OLIVIA LAING

Everybody

A Book About Freedom

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This is a book about bodies in peril and bodies as a force for change. I started it during the refugee crisis of 2015, and finished it just as the first cases of Covid-19 were being reported. The new plague has revealed the frightening extent of our physical vulnerability, but the global Black Lives Matter uprisings of the past year prove that the long struggle for freedom isn't over yet.

1

The Liberation Machine

In the final year of the twentieth century, I saw an advert in a herbal pharmacy in Brighton. It was pink, with a hand-drawn border of looping hearts, and it made the bold claim that all symptoms, from headaches and colds to anger and depression, were caused by stuck energy from past traumas, which could be loosened and induced to move again by way of body psychotherapy. I knew this was a controversial statement, to say the least, but the idea of the body as a storage unit for emotional distress excited me. I'd had a strong sense since childhood that I was holding something, that I'd locked myself around a mysterious unhappiness, the precise cause of which I didn't understand. I was so rigid and stiff I flinched when anyone touched me, like a mousetrap going off. Something was stuck and I wanted, nervously, to work it free.

The therapist, Anna, practised in a small, soupy room at the top of her house. There was a professional-looking massage bed in the corner, but the overwhelming impression was of slightly grimy domesticity. Frilly cushions proliferated. My chair faced a bookcase crammed with charity-shop dolls and toys, awaiting their casting into Gestalt pantomimes. Sometimes Anna would take a grinning monkey and clutch it to her chest, talking about herself in the third person, in a high-pitched, lisping voice. I didn't want to play along, to pretend an empty chair contained a family member or to wallop a cushion with a baseball bat. I was too self-conscious, painfully alert to my own ridiculousness, and even though I found Anna's antics mortifying I was aware she was inhabiting a kind of freedom to which I did not have access.

Whenever I could, I'd suggest we ditch talking in favour of a massage. I didn't have to undress completely. Anna would don a stethoscope and lightly work at odd places on my body, not kneading but seeming instead to directly command muscles to unclench. Periodically she'd lean over and listen, the bell of her stethoscope pressed against my stomach. More often than not, I

experienced a sense of energy streaming through my body, moving through my abdomen and down my legs, where it tingled like jellyfish tentacles. It was a nice feeling, not sexual exactly, but as if an obstinate blockage had been dislodged. I never talked about it and she never asked, but it was part of why I kept coming back: to experience this newly lively, quivering body.

I was twenty-two when I began seeing Anna, and the body was at the centre of my interests. When bodies are discussed, especially in popular culture, it has often meant a very circumscribed set of themes, largely to do with what the body looks like or how to maintain it at a pinnacle of health. The body as a set of surfaces, of more or less pleasing aspect. The perfect, unattainable body, so smooth and gleaming it is practically alien. What to feed it, how to groom it, the multiple dismaying ways in which it might fail to fit in or measure up. But the element of the body that interested me was the experience of living inside it, inhabiting a vehicle that was so cataclysmically vulnerable, so unreliably subject to pleasure and pain, hatred and desire.

I'd grown up in a gay family in the 1980s, under the malign rule of Section 28, a homophobic law that forbade schools from teaching 'the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. To know that this was how the state regarded your own family was to receive a powerful education in how bodies are positioned in a hierarchy of value, their freedoms privileged or curtailed according to more or less inescapable attributes, from skin colour to sexuality. Each time I went to therapy I could feel the legacy of that period in my own body, as knots of shame and fear and rage that were difficult to express, let alone dissolve.

But if my childhood taught me about the body as an object whose freedom is limited by the world, it also gave me a sense of the body as a force for freedom in its own right. I went to my first Gay Pride at nine, and the feeling of all those marching bodies on

Westminster Bridge lodged inside me too, a somatic sensation unlike anything I'd previously experienced. It seemed obvious to me that bodies on the streets were how you changed the world. As a teenager terrified by the oncoming apocalypse of climate change, I started attending protests, becoming so immersed in the environmental direct action movement that I dropped out of university in favour of a treehouse in a Dorset woodland scheduled to be destroyed for a new road.

