Portrait of Dora: Freud's Case History As Reviewed by Hélène Cixous

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The case history published by Freud in 1905 under the title *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,*[1] and popularly called "The Dora Case," has over the years stuck in the throats of many analysts. Controversial, unsettling, unresolved, this fragment of a case simply will not go down even though the explicative enzymes of psychoanalysis have attacked it persistently.[2]

Dora—whose fictitious name was borrowed, Freud tells us, from his sister's maid[3]—was brought to Freud by her father when she was eighteen, not so much to cure her of her numerous hysterical symptoms which, after all, had plagued her for the past decade, but rather so that Freud could "bring her to reason."[4] This aphonic hysteric was becoming unmanageably vocal about her father's long-term affair with a family friend, Mrs. K. As the case history written by Freud unfolds, a sordid network of illicit sexual activity is uncovered involving not only Dora's father and Mrs. K., but Mr. K. and numerous governesses as well. Lying behind the stiff rind of propriety maintained by these well-to-do Viennese families is a rotten pulp of seduction and exploitation which is making Dora sick.

Freud and Dora never get on well. She is an intelligent, vulnerable, and rebellious teenager. Freud has just published *The Interpretation of Dreams,* which did not receive the kind of notice he had hoped for, and he is looking for confirmation of his neglected theories. Dora is the patient he looks to to provide a redeeming confluence of the two separate theoretical streams he had been following, on the one hand into hysteria, and on the other into dreams.

After three months of analysis, Dora abruptly leaves treatment.

The tangle of unresolved psychological, social, and theoretical conflicts this case presents has lately drawn not only analysts but feminists as well into the Dora debate. As feminist commentators from Karen Horney to Nancy Chodorow have observed, the Freudian male model of psychosexual development simply does not fit the female experience. More particularly, in refer-

ence to the Dora case, feminist writers have objected to the authoritarian mode of interpretation and therapy practiced by Freud.[5]

Hélène Cixous, the author of *Portrait of Dora,* a play produced in Paris in 1976,[6] is the outspoken leader of a group of French feminists called "Psychoanalysis and Politics." As the name of the group indicates, they attach major importance to a feminist revision of Freudian psychoanalysis and to an investigation of the social and political transformations implied by that revision. Hélène Cixous' commitment to the mission of Psychoanalysis and Politics has been extended by her deep interest in literature to include a proclamation of the liberating possibilities of women's writing.[7] The author of some sixteen books since 1966, including novels, essays, and critical works, Hélène Cixous might have yielded to the temptation of easy indignation that the significant but finally superficial therapeutic injustices in the treatment of Dora have commonly evoked. Instead, she chose to re-open the case. She re-imagines, relives it in a sober, intricate, and profound play that shows us what it might have been like to be the Dora Freud wrote about. She writes, in other words, an hysterical play.

It is significant that Cixous chose the theatrical mode for representing Dora, for it is only in the theater that bodies speak their own language to us as they do in hysterical symptoms. And even more significantly, Cixous shows us the disruption between body and language that also characterizes hysteria. The problematic link of the body to speech and identity is dramatized by the silence of the characters we see in filmed sequences and by the obscured origin of voices we hear emanating from darkness.

Portrait of Dora stands then not only at the juncture of dreams and hysteria, but also at the point where the discursive logic of written language and the recursive logic of speech meet and confront each other in the visual mode of the theater. The very title of the play emphasizes the doubleness of its project: it is a portrait, a graphology, a line-drawing of written language; it is not, however, *a* portrait or *the* portrait, but simply "portrait"—undefined, unpositioned—a drawing forth into the immediacy of presence.

The portrait of Dora is drawn in word pictures, in Dora's own speech and in the speech of the people who surround her. But we notice immediately that these speech-portraits are conflicting and contradictory. "Dora is still a child," her father says, "and Mr. K. treats her like a child" (p. 12). "Dora is no longer a child" (p. 13), Mr. K. asserts initially, but later, when accused of trying to seduce Dora, he reverses himself: "Dora is only a child to me. You know the respect I have for her" (p. 33).

While these contradictory judgments are, on one level, the product of a cynical attempt on the part of these "adults" to protect themselves from exposure and condemnation, on another level they are accurate depictions of Dora: she *is* both still a child and no longer a child. Dora herself perceives her feelings and those of others as double and contradictory. She disagrees with her father at the opening of the play when he says he doesn't understand her: "You

do understand me, but you are not honest with me" (p. 12). But then she immediately reverses herself: "You *don't* understand. *I* am not honest" (*idem.*).

