THE LEFT ATRIUM

Lifework

A perfect and faithful record

Two Hemispheres

Nadine McInnis

Brick Books; 2007

93 pp \$18 ISBN 978-1-894078-59-7

The following essay and poems are excerpted, with the author's permission, from *Two Hemispheres*.

I first encountered the photographs of women patients of the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum as part of an exhibit on photography and science at the National Gallery of Canada in 1997. Almost lost amidst the other dramatic images were 10 small sepia figures framed together that I found very disturbing. I carried them with me once I left the exhibit: they insinuated themselves into my unconscious. From time to time, one or another of their faces would drift up to the surface.

In 1997, I was in the midst of a decade of healthy years before the re-emergence of my own illness, major depression, in 2001. That long episode of suffering, and I can call it nothing else, lasted 2 years. During this time, the women's faces became much more insistent. I thought long about how fragile the human mind can be and how these women might have experienced their illnesses before the age of pharmaceuticals, which, at that time, seemed to be causing me more grief than relief. The images haunted me until, by exploring the subjective experience of emotional and mental distress, I found a way to listen to them and connect my personal story to theirs. The more I looked at these women's faces, the less disturbing they became. Eventually, they seemed familiar, in all senses of the word.

Courtesy of Brick Books

The full-body photographs by Dr. Hugh W. Diamond, the medical superintendent of women at the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum, are gently lit, allowing the subject's character to shine through. The patients seem remarkably open to the photographer. Some hold objects that must have had personal significance to them — an apple, handiwork, a pigeon. The subjects seem to be full participants in the photographic process rather than examples of illness.

Diamond, who started taking these photos in 1850, stated that his intentions were primarily scientific in nature: he was most interested in the way photography could provide objective categorization of mental illnesses. But what is obvious from the photographs is that Diamond was also a skillful photographer whose portraits are as insightful as they are beautiful. As any artist must be, Diamond was open to mystery. He writes

in his article *On the Application of Photography to the Physiognomic and Mental Phenomena of Insanity*: "The Photographer ... needs in many cases no aid from any language of his own, but prefers rather to listen, with the picture before him, to the silent but telling language of nature."¹

The case notes for the patients have been lost, as have Diamond's original notes. Limited information can be found in an essay by Dr. John Conolly, published in 1858 in the *Medical Times and Gazette*.² His focus is primarily on the physical expressions and features that indicate the nature of illness. Three of the women featured in the poems are discussed briefly in his essay, but only the most fleeting discussion of their history is included. Rather than work from these meager facts, I have engaged with the women in the photographs directly and imaginatively (see poems on pages 600 and 601).

One of the great surprises of writing this book was discovering that I harboured misconceptions about the quality of psychiatric care available in mid-19th century England. Abuses existed before reforms of the mid 1800s, but after that time there was a concerted effort to make the public asylum system humane, providing places of healing for pauper patients who had nowhere else to go.

Asylums endeavoured to provide a healthy environment; good food; occupation in the gardens, workshops and laundries; and entertainment such as dances, plays, choirs and magic lantern shows. Medication and other forms of physical treatments, such as shower baths, sedatives, exercise and purgatives, were prescribed as required. The average stay in the Surrey asylum at this time was 4-and-a-half years. Unfortunately, the

optimistic view that severe mental illness could be consistently treated was to last only a few decades. By the 1880s, overcrowding in public asylums resulted in the reintroduction of the physical and eventually “chemical” restraints.

Although these photographs are unsettling, it is reassuring to know that these women probably received good care. I hope they passed through their suffering and emerged to experience the full spectrum of emotion, as I my-

self did. Diamond’s photographs nourish this hope.

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the insane: the case of Dr. Diamond. London: Quartet Books; 1990. p. 153, 156.

2. Gillman SL. *The face of madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the origin of psychiatric photography*. New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers; 1976. pp. 27–72.

Nadine McInnis’ other books are *First Fire/Ce feu qui devore* (poetry), *Quicksilver* (short fiction), *Hand to Hand* (poems), *Poetics of Desire* (literary criticism), *The Litmus Body* (poems) and *Shaking the Dreamland Tree* (poems).

Paranoid mania

She sees what they’re up to, humbugging one another in the garden. Baggage, bobtails, blowings, bog trotters, whores! Two snakes swallowing each other against the garden wall. She’ll keep her bone box shut tight tonight, won’t darken the daylight, won’t shut her eyes, a string tied from the doorknob to her thumb. She won’t be ground sweat tomorrow, no, no. She won’t be dead. In the morning she’ll yell in the corridor that they came into her room and poured poison down her throat, put maggots in her bed. Weigh me, weigh me, she’ll demand. How much did they get into me? She swears her eyes were open all night. Once they frogmarched her up and down the hallway and no one came. She was tired, so tired. She follows them, watching through leaves as they pass secrets from mouth to mouth. Dastardly plans, never to be spoken out loud, bug hunters, a dead lurk. They’ll get claws for breakfast when they’re lagged. The slaughterhouse — that’s the place for them with their maggots and schemes and poisons. Dresses come off in the cold, centipedes squirming in their cast-off bonnets. Lully priggers, so mean they rob children of their clothes, lully snow priggers. Mummer, her mill clapper shut, sniffing out their mog. Pot scum, that’s what they are. If she can trick them, they’ll stop putting maggots in her bed. They’ll have to be Resurrection men then, stealing dead bodies from the church yard. They tip velvet when they talk to the doctor, they wheedle, while she is under the screw. Their poison weakens her. They go on the shallow, half-naked to excite passion. Fakers, flam artists. The flying stationers shout it out on street corners for shillings. They have to keep moving to sell this story, or they would be hunted down and murdered in their beds. Street patterers know, she knows, even if the doctor is too stupid to see.

This poem is excerpted from *Two Hemispheres*, by Nadine McInnis (Brick Books, 2007, p. 57–8).

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A possible case of catalepsy

There are clues in her posture:
the protective arm across her belly,
thumb touching her breast.
There is room for a baby cradled
against her heart, or perhaps the doll
she left behind in the ward.

The arms are slender but the dress
could hide a matronly figure.
The head scarf knotted under her chin
doesn't reveal the firmness of flesh
so she could be twenty or thirty
or even a childlike forty years of age.

She could be frozen into this pose forever,
she could be singing nonsense songs
to herself all day. She could spend
waking hours rocking
and adding numbers in her head.
She could be frightened
by an hallucination of a fiery lion
floating just to her right,
or an amorphous cluster of lights,
forewarning of a shattering migraine.
She could be remembering a trauma:
house fire, or three generations
of her family dead with cholera.
What could she do, their failing hands
grasping her skirt as she moved
from bed to bed? Or remembering

her mother bloodied and the slow
sway of her father's body
hanging in the barn.

Take your pick. Trauma is an ongoing
theme with endless
variation.

She could have been beaten
or cherished or protected or ignored
or humiliated. She could have felt joy,
hatred, desire, resentment, gratitude,
giddiness, dread, pride, hope,
and an overwhelming transcendent love.
I hope she knew love.

This attention I pay to her
is something like love,
although she will never turn towards
me. The finger she holds at her lip
keeps all she might tell me
held at the brink where everything
rushes away into nothing.

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This poem is excerpted from *Two Hemispheres*, by
Nadine McLinnis (Brick Books, 2007, p. 81-3).