I loved living in the woods, but using my own body as a tool of resistance was gruelling as well as intoxicating. The laws kept changing. Policing had become more aggressive and several people I knew were facing long prison sentences for the new crime of aggravated trespass. Freedom came at a cost, and it seemed that the cost was bodily too, the loss of physical liberty an omnipresent threat. Like many activists, I burned out. In the summer of 1998, I sat down in a graveyard in Penzance and filled out an application for a degree in herbal medicine. By the time I started seeing Anna, I was in my second year of training.

Though I didn't know it at the time, the type of therapy she practised had been invented in the 1920s by Wilhelm Reich, one of the strangest and most prescient thinkers of the twentieth century, a man who dedicated his life to understanding the vexed relationship between bodies and freedom. Reich was for a time Freud's most brilliant protégé (*der beste Kopfe*, the best mind, in psychoanalysis). As a young analyst in Vienna in the wake of the First World War, he began to suspect his patients were carrying their past experiences around in their bodies, storing their emotional pain as a kind of tension he compared to armour. Over the next decade, he developed a revolutionary new system of body-based psychotherapy, drawing attention to the characteristic ways each patient held themselves. 'He listened, observed, then touched, prodded and probed,' his son Peter later recalled, 'following an uncanny instinct for where on one's body the

memories, the hatred, the fear, were frozen.' To Reich's surprise, this emotional release was often accompanied by a pleasurable rippling feeling he called streaming; the same unmistakable sensation I'd experienced on Anna's couch.

Many of the patients Reich saw in Vienna were working class. Listening to their stories, he came to realise that the problems he was seeing, the psychic disarray, weren't just a consequence of childhood experience but of social factors like poverty, poor housing, domestic violence and unemployment. Each individual was plainly subject to larger forces, which could cause just as much trouble as Freud's central site of interest, the crucible of the family. Never one to shirk almighty ventures, Reich spent the interwar years trying to fuse two major systems for diagnosing and treating human unhappiness, wrestling the work of Freud and Marx into productive dialogue, much to the discomfort of the followers of each.

Sex had always been central to his notion of freedom and in 1930 he moved to Berlin, a city on the brink, caught between two disasters, where out of the wreckage of war there arose a great flowering of new ideas about sexuality. Reich believed freeing sex from centuries of repression and shame would change the world, but his activities in Berlin came to an abrupt halt when Hitler seized power in the spring of 1933. In exile in Denmark that autumn, he wrote *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, a gripping analysis of how Hitler utilised unconscious sexual anxieties, including the fear of infection and contamination, to whip up anti-Semitic feeling.

The first book of Reich's I read was *People in Trouble*, an account of his political experiences in Vienna and Berlin. I found a copy in the old Sunday market that flourished in the 1990s in the car park of Brighton station, picking it up because the title was the same as a novel I loved. Although it was written in the 1950s, it chimed

with my memories of becoming involved in activism, the excitements and frustrations of trying to agitate for political change. Reich was not a beautiful writer, like Freud, and nor were his arguments so disciplined or composed. He often sounded boastful, even paranoid, but there was an urgency that tugged me in. It was as if he was writing from the battleground, hunched over his notebook, sketching out high-stakes possibilities for enlarging the freedoms of real people's lives.

His ideas seemed so relevant to my own times that I couldn't understand why I hadn't heard about him, either in protest circles or during my training. It wasn't until much later that I realised the reason he isn't more respected or discussed is that the excesses of the second half of his life have overwhelmed the first. The radical, incisive ideas about sex and politics that he developed in Europe before the war have been almost buried beneath the far more dismaying notions developed in his years of exile, which range from pseudo-scientific theories of disease to a space-gun that controls the weather.

When Reich emigrated to America in 1939, he didn't establish himself as a psychoanalyst or an activist, but as a scientist, albeit one proudly uninterested in the process of peer review, the testing ground of all scientific achievement. Shortly after his arrival, he claimed to have discovered the universal energy that animates all life. He called it orgone, and in the laboratory of his house in New York he developed a machine to harness its healing powers. Given the consequences it would have for its maker, it's ironic that Reich's universal healing device was a wooden cell slightly smaller than a standard phone booth, in which you sat in stately self-confinement.

Reich believed the orgone accumulator could automate the work of liberation, obviating the need for laborious person-to-person therapy. He also hoped it might cure disease, particularly cancer.

This latter claim triggered an exposé, which in turn drew him to the attention of the Food and Drug Administration, initiating an investigation into the medical efficacy of the orgone accumulator that lasted almost a decade. On 7 May 1956, Reich was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for refusing to stop selling his invention. The following spring he was sent to Lewisburg Penitentiary in Pennsylvania.