This portrait world of hysteria is one in which contradictory statements about people's identity, character, feelings, and motivations stand simultaneously as true. It is a world where logical opposites engender each other, but where neither takes priority. And it is this question of priority which is perhaps central in distinguishing the hysterical logic of Dora from the logic of the "sane." For Dora, the principal modes of relationship are juxtaposition and substitution; there is no subordination. This paratactical mode of relationship operates and becomes vivid on a purely grammatical level in Dora's discourse. Here, for instance, is the way she describes her viewing of a painting in a Dresden gallery: "I stopped a long time. In front of this painting. It was the Sistine Madonna. I stayed a long time, alone, deep. In this painting. For two hours. In its light. A soft smile" (p. 35). In this example, we hear fragments of phrases which take on the function of sentences but whose grammatical relationship is unstructured, unspoken. Even predication dims; the subject, the "I," no longer identifies itself with the seeing eye making statements about itself and what it sees from a single perspective. Dora is simultaneously "in front of" and "in" the painting.

Prepositions take on, then, pre-eminent importance in Dora's speech. As the words which locate her, they perform the central grammatical function of indicating juxtaposition and substitution. Furthermore, just as the verb "to be" is the foundation of all predication in analytic discourse, so the preposition "to" stands as the foundation of the synthetic discourse of the hysteric. Dora cries to Mrs. K. whom she adores: "You have killed me! You have betrayed me! Didn't I write numberless letters to you? Didn't I adore your footsteps? Didn't I open my doors? . . . And now to whom can I address this letter? To whom can I be silent? To whom can I kill myself?" (p. 42).

Actions are not conceived here as being complete in themselves, as emanating from a self-defining, autonomous subject. They are defined rather by their relationship to another subject to whom they are addressed. Actions are not statements of identity but are letters or messages whose meaning depends on the reception and interpretation given them by the other. Fragments of language, like fragments of feelings and actions, are not hypotactic segments in a system of subordination to a ruling core, but are linked paratactically by their direction towards. The identity of the subject is both dependent and positional: Dora remains silent *to* someone; she thinks of killing herself *to* someone. These directional intentions expressed by the preposition "to," represent the vectors of desire that link nouns one to the other, propositions one to the other, people one to the other, and create finally the possibility of meaning, but only in a potential, suspended, and anaclitic mode.

Meaning in Dora's hysterical system is therefore ambiguous, and in the deeply etymological sense of the word: it literally *wanders around* looking for its destination, never sure of reaching it, never sure of what or whom it will find when it gets there. "*Who* is abandoning me?" "Who was it?" "Who is betray-

ing whom in this affair?" "Who is in whose place?" These questions pertaining to identity are repeated endlessly in this play. And, in fact, all pronouns in *Portrait of Dora* finally become interrogative. Because of the particularities of French grammar, the referents of pronouns are often literally undecidable, and Cixous exploits this property. The indirect object pronoun *lui* stands, for instance, either for a masculine or a feminine noun. The gender of possessive pronouns is determined by the thing possessed, not by the possessor. As a result, it is impossible to know whether the person to whom a speech or an action is directed is a man or a woman. It is impossible to know who is possessing whom.

In this swirl of revolving and uncertain identities, bi-valent meanings, and relationships pulsating with both tenderness and betrayal, human identity and the language expressing it are dissolved into a binary, reversible logic which clearly challenges the logic of tautology underlying what we call sanity. In *Portrait of Dora,* Freud is, foreseeably enough, the leading spokesman of this "sane" logic of the normal and the predictable. He repeatedly asserts our commonly-held beliefs about the orderly progression of events, the self-coincidence of objects, and the consistency of language and its referents. Appropriately, these expressions of the hierarchical logic we call common sense take form in proverbs and maxims, traditional condensations of society's wisdom. Borrowing directly from the case history, Cixous puts Freud's own words into his mouth: "Where there's smoke there's fire," he asserts repeatedly, appealing to our belief that where we see an effect, there is of necessity a proximate and predictable cause. As he observes Dora absent-mindedly snapping her purse open and closed, Freud states in another proverb a variation of the law of the conservation of energy: "When the lips are silent, fingertips chatter." Underlying Freud's use of the expression, "I call a spade a spade," is the reductionist tendency of science to conceptualize language as having a direct, tautological relationship to its referents.

But these assertions of identity and consistency are themselves, as we will see, a kind of double-talk, for the words that make them up drip with double meanings. For instance, the very science that Freud appeals to as a guarantee of univocal meaning has given the name "lips" to more than one part of the female body. And the proverb translated in English by "I call a spade a spade," appears in French, both in the case history and in the play, as "J'appelle un chat un chat," an expression which, as Jane Gallop has pointed out in her book on French feminism and psychoanalysis, ought properly to be translated, "I call a pussy a pussy."

The very definitions of identity and appeals to common-sense logic are undone, then, by their own *double-entendre.* And what keeps intruding in this system of tautologous identity and linear causation, what keeps chattering in these proverbs is what Diderot so discreetly called in the title of his novel, *Les Bijoux indiscrets,* those "indiscreet jewels," gossipy female genitals.

