

An Invitation to Modern Times

Therese's life had been, thus far, a pattern of pure repetition of feminine duty. Helping her mother, helping God, keeping manners, keeping a kept room, behaving as a young woman ought to behave. In mirroring the detached grace of her mother, Therese had become an exquisite corpse, with very little to offer in terms of an authentic signature of a mental or spiritual will. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she saw someone that existed *in potentia*. She was a fair woman, emerging gracefully into her adulthood. She exuded a youthful demeanor and feminine countenance. Her hair was brown, appearing to be stained with saffron. Her cheeks were gaunt and stained red. A barbwire fence, scattered with roses, stood between her and her future.

Therese sought to escape the feminine domain, where she had been hitherto locked into immanence. The cluster of representations of what she could be had little appeal. Mother, wife, mistress. Nor did she want to hold male authority. Therese believed that she could become like Proust's Albertine or perhaps Sand's Dortha Brooke. A synthesis of genuity and freedom is what she must strive toward. She would not be riveted to her body like an animal nor relegated to the private sphere with a chorus of crying babies and displeasing sighs of a husband. Every woman in Babylon gave herself to a stranger at one instance in her life, stepping into the Temple of Mylitta with a certain anonymity, a civil duty assigned to the female species. There was no dishonour in this act, it was requisite of all nubile and civilized persons. With this in mind, Therese stepped into the world, perpetually offered to her each day. Whether life was a gift or simply a curse, was not of central concern to Therese, all she knew is that her freedom was beckoning her.

The desire to be seen, specifically desired. By any hideous person or even a decrepit old man, the thought of this desire arose and stirred something within Therese. It was not until meeting Professeur ou Madame Hélène DuBois that Therese realized she could attach her desire to someone of her kind. Of womankind. Desire for a woman is like an asymptote, there is a projection (curve) and the reality (line) and the two figures never meet. It is best for women to abandon all expectations of the other sex, and to blindly pursue their carnal desires. And for love, well, there are two kinds of love: essential and contingent. Essential love comes from within, and the best kind of love is the love shared between solitudes. Contingent love is built upon raw desire, it is often a fleeting kind of passion, one that becomes ephemeral all too soon.

Therese had finally become prey to freedom. It was in this moment, where she was edging away from adolescence and into the realm of the serious, where she became acutely aware of her own suffocation. She was no longer a corpuscle; an atomized being floating around aimlessly. She felt a pronounced urge to impress herself upon the world. It was incumbent for her, in this moment, to retain her wholeness and refuse the anticipation of being guided by some divine being. She was tired of spectating as the carousel made its rounds, she was ready to jump onto the aluminum horse.

Hélène Dubois walked into her life like a forest fire. Destroying innocence while laying bare Therese's inert disposition. Within the hour of encountering her *professeur* at the École normale, it could be said that the girl was unequivocally lovestruck. The frame of her body devoured Therese's

concentration; her ovular face her tout and angular shoulders. Her shapely body coalesced into a firm singularity. She was always alert, erect. Every hair was sharply ordered and every word acutely synchronic. The delivery of her speech, the certainty of each syllabic utterance, the posture of her being, she was unlike any woman that Therese had encountered. After many weeks, Therese had become a companion to Hélène, and by extension, a companion to her partner, Alain.

‘You’re like a daughter to me’ Hélène touched the girl’s arm

‘It is so often customary that children hate their parents’

Strips of sunlight illuminated the girl’s face as she held her stoic posture. She could not bear to move. She would not drop her gaze from Hélène’s, at this moment they were equal. But the moment instantly passed away and once again, Therese could taste the inferiority of her being.

The following day, Therese was waiting for Hélène outside of her office. Pacing in little circles and not willing to make eye contact, she finally stood still.

‘How are you Therese? What are you doing?’

‘Waiting for the sky to split’

‘What are you trying to say, Therese? That you want to die? When will you die?’

‘When my body is rotten and my soul matches its state of decreation’

‘My wilted flower, please come inside’ Hélène gestured toward the office door, now ajar, an attempt to flatten out their exchange: a jar of nuances, overflowing.

There is something between women, a symbolic order they share, where authority becomes maternal, when empathy steps in. Empathy patterns Hélène’s being, although she approaches her sentimentality with reluctance. Hélène pet Therese and invited her for dinner that evening.

The miasmic relationship began to stir Therese violently. She fantasized and plotted Alain’s destruction. The thought of him touching Hélène stirred within her a nausea so visceral that she collapsed in her bedroom, unable to move or speak. She was tormented by love and fear, washing over any potential for rationality.

The dalliance between the couple and the young girl had faded over time. Hélène refused to see Therese. Therese locked herself in her bedroom, refusing to eat or drink. Hélène was once again simply a professor. Alain grew more disinterested as time unfolded, fixing his desires upon a new flesh outfit. One evening the pair returned to their apartment and Alain hurried into his quarters while Hélène oriented herself toward the kitchen to prepare something to eat. As she entered the living room she saw a dog, a

beautiful stray with yearning eyes. The dog began to bark and wag its tail in tandem. Hélène was startled by the beast and called for Alain, who entered equally perplexed by the uninvited visitor. The dog circled Hélène. Alain rolled up a news paper and began to beat the animal on its head. The dog immediately attacked Alain, clinging to him violently and bearing its teeth, inching closer to his neck, preparing its target with fervent licks. The dog was not being properly fed, she was being deprived of her doghood, or if you permit, her personhood. Hélène squeezed the dog until it nearly suffocated. She was petting the animal ferociously and kissing its head,

“I’m so sorry Therese, my beautiful.”

The dog was licking her all over. Alain was wincing in pain, stranded in his own consciousness as Hélène and the dog wept.

Hélène would not be opening her veins like Pompeia Paulina in pursuit of honour. Alain was no Seneca, and she was not his wife. There is no law of Manu to disrupt the streams of vertigo that Hélène was suddenly experiencing. She would not sacrifice herself upon his tomb, she would continue her existence. She and the dog left the apartment at once. Sans leash the dog followed her down the rue Montparnasse.