The orgone guy: that was Reich! I hadn't put the two things together. As a teenager I was besotted with William Burroughs, and as a young man Burroughs was obsessed with Reich. His letters from the 1940s and 1950s are riddled with references to Reich and his orgone boxes. The flickering blue glow of orgone energy, the 'vibrating soundless hum of deep forest and orgone accumulators' form the pervasive atmosphere of his books, contributing to their apocalyptic chill, 'the message of orgasm received and transmitted'. Like many counter-cultural figures, Burroughs built his own orgone accumulators. In fact, the first time I ever saw one was when Kurt Cobain tried out Burroughs's rusty garden accumulator in Kansas in 1993. He was photographed waving through a porthole in the door: a melancholy, earthbound astronaut, frozen in time six months before his suicide. Every time I saw that photograph, it seemed retroactively to condemn Reich as a hopeless fraud.

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It wasn't until the despairing year of 2016 that I returned to Reich. Over the previous few years, the body had become a battlefield once again. Two issues in particular had come to a head: the refugee crisis and the Black Lives Matter movement. Refugees travelled to Europe in leaking boats from regions that had been graphically destroyed, and other people expressed the belief that they were scroungers and crooks, followed by the hope that they

would drown. Those who did make it across the Mediterranean were penned in camps from which they would potentially never escape. The presence of these desperate bodies was utilised by the far-right to gain power in Europe, while in Britain they were deployed in the xenophobic scaremongering of the Brexit campaign.

Meanwhile in America, the Black Lives Matter movement had emerged in 2013 in response to the acquittal of the murderer of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager killed by a white man. Over the next few years, Black Lives Matter protested the ongoing murder of African-American men, women and children by the police: killed for selling cigarettes, for playing with a toy gun, while reaching for a driving licence, while asleep at home in bed. The demonstrations that took place in Ferguson, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, Baltimore and across the nation seemed as if they must bring change, but on 8 November 2016 enough people voted for Donald Trump, a barely disguised white supremacist, that he became the 45th President of America.

The old bad news of bodily difference was everywhere again. Words and phrases that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier were articulated by newspapers and politicians in countries that had only recently seemed bastions of liberal democracy. The right to abortion was rolled back or rescinded altogether in several American states, even as it was secured in Ireland. In Chechnya, gay men were put in concentration camps, in what was euphemistically described as a 'prophylactic sweep'. The right to love, to migrate, to gather in protest, to reproduce or to refuse reproduction were becoming almost as viciously contested as they'd been in Reich's own time.

It was beginning to seem as if the great liberation movements of the twentieth century were failing, the victories of feminism, gay liberation and the civil-rights movement overturned one by one,

assuming they'd ever been secured at all. I'd grown up embedded in some of those struggles, but it had never occurred to me that their painful, inching progress could be so rapidly reversed. What they all shared was a desire to turn the body from an object of stigma and shame into a source of solidarity and strength, capable of demanding and achieving change.

This had always been Reich's subject and as my own era grew more troubled I was haunted by the sense that there was something vital untapped in his work. His ideas felt like time-capsules, half buried in history and still humming with life. I wanted to unearth them, to trace their legacy in the flickering light of the twenty-first century. What Reich wanted to understand was the body itself: why it's so difficult to inhabit, why you might want to escape or subdue it, why it remains a naked source of power, even now. These were questions that burned away at me too, informing many different phases of my life.

The pseudoscience of his orgone theory appalled me, but I was beginning to wonder whether there wasn't something to be learned from his downfall, too. Throughout his career he'd struggled for bodily emancipation, and yet he ended up in a prison cell, unmoored by paranoia, an end not uncommon to people involved in freedom movements. I felt as if his troubled life formed a pattern that was in itself illuminating. Why had his work gone so catastrophically astray, and what did it tell us about the larger struggles in which he'd played such a dynamic, ardent role? His failures felt just as important to understand in this new moment of crisis as his more obviously fertile ideas.