This reference to the insistent "speech" of female genitals and their double logic in the letter of the law brings us to the central image of the play and the

one which reveals the final phenomenological incongruence of the hysterical world and the "sane" world—the image of the door.

The very word inhabits the title of the play interestingly enough both in French and in English: *porte—portrait,* door—Dora. And they are everywhere in the play, opening and closing, in reality, in metaphors, and in dreams. "There is a door in Vienna," Dora reports in a dream, "through which everyone can pass but me" (p. 14). "There is a door," she says again recounting Mr. K.'s first attempt at seducing her when she was fourteen, "there is a door leading from the store to their apartment, but instead of going out through the open door, he grasped me, he held me against him and kissed me on the mouth" (p. 19). "There is someone behind the door," she says telling another dream, "but is it him behind the door? You never know . . . He's going to force the door, and I lean against it" (p. 25). "Didn't I open my doors?" Dora cries to Mrs. K. (p. 42). "Don't close yourself," Mr. K. pleads seductively to Dora (p. 44).

It is clear from these examples that the opening and closing of doors is a metaphor for both emotional receptiveness and sexual availability. But we quickly observe that doors have a different significance for men and for women, and that for the men in the play all possible references of this metaphor are subordinated to its central expression of the sexual availability of women. In their parlance, doors are female genitals, and according to the male law of the exclusion of opposites, doors must be *either* open *or* closed; as Freud says to Dora: "Naturally it cannot be a matter of indifference whether a girl is 'opened' or 'closed' " (p. 49). This "naturally" carries with it, of course, a hidden imperative: "naturally" women ought to be opened.

This open-door policy of the men in the play—Freud, Mr. K. and Dora's father—while ostensibly one of petition and negotiation, is, in fact, a strategy of aggression and domination that includes the necessary capitulation and defeat of one of the participants. In this logical system, it is necessary that one member of a couple be prior and dominant and the other be dependent and subordinate. The power politics inherent in male sexual grammar is revealed in one of Dora's dreams: "I have no doubt that he intends to force open the door . . . How simple everything is. It is either Him or Me. That's the law" (p. 25).

Freud and Mr. K. both regard Dora as a locked door that needs to be opened, and, as Freud says, "We all know what key opens the door in this case" (p. 49). Dora's reaction of repulsion to that "key" is considered by Freud to be the nucleus of her hysteria. Her feeling of repulsion, he says, is an hysterical defense against her "natural" erotic drives.

But Dora sees that to be opened by that key is to be annihilated, to be made into nothing. "My wife is nothing to me," Dora's father says to Freud (p. 20). "My wife is nothing to me," Mr. K. asserts in his seductive plea to a governess (p. 87). "My wife is nothing to me," he repeats for similar reasons to Dora (p. 89). In the male view, once the female door is opened, she becomes a nothing. Once she is possessed sexually, she is annulled, and the void thus created in the place of the woman can then be filled up with another woman and so

on *ad infinitum.* The male open-door policy is therefore a method of establishing trade routes for the exchange of women. Dora points out to Freud: "Papa takes advantage of the opportunities Mr. K. gives him. Mr. K. takes advantage of the opportunities Papa gives him. Everyone knows how to be accommodating" (p. 68).

In *Portrait of Dora* women are commodities of exchange—mistresses, wives, daughters, governesses, patients. Dora's father hands her over to Freud as he has already handed her over to Mr. K. Mr. K. hands his wife over to Dora's father and expects Dora in return. Freud receives Dora from her father intending to hand her over to Mr. K. As Dora says, "Everyone knows how to be accommodating."

But what does it feel like to *be* the door? In contrast to the either/or logic of the male system which dictates that a door be either opened or closed, Dora's doors are double and open both in and out. As such, they become the central figures of the logical reversibility and undecidability inherent in the hysterical system. "What is open, may not be open," Dora states, "what has happened may not have happened" (p. 23).

Here again, the questions are ones of relationship and multiple possibility. In Cixous' view of hysteria, there is no logically dominant point of view defined as "objecive" as there is in the male system of "sanity." "Bodies have many resources" (p. 37), Mrs. K. says to Dora, indicating that "keys" are not the only means of opening doors, and that, in fact, a body contains not one door, but many. In this pluralistic world, not just genitals, but mouths, fingers, eyes may be portals of desire. "Look at me," Dora says to Mrs. K. "I would like to go into your eyes. I would like you to close your eyes" (p. 39). And closing these double door-eyes may be an opening of another kind, an opening not just to another, but an opening to, in, and of oneself. As Mrs. K. draws the curtains across the windows, Dora murmurs: "It's like a grotto. Where are you? It's me! Me in myself, in the shadows. In you. Now empty, now full . . . Time opens and closes like fluttering eyes" (p. 42).

