mind, how the representations of both the hysterical and “normal” woman shaped the construction of the narrative and also the construction of the author’s identity itself.

KEYWORDS: autobiography; Siri Hustvedt; hysteria.

Introduction

The rise of psychoanalysis in Europe in the late nineteenth century combined with changes in the political and socioeconomic structures resulting from the consolidation of capitalism have brought up discussions about mental illnesses. Such debates would reappear more intensely in the second half of the twentieth century within the humanities mainly due to the conjectures of Michel Foucault on the history of madness, its impositions, silences and exclusions.

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A permanent and socially marginalized character of this story is the hysterical woman. Hysteria, a disorder associated exclusively to women during the nineteenth and twentieth century, was present in the social imaginary and functioned as a means of body and mind control as well as being a form of female oppression. With the consolidation of Psychiatry and Neurology during the twentieth century, the discussion around the relationship between body and mind intensified and the medical field went through considerable transformations. Several diagnoses were questioned or created, but the idea and stigma of the hysterical woman lingers in the twenty-first century.

In the literary field, numerous works were written on the subject, from poems, novels and autobiographies to detailed accounts of the institutions and illnesses, their consequences and processes of cure and recovery. However, as stated by Sidonie Smith, “the life narrator describing a breakdown from an asserted position of recovery is always suspect” (2010, p.145). Therefore, it becomes relevant to question how memoirists authorize themselves as postbreakdown writers and how they build their own stories. Drawing from these notions, the present paper intends to analyze the work *The Shaking Woman or a History of my Nerves* (2010), by Siri Hustvedt (1955-), attending to the autobiographical narrative construction as a way to unravel the construction of the self and as a way of trauma recovery.

The Shaking Woman

Every sickness has an alien quality, a feeling of invasion and loss of control that is evident in the language we use about it.
(HUSTVEDT, 2010, p. 6)

In *The Shaking Woman or a History of my Nerves* (2010), the American novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt reports her search for a diagnosis to the violent seizure she first experienced when making a speech, in honor of her deceased father’s in her hometown. As the narrator says, “[I] launched into my first sentence, and began to shudder violently from the neck down. My arms flapped. My knees knocked. I shook as if I were having a seizure. Weirdly, my voice wasn’t affected” (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.3). This description suggests a rupture between the mental and cognitive functions, which remained intact, and the rest of the body. The narrator herself suggests such division later in the narrative².

Siri Hustvedt’s narrative is built as a way to overcome the grief over her father’s death, Lloyd Hustvedt (1992-2004), as well as to understand her occasional lack of control over her body, her long history of migraines and mild psychological disorders, but, above all, as a way to understand herself. Consequently, it is relevant to understand how the author figures the struggle between body and mind and how the representations of both the hysterical and “normal” woman shaped the construction of the narrative and also the construction of the author’s identity.

Having as a reference the categorizations proposed by Smith and Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010), it is possible to classify Hustvedt’s work as a case study, in their own terms:

² “But the neck is also where the shaking woman begins. A sick neck served as the perfect dream image of my symptom: *From the chin up, I was my familiar self. From the neck down, I was a shuddering stranger.*” (Hustvedt, 2010, p. 129, author’s emphasis)

a life narrative that is gathered into a dossier in order to make a diagnosis and identification of a disease or disorder. [...] This mode of life reporting is often associated with Freud's extended analyses of the cases of various patients with symptoms such as hysteria and gender-identity disorder. (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 264)

Hustvedt's first person narrative is an account of her trajectory in search of the conciliation/acceptance of her other half, named by herself as *the shaking woman*. In order to achieve this goal, the narrator shapes the narrative as a link between her body and her mind, that is, as the neck, the part of the body that allows her to become aware of herself as a whole.

Her initial diagnosis was "conversion disorder", previously known as hysteria – a condition associated with the institutionalization of many women throughout history.³ In the twenty-first century, the narrator, in spite of being aware of this diagnosis inconsistency, diagnoses herself as possibly hysterical. This situation originates a social dilemma, for hysteria is still commonly related to madness and demonic possession. However, nowadays hysteria is usually referred to as "dissociative disorder", in which dissociation is "a very broad term used in different ways to indicate some form of distance from or disruption of ordinary selfhood" (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.12). After being supposedly diagnosed with various other mental illnesses the author decided to carry out a research and put together the history of Psychiatry and Neurology, focusing on the relationship between mind and body.