It turned out Reich's influence was far more substantial than I'd realised back in the 1990s. It was him who'd coined the terms 'sexual politics' and 'the sexual revolution', though what he'd hoped for was closer to the overthrow of patriarchal capitalism than the Pill-abetted free love of the 1960s. According to Andrea

Dworkin, one of the many feminists who drew on his work, he was 'that most optimistic of sexual liberationists, the only male one to abhor rape *really*.' James Baldwin had been reading Reich, as had Susan Sontag. He even had an afterlife in pop culture. Kate Bush's song 'Cloudbusting' immortalises his long legal battle over the orgone accumulator, its insistent, hiccupping refrain – 'I just know that something good is going to happen' – conveying the compelling utopian atmosphere of his ideas.

Though I was fascinated by his life, which is charted in a brilliant, troubling biography, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron* by Christopher Turner, what I found most exciting about Reich was the way he functioned as a connector, drawing together many different aspects of the body, from illness to sex, protest to prisons. It was these resonant regions I wanted to explore, and so I took him as a guide, charting a course right through the twentieth century, in order to understand the forces that still shape and limit bodily freedom now. Along the way I encountered many other thinkers, activists and artists, some of whom drew directly on his work and some who arrived in the same places by very different routes.

Reich led me first to illness, the experience that makes us most forcibly aware of our bodily nature, the ways in which we are both permeable and mortal, a revelation that the Covid-19 outbreak would soon forcibly bring home across the world. One of Reich's more controversial theories is that illness is meaningful. This was Sontag's criticism of him in *Illness as Metaphor*, and yet the more I discovered about her own experience of breast cancer, the more it seemed that the reality of illness in our lives is far more personal and complicated than she might have been willing to admit in print. As she put it in her hospital diary: 'My body is talking louder, more plainly than I ever could.'

I didn't agree with Reich that the orgasm could bring down the

patriarchy or stop fascism (as Baldwin tartly put it in an essay on Reich, 'the people I had been raised among had orgasms all the time, and still chopped each other with razors on Saturday nights'), but his work on sex took me to Weimar Berlin, the birthplace of the modern sexual liberation movement, the numerous achievements of which seemed less secure by the day. Though Reich placed enormous faith in the liberatory possibilities of sex, sexual freedom is not such a straightforward matter as we might sometimes like to think, since it shares a border with violence and rape. Thinking about these less comfortable aspects of sex brought me to the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, to the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin and to the Marquis de Sade, who between them have mapped one of the most difficult regions of bodily experience, where pleasure intersects with and is usurped by pain.

While the theories of Reich's later years were often bizarre, his battle with the Food and Drug Administration and subsequent imprisonment were clearly not unrelated to the issues with which he grappled throughout his life. What does freedom mean? Who is it for? What role does the state play in its preservation or curtailment? Can it be achieved by asserting the rights of the body, or, as the painter Agnes Martin believed, by denying the body altogether? Reich's liberation machine might not have cured cancer or the common cold, but it did serve to expose a system of control and punishment that is invisible until you happen to transgress it in some way.

His imprisonment in USP Lewisburg drew me to consider the paradoxical history of the prison reform movement, encountering the radical ideas of Malcolm X and Bayard Rustin. They in turn opened up the realm of political activism and protest, the bodily struggle for a better world. Here I came upon the painter Philip Guston, who documented the cartoonish, grotesque forms of those who try to limit freedom, as well as the singer and activist Nina

Simone, who spent her life trying to articulate how it might feel to be free, the ultimate Reichian dream.

Like all of these people, Reich wanted a better world, and furthermore he believed it was possible. He thought that the emotional and the political impacted continually on the actual human body, and he also believed that both could be reorganised and improved, that Eden could even at this late juncture be retrieved. The free body: what a beautiful idea. Despite what happened to him, and despite what was happening to the movements in which he'd participated, I could still feel that optimism vibrating through the decades: that our bodies are full of power, and furthermore that their power is not despite but because of their manifest vulnerabilities.

2

Unwell

When I was seventeen or so I had irregular periods, also acne, the former concerning enough that my mother decided I ought to see a specialist. We drove into London on a sweltering afternoon, past the dusty plane trees of the Cromwell Road. At the hospital, I was chastised for not having a full bladder and made to drink several penitential glasses of Ribena. The ultrasound technician plied her wand over my belly and then a consultant informed me I had polycystic ovaries and would need IVF to get pregnant, which as it happened wasn't true and was probably a reckless thing to tell a teenage girl.