Dora's doors flutter rhythmically, always in the process of being both opened and closed. For her, opposites are not negations of one another but are rather part of a continuous movement of double linking: "Me in myself. In you." Dora desires both Mr. *and* Mrs. K., both her father *and* her mother, and within each of those desires there is a double mode of being—both male *and* female, child *and* adult. Dora is not duplicitous as are the others, but double, and her doubleness is doubled. But whereas the "sane" regard this doubleness as a process of splitting and fragmentation, for Dora it is a process of redoubling, of filling up.

At the end of the play, Dora realizes that her portrait as constructed by the others is but the scribblings of their need on her body. And she refuses to let herself be confined and immobilized by them; she refuses to let herself be framed. "No," she says, sending back to them the echo of their law. She leaves Freud's consulting room and closes the door behind her.

From Freud's point of view, Dora has, by going out this one-way door,

shut herself out of sanity's frame of reference, destining herself to become in the hierarchy of psychoanalysis, as another analyst later put it, "the most repulsive hysteric" anyone had yet seen.[8] But from Dora's point of view, she has let herself out *and* into—out of that closed system and into a world, undefined and unimagined in the play, of potential emptiness and potential fullness.

Cixous presents in *Portrait of Dora* a view of hysteria which posits it as possessing a logic of its own, a logic she characterizes as particularly female. She ends up paradoxically re-asserting the ancient notion of hysteria as a female syndrome and reclaiming it as a valid mode of being. Rather than representing a clinical disorder, hysteria takes on, then, the properties of a symbol, at once an instance of and a reference to a larger view of women's place in society.

While challenging prevalent notions of history and identity and thereby reversing traditional definitions of sanity and madness, while championing the plausibility of multiple selves and synthetic logic, Hélène Cixous does not, however, merely repeat the authoritarian strategy of the regime she wishes to overturn or subvert. As the play ends, she engages again the principle of revolving identity and puts the audience in the place of Dora while emerging herself as the "Voice of the Play" in the figure of Freud. This voice sounds a nostalgic tone as it gives expression to the wish that Freud attempted to conceal but finally revealed so blatantly in the case history: his wish that Dora love and desire him. And so, while the audience becomes increasingly aware that they must, like Dora, get up, leave the theater, and close the doors behind them, Freud remains center stage, the suffering figure, repressed but implicit in his own system, of the father's desire for his daughter, his desire for his own femininity.

Cixous remains true to the multivalent logic of hysteria and, in contrast to Freud's case history which rigidly represents only his point of view, she represents both Dora's and Freud's desires. Cixous' portrait of Dora is therefore an ambiguous trace that marks the place both where she is and where she is not. Her closing the door on Freud is an opening of another kind.

NOTES

1. *Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), Vol. 7, pp. 1-122.

2. For the major analytic commentaries on the Dora case, cf. E. Erikson, "Reality and Actuality," *Journal of the American Psychiatric Association,* 1962, Vol. 10, pp. 451-474; M. Kanzer and J. Glenn, ed., *Freud and his Patients* (New York: Aronson, 1980); J. Lacan, "Intervention sur le transfert," *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966); R. J. Langs, "The Misalliance Dimension in the Case of Dora," *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy,* 1976, Vol. 5, pp. 301-307; K. K. Lewin, "Dora Revisited," *Psychoanalytic Review,* 1973-74, Vol. 60, pp. 519-532; H. Muslin and M. Gill, "Transference in the Dora Case," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.*

3. Cf. *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), *Standard Edition,* Vol. 6, pp. 241-242.

4. "Fragment of an Analysis . . . ," p. 26.

5. For feminist and non-analytic commentaries on the Dora case cf. H. Cixous and C. Clément, *La Jeune née* (Paris: Collection 10/18, 1975); J. Gallop, "An Open and Shut Case: Keys to Dora," *The Daughter's Seduction: French Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1982); S. Gear-

hart, "The Scene of Psychoanalysis: The Unanswered Questions of Dora," *Diacritics,* March, 1979, pp. 114-126; S. Maddi, "The Victimization of Dora," *Psychology Today,* September, 1974, pp. 91-100; J. Malcolm, "The Impossible Profession," *New Yorker,* November 24, 1980, pp. 55-133; S. Marcus, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History," *Representations: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 247-310.

6. *Portrait of Dora* (Paris: des femmes, 1976). All references will be to this text. Since the play has not appeared in English translation, all quotations of the text will be my own translations.

7. Cf. "Laugh of the Medusa," tr. by K. and P. Cohen, *Signs I,* no. 4, pp. 875-893.

8. F. Deutsch, "A Footnote to Freud's Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* 1957, Vol. 26, p. 167.