

# Iris' Story: An Inversion Of Philosophical Skepticism

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## THE BLINDFOLD

By Siri Hustvedt

The Poseidon Press. 221 pp. \$20

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Reviewed by David Foster Wallace

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What is it to be a woman?  
To be contained, to be a vessel?  
To prefer a window to a door?  
A pool to a river? . . .  
- Theodore Roethke

The point of this review is going to be that *The Blindfold* is a really good book.

The first neat thing about it is that the jacket copy and blurbs are interesting. Don DeLillo is arguably the best living fiction writer in the United States, and he rarely blurbs anybody except his good friend Paul Auster, and so DeLillo's endorsement carries weight, and on the back cover he calls this novel "completely urban and modern but working at the reader's emotions with the undistanced intimacy of a traditional tale." What's cunning about this blurb is that Siri Hustvedt's "tale," which is really four interconnected novellas, is "traditional" only in a very specific sense.

Though features of *The Blindfold* will remind readers of any number of novelistic touchstones - Beckett's *Molloy*, Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus' *The Fall*, Fowles' *The Magus* and Auster's *New York Trilogy* - Hustvedt's accomplishment is hard to appreciate fully without reference to a loopy philosophical tradition that runs from Descartes to R.D. Laing and then back to Bishop Berkeley. Because the most impressive thing about this novel is its ingenious distaff inversion of that most haunting preoccupation of modern art-fiction, the problem of philosophical skepticism.

The problem of skepticism is Cartesian and phallogocentric and presumes the ontological priority of the Subject: I know I exist OK, but how can I trust my perceptions enough to be equally sure that any of the non-me Objective stuff I seem to see around me exists, etc. Since your thinking man avoids solipsism at just about any cost, this skeptical Subjective insecurity - in which the integrity of the self depends on an efferent relation between the Subject as active perceiver and world as reliable Object - sits brooding astride the whole canon of Anglo-American 20th-century lit, from Eliot and Joyce to Lowell and Larkin.

A defining characteristic of this century's important feminist fictions, though, has been its obversion of the skeptical dilemma. The best feminist lit has co-opted ideas such as quantum theory's axiom that any observation affects its object, post-structuralism's revolt against the "metaphysics of presence," and existentialism's (Heidegger's, Sartre's, La-

ing's) idea that the really significant ontological insecurity is that of the self about itself, all to alter the skeptical angst-dynamic in their best fictions from Subject-ive to Object-ive.

Instead of a secure Subject brooding Cartesianly over the reliability of an Exterior's appearance, most interesting feminist novels involve the ontological insecurity of a female whose sense of her own authentic existence is bound up with how she herself is perceived by other (male) Subjects. The philosophical touchstone of important novels such as Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* or Kathy Acker's *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* is not Descartes but Bishop Berkeley, whose ultra-empiricist tenet that existence consists all and only in being perceived is way more congenial to a gender whose sense of authenticity has for a long time been dependent on an afferent relation between the self as alluring Object and the world as a male Subject whose attention defines her sexual (the equivalent, for these feminists, of ontological) security.

*The Blindfold* is the best novel I've ever read in this Berkeley/Laing mode. In contrast to Rhys, whose portraits of disintegrating female selves were prescient but sort of simplistic and freighted with a passive self-pity, and Acker, who's up on all kinds of cutting-edge French theory but is crippled by easy anger and a penchant for cute, easy formal tricks like rendering her females' ontological fragmentation through sharp juxtapositions of different narratives and enraged autobiography, Hustvedt's protagonist Iris (her name both an inversion of the author's "Siri" and, literally, a perceiving eye) struggles to establish an actual self literally to make herself up - in the face of relentless and surreal objectification by the males she's drawn to. Here the book's jacket copy is not only accurate but incisive: It describes *The Blindfold* as "a story particular to our time, when a woman no longer expects to move from parents to husband but must forge a separate identity to hold at bay that which others impose upon her."