The condition was enigmatic and basically untreatable, a hormonal disturbance marked by clusters of fluid-filled follicles in the ovaries. Its symptoms included acne, weight gain, hair loss and hirsutism, all related to elevated levels of testosterone. The only treatment on offer, ironically enough, was the contraceptive pill, which would at least give me the illusion of regular periods and might also help reduce my zits, though the small print warned that the opposite was also possible.

It was the mid-1990s, and I was a punk–hippie hybrid, with an undercut and a pack of tarot cards wrapped in black silk. I didn't want to take a pill, to eradicate symptoms without understanding their cause. I was an awkward occupant of my body at the best of times. It felt like an animal I couldn't talk to, a dumb, not always loyal horse. It went on without me, and its failure to function on schedule accentuated my sense of mystification. Sometimes at night I lay on my bed and tried to project my astral body onto the ceiling. Sometimes too I woke to find my body was paralysed, immobile as a block of wood, a terrifying experience I discovered years later was called sleep paralysis. I'd lie there, concentrating all my energy on the formidable task of twitching my toe, to break the spell. What if I got stuck there, and nobody knew I was still inside?

At around this time, I came across a copy of *The Holistic Herbal* by David Hoffmann, a hippie bible with a beguiling spiral of hand-drawn flowers on the cover. Under its benign guidance, I began experimenting with herbs, jotting down properties and contra-indications in my diary. I bought dried raspberry leaf and chasteberry from a local wholefood shop, to try and regularise my periods. They sounded like prescriptions from a fairy tale but they did possess actual, verifiable effects, at least as far as my ovaries were concerned.

After a brief dalliance with an English degree and a year on protest camps, I decided to apply to do a degree in herbal medicine. I was exhausted and burned out by protest, and I badly wanted to do something positive with my life, to contribute to a future that didn't despoil the environment. I wanted to formalise my understanding of the body, and I was fascinated too by the idea that it might have its own language, distant from speech but just as eloquent and meaningful, composed of symptoms and sensations rather than words. A Mickey Mouse degree, my dad liked to say, but it was four solid years of Mickey Mousing, plus a foundation year to make up for my lack of science A-levels. Most of the courses were the same as in a standard medicine degree, but there were witchier modules in materia medica and botany too.

Over the next two years, I drew every bone, muscle and organ in the body, memorising their functions and their names, right down to the tiny bones of the hand: lunate and pisiform, named for their resemblance to moons and peas. On sheets of butcher's paper, I mapped the metabolic transformations that went on inside the miniature factory of each cell. At the beginning I had only the crudest notion of how the body worked, but I struggled gamely on, fascinated and a little appalled by how much of my life happened beneath the Plimsoll line of conscious control. Gradually it all came into focus. The body was a device for processing the external world; a conversion machine, hoarding, transforming, discarding,

stripping for parts.

We studied the ideal body, the theoretical version, and then what could go wrong, working our way through hundreds of disorders, each with its own idiosyncratic pathology. The process of distinguishing between them was called differential diagnosis. We learned how to recognise the finger clubbing that foretells congestive heart failure, to differentiate the rash of eczema from that of psoriasis, to spot the bulging eyes and racing pulse of hyperthyroidism or the classic 'lemon on sticks' presentation of Cushing's syndrome.

We were initiated into the art of physical examination in a training clinic in pre-gentrification Bermondsey, spending giggly, embarrassed afternoons taking each other's blood pressure and palpating livers and kidneys, which had to be caught between two jabbing hands like a bar of soap. Everything was meaningful. A wince as you poked at the base of a patient's rib might indicate gallbladder disease. Fingernails that curved inward like spoons could mean iron-deficiency anaemia or haemochromatosis. The sheer amount of information was overwhelming but also wonderfully orderly, at least on paper.

I began to see patients in my second year. Because the clinic was in central London and offered subsidised appointments, the diversity of patients was greater than tends to occur in private practice. I soon found that diagnosis was far more tangled and confusing than Davidson's *Principles and Practices of Medicine* had led me to expect. For a start, people rarely had one illness, but came with a concatenation of conditions. An elderly man might have diabetes and heart disease and swollen ankles; a teenage girl Raynaud's syndrome and painful periods and depression. You had to painstakingly assess each symptom, to trace it back to the source, before even beginning to consider a treatment plan.