The narrator states she has always been interested in the discussions and innovations in Psychiatry and Neurology; she has read much of the literature of these areas and taken part in study groups with experts. To some extent, her text is a long comparative summary of different disorders, diagnoses and treatments. At the end it contains notes and bibliographical references. This work is highly praised by prominent neuroscientists such as Oliver Sacks and Antonio Damasio.

When writing *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), the narrator says she renewed her longstanding interest in psychiatry, originated from her speculations about the source of her recurring migraines. The main character in this novel is a psychiatrist named Erik Davidsen, Hustvedt's imaginary brother, whose creation led the author to endless speculations: "He was the boy never born to the Hustvedt family. To be Erik, I threw myself into the convulsions of psychiatric diagnoses and the innumerable mental disorders that afflicted human beings" (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.5). In this and in other works by Hustvedt, including her first novel *The Blindfold* (1992), dislocation elements and identity struggles are noticeable, what was manifest in her early characters culminates in *The shaking woman*.

The Shaking Woman or a History of my Nerves can be associated to *The Sorrows of an American* since they share themes such as grief, identity crises, the search for a real father, and the writing process. The main difference between these two works by Hustvedt is the genre: one is an autobiographical narrative, and the other is a novel. Moreover, both works have elements that suggest a connection to the historical "I" (Siri Hustvedt), and

³ Many pages are dedicated to the explanation of the term hysteria and how this diagnosis is nowadays amplified and has included man as well. For more, see Hustvedt, 2010, pages 9-27.

thus present complementary reflections that aid the comprehension of the self-disruption and assimilation processes of the shaking woman.

Writing in different ways

Intellectual curiosity about one's own illness is certainly born of a desire for mastery. If I couldn't cure myself, perhaps I could at least begin to understand myself. (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p. 6)

The shock between the self other see, and the self from the inside (Stephen Spender, apud SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p.6) is relevant in the narrative construction of *The Shaking Woman*. After all, one must distinguish the shaking experience and its consequences for the author and the narrator. To do so, it is useful to refer to the categorization elaborated by Smith and Watson around the “I”, divided in four categories: “‘real’ or historical ‘I’”, “narrating ‘I’”, “narrated ‘I’”, and “ideological ‘I’” (2010, p.72-78). The “‘real’ or historical ‘I’” would be the author, historical person, Siri Hustvedt, who has experienced the seizures; the “narrating ‘I’” would be the persona that narrates and is available to the readers; the “narrated ‘I’”, or the protagonist, can be “fractured and fragmented as a thematic project” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p.74). That is, in the case of the narrative at hand, it would be the narrated protagonist that suffers the seizures and sees herself split into the “normal” woman and the ill one, named “the shaking woman”.

The fourth “I” is the ideological one, “the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p.78). It brings the focus back to the issue of the hysterical woman and its marginalization. Culturally, there is an ideal concept of personhood that values “mental normality”, individual knowledge and characterization, that is, the idea of a well-shaped self. The narrator tries to understand herself and aims at social-cultural normality. Although hysteria, or dissociative disorder, is her initial self-diagnosis, throughout the narrative she steers away from it and all the weight it conveys.

Smith and Watson pose the question of *relationality* that indicates “how the subject is always in process and thus involved with others, not autonomous” (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p.217), in the case of the Hustvedt's narrative, besides the shaking woman, another figure permeates the narrative, the father figure. The result is a self-narrative in which the narrator tries to (re)construct her own identity in two ways: first, by attempting to assimilate its other, the shaking woman; and secondly, by searching the father figure, though not the actual person, but the one constructed by memory.

The narrator reaffirms that she has sought various possible diagnoses, from psychological to psychiatric and neurological ones. During one of these incursions, she chooses an old man as her analyst, because he “would be a paternal creature, an echo of my father, who is the ghost somehow involved in my shaking” (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.20). Before undertaking psychoanalysis, the narrator had already analyzed herself and would be able to point out her father's ghost as one of the problems to be solved. A similar situation arises in *The Sorrows of an American* when the characters try to solve their personal problems, and deal with their parents' death, overcoming the grief and building the image they wanted to preserve of them. The link between Hustvedt's works seems to lie in the possibility of writing about the same subject in different ways; thus, revisiting memories

and assigning them new meanings, making it possible to construct narratives that combine breakdown and breakthrough, or stories of self-reinvention.