Written in self-consciously simple English, this intricate novel's best complexity is the neurasthenic Iris' ambivalence about her objectification by Others - all of whom both attract and repel her - so that she's split not only existentially but emotionally. This seems real. And her ambivalence is justified by the hypnotic power with which Hustvedt constructs Iris' manipulative Others: the weird old hack writer who hires Iris to compose descriptions of a murdered girl's personal effects; the demented, "disintegrated" old woman who sees in an invalided Iris a reflection of her own shattered identity; the gifted photographer whose truncated portrait of Iris becomes a triangular third character and destroys her relation with a lover who prefers the photo to the real woman; the academic superstar whose translation of a fake (?)

novella called *The Brutal Boy* plunges Iris into a schizoid transsexual identification with the story's sadistic protagonist.

None of these synopses does the jewelers' fine complexity of the four narratives' plots justice. It's not surprising that a couple of them won great praise and Best-Of anthologizing when they were published as short stories in literary magazines: each of the novellas ends up a moving, troubling story about metaphysical erasure: In her struggle to construct a self in a relationship with males and elders (rather than in some cruder, Ackerish opposition to them), Iris ends up dismantling others' psyches to the precise extent that she preserves the integrity of her own. What is remarkable is the haunting effect of these novellas' combination. Hustvedt has created in *Iris* both a stunning synecdoche of female skepticism - a fecund, symbolic exploration of the question whether a distinctively female character is even possible - and a compelling, utterly three-dimensional fictional character, a heroine in every old and some new senses of the world.

*The Blindfold* both intrigues and annoys in its efforts to align itself with another tradition, too. It's not surprising that Don DeLillo's praise adorns the jacket, because *The Blindfold* is clearly a feminist reworking of some of the central themes of DeLillo and his literary compadre, Paul Auster. Lines like "What you've forgotten is that some things are unspeakable. . . . Words may cover it up for a while, but then it comes howling back" and "There is no end to such discussions. They wind in on themselves" sound almost straight out of *Great Jones Street* or *White Noise*.

Hustvedt's preoccupation with silence and the untellable, inanimate objects and their spatial arrangement, the modal potency of names, the geometric expansion of images, even the urban-blighted surrealism of the novel's setting are overwhelmingly reminiscent of DeLillo and Auster. And so are her prose rhythms, developed carefully via short sentences and oblique repetitions. A problem is that *The Blindfold*'s prose lacks both DeLillo's wit and ear for speech and Auster's lapidary compression and lucidity.

Blurbers praise this novel's "brainwave-altering prose," but I think they confuse style here with tone. The narrative tone is masterly - at once flat and sharp, disassociated and intimate - but the prose itself is sometimes so clunky it seems as if it has been poorly translated from some foreign language. Besides dialogue that often sounds stilted and written, *The Blindfold* is also pocked with ponderous bits of exposition like "The connection seemed rife with meaning, and yet it spawned nothing inside me but a feeling akin to guilt" and "I didn't know what the words meant, but they seemed to identify an amorphous truth."

It seems fair to point out the ways Hustvedt is inferior to DeLillo and Auster,

## THE BLINDFOLD (cont'd)

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since she seems to try so hard to associate her work with theirs. Besides the DeLilloish meditations, *The Blindfold* is dedicated to Auster, has characters eating in restaurants named after Auster novels like *Moon Palace*, and is studded with weird throw-aways like "I heard, someone shout the name Paul. I waited for an answer. None came." Since Hustvedt is Auster's spouse, I guess some of these are at least explainable. But a little of this stuff goes a long way. At certain points the reader gets the sense that *The Blindfold* is in some ways a roman a clef, except a cozy inter-author roman a clef, with inside jokes and references from which those outside a small circle are consciously excluded.

I am giving these flaws so much attention because they're just about the only ones I could find. I don't know that I'd call this novel fun to read, but it's very powerful, and awfully smart and well-crafted, a clear bright sign that the feminist and post-modern traditions in America are far from exhausted. For its sensitive, surreal illumination of the Objectified psyche, *The Blindfold* is likely to end up recognized as one of the more important first novels to appear in this decade.