Herbal medicine is narrative medicine, a tutor once said, and

that phrase stuck with me. Because the prescription was dispensed at the very end of the session, the bulk of the hour was spent listening to the patient, drawing out their whole life story by way of their body. It was as close to psychotherapy, the talking cure, as any form of physical treatment could be. From the beginning, I was fascinated by the sense patients made of their own bodies, the way they experienced their physical and emotional lives as interwoven. In their telling, a divorce prompted cystitis, old griefs attached to tumours, the bereaved developed ulcers or lost their voices, like Freud's famous patient Dora.

After qualifying, I set up practice in a large white room in Hove, overlooking a long garden I wasn't allowed to enter. There was a tiny dispensary off the hall, where I'd weigh out tisanes of meadowsweet and lavender on an old brass scale, digging out the five and ten gram counterweights and sneezing at the aromatic clouds of dust, an activity I still find myself carrying out sometimes in dreams. My patients were of all ages, from infants to the very old. I saw anorexic girls and whole families beset by anxiety. I saw people desperate to conceive, women who were so lonely it was a sickness in itself and men with weeks to live. I listened to their stories, and though I knew why buchu and horsetail would help one patient, and sweet violet and yarrow another, it still seemed to me that the abiding assistance I was providing was as a facilitator of narrative, a witness before whom the whole tangled yarn of the body's difficulties could be unfolded and considered. It felt as if this process was in itself a source of healing, and it left me more fascinated than ever by the mysterious nature of illness, which arises and departs on tracks that are not always visible.

There was a pernicious mode of thinking at the time, popular in New Age and alternative circles, which argued that all physical illness is caused by negative psychological states, the body a theatre in which suppressed or unacknowledged emotions wreak

total havoc. One of the main sources was an elderly American woman called Louise Hay, a former model with white-blonde hair and a tight, uplifted face, who became a millionaire on the back of her 1984 self-help manual *You Can Heal Your Life*. It sold fifty million copies, making it one of the most read non-fiction books of all time. When her marriage broke up at the end of the 1960s, Hay started attending a spiritualist church, which introduced her to the concept of positive thinking. She claimed to have used it to cure herself of cervical cancer (when an interviewer at the *New York Times* asked her to prove this in 2008, she said she'd long since outlived any doctor who could confirm the diagnosis).

In the Hay universe, the mind was far more powerful than the body. She taught that illnesses as serious as cancer would spontaneously resolve if the underlying psychological woe was addressed, not by medication or therapy but by positive affirmations, the practice of repeating slogans like 'I am a beautiful person' or 'I am radiant with health'. It was as simple as a, b, c, and indeed in 2004 she published an alphabet of physical illnesses and their mental causes: acne caused by dislike of the self, arthritic fingers by a desire to punish, asthma by suppressed crying. Cancer was resentment and hatred, while polio was paralysing jealousy (a condition that apparently became vanishingly rare in England after the 1950s, when the polio vaccination was introduced).

It didn't surprise me that she'd become one of the best-selling authors of all time, a mere rung beneath the titans, Danielle Steele and Agatha Christie. Somehow it is more comforting to believe that sickness is consequential, a response to suppressed emotions or undigested traumas, than to confront the existential horror of randomness, the knowledge that anyone, no matter how good or innocent or emotionally healthy, might be afflicted at any time. To believe that illness is caused by their own mind gives the patient a kind of power over it, though also a terrible culpability. What I most hated about Hay's theory was that it manoeuvred the blame

for illness onto the person who was experiencing it. It was anti-science, and it housed a more insidious notion, too: that there is a right way for the body to be, and that illness or disability is the consequence of failure, while physical health is a reward for psychological balance.

My own experience with patients made me certain that the relationship between soma and psyche was far more complicated than either Hay's model or mainstream medicine allowed. Sometimes it was plain that emotional distress was at the root of physical symptoms (there's evidence, for example, that past trauma has a substantial impact on the functioning of the immune system, as the psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk discusses in his fascinating book *The Body Keeps the Score*). But the relationship wasn't always that simple, or that unidirectional. The patients I saw were ill, and at the same time their illness was grounds for thinking about other arenas of their lives. Illness functioned as a way for them to acknowledge or express otherwise inadmissible pain, the afflictions of the body providing a ready language by which other things could be conveyed.

At the very end of the Patrick Melrose quintet, the novelist Edward St Aubyn put this phenomenon into words so precise that I was jolted when I read it.