Writing self-disruption, rewriting the self

Writing, especially in traumatic situations, can be used as a therapeutic activity that helps individuals exteriorize emotions and revive and reinterpret repressed memories. Again, the narrator plays two roles, being the tutor of creative writing at a New York hospital for traumatized children and being a writer of her own narratives.

One of the advantages of works such as *The Shaking Woman* is the possibility to picture the impressions of a patient. The work might be read by people who identify themselves with the narrator's condition and it can also be a reference to doctors who try to understand their patients and what they go through. It is of great importance, though, that this autobiographic account be read critically; and not necessarily a "true" story. It might be seen as a constructed discourse that has to be questioned.

Life narratives, such as *The Shaking Woman*, might be interpreted as a work that mediates the borders between the *self* and the *other*. It can be used as a self-knowledge tool or as a strategy of rewriting the self. According to the narrator, "the story of the shaking woman is the narrative of a repeated event that, over time, gained multiple meanings when seen from various perspectives" (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.182). As a book, *The Shaking Woman* can be read in different ways, and gain different meanings and interpretations according to who reads it. It is evident in the different diagnosis Hustvedt receives in her quest for an answer to her problem. Therefore, the construction and consolidation of a self through a narrative seems to be impossible, that is, through language and its multiple meanings the self is fractured into several parts once more, resulting in different possibilities. However, the narrator has her own interpretation and can, consequently, state she has found herself and is now the shaking woman. It is in this manner that writing as a therapeutic exercise to overcome traumas works. In relation to the self, the narrator says:

I don't know what a self is. Defining it, whatever it is, is clearly a semantic problem, a question of borders and perception, as well as any psychobiological truths we might be able to discover.
I feel I have one – a self – but why? Is it everything that lies within the borders of my body? Not really. When I shook, it didn't feel like *me*.
(HUSTVEDT, 2010, p. 193, author's emphasis)

Even though the narrator does not understand what a self is, she is aware that through experience and writing she might be able to forge one. Hence, the problem lies in the fact that the break between body (the shaking woman) and mind (the "normal" woman) has to be healed so that the comprehension of the self may emerge.

In the narrative, the shaking woman seems to be only one among the many selves experienced by the narrator. She wants to find, or build, *one* self, but as the narrative progresses different faces, or characters, emerge. "I am usually one of those characters, *not I as I but I as someone else, an other self*, male or female, projected into the mental world I inhabit as I write" (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p. 111-12, my emphasis). The narrator affirms that this only happens when she writes fiction, but to keep control over the shaking woman is to be in control of a character, another self. To do this, the narrator has to use her imagination

(writing) in order to try to control her body. Therefore, in *The Shaking Woman*, the life narrative is a means to attach, such as a neck, the mind and the rest of the body.

Conclusions

The autobiographies describing breakdown and breakthrough have become increasingly more popular. Their success points to a shift from conventional narratives (narratives that tell stories of success, happiness, inspiration etc.) to narratives centered in the self, its dilemmas and disruptions. Eva Illouz comments that “the autobiographical narratives from the nineteenth century used to be interesting because they had a ‘from poor to millionaire’ plot, contemporary autobiographies have the opposite characteristic: they allow for psychic agony, even in the midst of fame and fortune” (2011, p.78, translation mine). Although Siri Hustvedt is not a Hollywood star, she has a notorious literary and professional career, and her autobiographical narrative fits the patterns proposed by Illouz when analyzing autobiographies of stars such as Oprah Winfrey, Jane Fonda, and Brook Shields. In her analysis, Illouz concludes that these women’s narratives “are narrated as stories of an eternal search for the inner being, of a struggle with the emotional life, and of the liberation from emotional shackles” (2011, p.79, translation mine).

In the beginning of the text, the narrator says she has “decided to go in search of the shaking woman” (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.7), that is, the shaking woman is seen as an “other”, someone to be analyzed and understood. At the end of the book, the narrator adds: “a self is much larger than the internal narrator” (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.198); and it could be further commented: it is much more than a character. Moreover, the narrator says:

because she was a late arrival, I have had a much harder time integrating the shaking woman into my story, but as she becomes familiar, she is moving out of the third person and into the first, no longer a detested double but an admittedly handicapped part of my self. (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.190)

And aware of the ambiguity it stirs, she closes: “I am the shaking woman” (HUSTVEDT, 2010, p.199) By writing the story of her disease, Hustvedt finds a way to come to terms with her handicap and thus turn the “other”, unknown, and haunting part of herself into a familiar feature of her life.

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