> His body was a graveyard of buried emotions; its symptoms clustered around the same fundamental terror . . . The nervous bladder, the spastic colon, the lower back pain, the labile blood pressure that leapt from normal to dangerously high in a few seconds, at the creak of a floorboard or the thought of a thought, and the imperious insomnia that ruled over them, all pointed to an anxiety deep enough to disrupt his instincts and take control of the automatic processes of his body. Behaviour could be changed, attitudes modified, mentalities transformed, but it was hard to have a dialogue with the somatic habits of infancy. How could an infant express himself, before he had a self to express, or the words to express what he didn't yet have? Only the dumb language of injury and illness was abundantly

available.

It was this dumb language I longed to understand, the body speaking its own stubborn, elusive tongue.

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Whether they knew it or not, both St Aubyn and Hay were drawing on the work of Wilhelm Reich. The foundation of all Reich's thinking, good and bad, lies in a single idea he developed in Vienna between the wars: that our bodies carry our unacknowledged history, all the things we try to ignore or disavow. This is the seed that gave rise to his subsequent ideas about freedom, but it's also the origin of the troubling, even dangerous theories about health he expounded in America.

When Reich arrived in Vienna in the summer of 1918, he was twenty-one, a penniless Jewish soldier who'd spent the past three years as an infantry officer in the Austro-Hungarian army, trapped in the squalid trenches of the Italian front. The vast empire in which he'd grown up had suffered an overwhelming defeat and there was no home to which he could return. His parents had died when he was still a teenager, and the prosperous family estate in Bukovina had been abandoned during the Russian invasion. When the Austro-Hungarian Empire finally collapsed that November, it became part of Rumania (it's now in Ukraine). Reich couldn't afford the legal case to win it back.

The city he washed up in was also in trouble. Vienna was no longer the capital of a wealthy and cosmopolitan empire, a place so opulent and luxurious it had been nicknamed the City of Dreams. The newly created Republic of German-Austria had lost two-thirds of its pre-war territory, cutting it off from most of its former sources of fuel and food. By the time Reich arrived, part of a mass migration of thousands of homeless and desperate fellow soldiers,

hyperinflation had made the krone almost worthless. Wood was in such short supply that there were only paper coffins in which to bury the dead. Many of the corpses were victims of the global Spanish flu epidemic, now raging through the ruined city.

That year, Reich lived off a subsistence diet of oatmeal and dried fruit, along with a slice of jam cake on Sundays and an eighth of a loaf of bread a week. But it wasn't just meat and butter he craved. He was desperate for intellectual stimulation, an outlet for his considerable energy and intelligence, and he also longed for love, companionship and sex. His future sister-in-law, who met him around this time, never forgot how this orphaned boy responded to the warmth of her family. She described him in terms you might use for a stray dog: 'open, lost, hungry for affection as well as food.' Other friends described Willie, as he was invariably known, as brilliant, energetic, far more vital than other people, but also gauche, insecure and arrogant, prone to fits of jealousy and depression. He was so handsome and dashing that you didn't necessarily notice his skin was covered with the itchy red plaques of psoriasis, a condition that had tormented him since childhood.

In October, Reich enrolled at the University of Vienna to study law, and after a dull term switched to medicine, a far more congenial subject, though his living conditions remained gruelling. The single room he shared with his younger brother Robert and another student was so cold he got frostbite despite wearing gloves and a fur coat. Once he collapsed from hunger in a class. Robert, who was working, helped him financially, but even so he was penniless until he started to tutor younger students in his second year, exhausting work that ate up precious hours of the day.

Despite his interest in his classes, the dominant mechanistic model of medicine troubled Reich. He felt instinctively that something was missing: some kind of life essence or vital force that hadn't yet been isolated or pinned down. It was all very well

learning anatomy, but what was the thing that made him *him*, the appetite that propelled people through life? Sexual topics weren't covered on the course, and he wasn't the only student to feel it a serious omission. In January, a slip of paper passed from desk to desk during an anatomy lecture, inviting students to join an informal seminar on the secretive, shameful subject of sex. It was in this seminar that Reich first encountered the stunning ideas of Sigmund Freud.

Like Reich, Freud was a non-observant Galician Jew who began his career as a medical student, and like Reich he was insatiably curious, daring and intellectually ambitious. Freud was a scientist who described himself as 'an adventurer', a passionate man who kept his passion confined to two deep pockets: his work and the smoking that he refused to relinquish even when he knew it was killing him. His first research project was to investigate the sexual organs of eels. He moved by degrees into the no less mysterious realm of the human mind, like a diver who plunges into a dark sea.

The discipline of psychoanalysis was only a year older than Reich himself. Freud named it in 1896, a year after publishing his breakthrough work *Studies on Hysteria*, co-authored with Joseph Breuer, in which he argued that hysterical symptoms were not the result of madness, but caused by repressed traumatic memories; a notion made even more shocking by his claim that the trauma was always sexual in origin. Although he later recanted his belief in widespread sexual abuse in favour of an unconscious realm of fantasies and drives, it was his insistence on the primacy of sexuality, even in infants and children, that made Freud such a pariah in academic circles. By the time Reich encountered him, he was sixty-three, recognised across the world and yet a virtual outcast in his own city, regarded as a laughable eccentric, if not a repellent pervert.

Reich was particularly taken by Freud's theory of the libido,

which seemed to answer the question of vital force that he'd been fretting over in his own studies. When Freud first began using the word *libido*, it simply meant the energy of sexual desire, which was satisfied by the act of sex. Over time, he deployed it more broadly to refer to a positive life force, an instinctive animal energy that drives each individual from the moment they are born, and which can become damaged or distorted at any stage in their development. Freud saw libido as the force behind all loves, passions and attractions. It made sense to Reich, who by March was writing excitedly in his diary: 'I have become convinced that sexuality is the centre around which revolves the whole of social life as well as the inner life of the individual.'

Ever enterprising, he visited Freud at his apartment at Berggasse 19 to request a reading list for the seminar. I've spent years trying to imagine that encounter. Reich came up the stairs in his army greatcoat, he entered Freud's study, with its subterranean atmosphere, its sense of being filled with an accretion of objects from past eras, as if many civilisations had marched through, abandoning small relics. It was like a museum or a shipwreck, very quiet, and at the centre there was Freud, so alert and lively that Reich described him as a beautiful animal.

In those years Freud was surrounded by disciples, but either they were insufficiently intelligent or they were too obdurate, like Jung, impelled to kill the father whose approval they'd once longed for. Looking back on their first encounter from the vantage point of 1952, Reich thought this heated and unequal environment made Freud intensely lonely, that the reception of his theories had isolated him, and that he longed to have someone with whom he could talk, a need that his youngest daughter Anna was later able to fulfil. He could see that Freud was drawn to him, even excited by him – a new protégé, perhaps at long last capable of both brilliance and loyalty. Freud knelt at the shelves and pulled out essays, assembling a pile of reading material that would introduce this

raw young man to the mysterious working of the unconscious, the baffling, telling realm of dreams and slips and jokes.

More than thirty years on, Reich could still vividly remember the graceful way Freud moved his hands, the brightness of his eyes, the appealing glint of irony that ran through everything he said. Unlike the other teachers he'd encountered while gathering material for the course, Freud didn't pretend to be a prophet or a great thinker. 'He looked straight at you. He didn't have any pose.' Looking back, it's apparent that both men brought a weight of need and desire to each other, as we all do when we encounter a stranger to whom we feel drawn, and that the impossibility of those expectations – beloved father, faithful son – would play a heavy role in the relationship ahead.

The 'click' Reich felt was borne out when Freud referred a patient to him, followed quickly by another. In 1920, at the age of twenty-three, Reich was formally inducted into the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, its youngest member by two decades. He wouldn't finish his medicine degree for another two years. As Christopher Turner explains in *Adventures in the Orgasmatron*, this wasn't totally unprecedented (indeed, it was a trajectory followed by several other members of the sexuality seminar). In the early 1920s, psychoanalysis was 'still at an uncodified, experimental stage, practiced only by a small coterie of faithful apostles.' No training was required, and though it was suggested that new analysts were themselves analysed, it wasn't a formal requirement until 1926. All the same, Reich was special. Capable and burning with intellectual curiosity, he prodded the city's analysts into life. A shark in a carp pool, he once described himself.

The basic technique of psychoanalysis, then as now, was very simple. The analyst sat in a chair, while the patient lay before them on a couch (Freud's was draped in an Iranian rug and littered with velvet cushions). They couldn't see the analyst, and so they


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