

Holdrege Paper: A Portrayal of the Female Body

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## *Abstract*

Practicing the Goethean model of science involves a thoughtful operational awareness and sensitivity to the way we engage in this phenomenal world. We must overcome our habit of viewing the world in terms of objects and explain our findings through our relationship to the objects as a subject. A key element of Goethean Science is the conversation with nature, with this perspective I can form a scientific basis to draw upon. I then present the Goethean approach with a contrasting example of the study of the female body through time and with an evolutionary lens. I have come to understand the information I am presenting from a four week long field study where I read a collection of texts to try and answer my questions and engage in a conversation. As I have questioned almost everyone observing me, why do they care about how I alter my body, for this is part of my identity?

## *Beginning: Sensing Boundaries*

In my senior year of high school I began to gradually shorten the length of my hair. At the beginning of the year my golden locks would graze the small of my back, but as time went on I felt the true weight of my hair. One day I looked at myself in the mirror and decided that my hair would not define me. A day or two later I walked into my favorite hair salon and asked them to cut it as short as they felt inclined to, I then bought some black hair dye and went to town. The next day at school was the first day I received blatant negative remarks about the way that I looked. "So, are you a lesbian now? You looked a lot better with longer hair. Why did you cut it, you shouldn't have cut your beautiful hair! I don't like it," would echo in my head. As much as I tried to resist the urge to break down and run away from my peers' comments I could feel each declaration tugging at my inch long locks, begging each strand to grow back again. The question

I would ask myself was, “Why do they care; this is my body, my identity,” my thoughts soon ran wild, I began to be hyper-aware of my entire body and how I held myself. The question of why my appearance affected other people around me grew within the next year and into my first year of college. I have been working through the lens of Goethe for the past three quarters and have adapted my thought process to question my experiences in such a way where I make changes for myself and do not act upon the desires and wishes of others.

The phenomenon at hand is the current fascination with being skinny; the ideal woman’s body and the views that are projected onto her have thus been transformed throughout history. The underlying properties resulting in this skewed view of how women are portrayed and treated are the rise of patriarchy, religion, the industrial revolution, and the media in America.

I started off my readings with a book titled *The Naked Woman* by Desmond Morris, his lens is that of a zoologist depicting a portrait of the evolution of the female body throughout history. Each chapter specifies the alterations of each trait a woman holds from hair to feet. Within this reading I learned that [in the primeval age] the female body, which was and is necessary for reproduction, had to be protected against starvation. As a result, the average woman’s curvaceous body contains 25 percent fat. Now in relation to this womanly trait, men have been programmed by evolution to be strongly protective of their children. To thrive the slow-growing human offspring required the rearing of both parents. “Paternal responses to the rounded, fat-covered bodies of human babies were so strong that they could be exploited by the adult females. The more physical baby features the female displayed, the more protective responses they would elicit in their mates,” (Morris 3). This resulted in the adult woman’s voice remaining higher pitched than men, operating at 230-255 cycles a sound. Women also kept their juvenile facial features and their childlike hair pattern, as well as being mostly finer boned,

smoother, and smaller in stature. This is a function of human evolution for women to seem young and fertile in order to pair up two people to reproduce; it makes perfect sense-until you think the matter through a bit further. The more that a woman is seen as a child the more a man will feel obligated to protect his spouse; this is where sexism and skewed views of the female body come into play.

*Delicate Empiricism: The Female Body as a Conversation*

The realization that the phenomena we confront are always richer than the abstractions we use to explain them is central to the Goethean approach. This realization is the expression of an awareness or sensitivity that Goethe presents as “delicate empiricism.” First we experience a phenomenon that sets our wonder in motion that sparks possibility of questioning, of “becoming utterly identical with it” (ibid). This is empiricism, where we focus our energy into understanding the phenomena for ourselves. Next, we become extremely aware of the thoughts we bring to the phenomenon, how we interact with the world through thinking. The more we are aware and confident with our thoughts, the more vibrancy we can bring to our experience.

Goethe describes the process of gaining knowledge in the following way:

When in the exercise of his powers of observation man undertakes to confront the world of nature, he will at first experience a tremendous compulsion to bring what he finds there under his control. Before long, however, these objects will thrust themselves upon him with such force that he, in turn, must feel the obligation to acknowledge their power and pay homage to their efforts. When this mutual interaction becomes evident he will make a discovery which, in a double sense, is limitless; among the objects he will find many different forms of existence and

modes of change, a variety of relationships livingly interwoven; in himself, on the other hand, a potential for infinite growth through constant adaptation of his sensibilities and judgment to new ways of acquiring knowledge and responding with action. (Goethe, 1807; in Miller; 1995, p. 61)

With this Goethean approach a “mutual interaction” occurs where we discover the limitless nature of connections and relationships in the world. All the while our potential to grow and adapt ourselves to new ways of knowing continues as we walk the path of conscious development. The metaphor of a conversation is quite helpful while looking through a Goethean lens. The metaphor itself brings light to the consciousness of doing science, it is a back and forth between partners in an ongoing process. For me that partner is the female body as well as others that I have read about and my own, which are a convenient partners to have. Here are some of the elements of science-as-conversation.

1) When I enter a conversation with the female body my interest has been sparked by countless experiences leading to this moment. I am presented with a riddle and begin asking questions and observing. In this way I give the conversation between the bodies I read about and my own an initial focus.

2) But if the focus I bring is too narrow, we cannot have a conversation. In any kind of conversation the process is the journey. It is not just about answering pre-formulated questions, but essentially what happens along the way. There will be silence, surprise, and moments of tension, and in these moments I will remember that this practice is necessary for each side of the conversation to take its turn revealing itself to the other.

3) Taking the conversation-as-process means realizing that it is open-ended, meaning the destination is uncertain. With this awareness present in each moment, the conversation is imbedded with an atmosphere of honesty, all the while looking forward to anything unexpected that may arise.

4) My body and all female bodies are my partner in this conversation with the past and present. I am acknowledging that each woman is something in her own right, while recognizing this I infuse respect into the conversation. Now knowing that I am involved in this conversation I become sensitive in what I think and do, now everything I see and hear is seen through the eyes of an empowered fed up woman who is conversing with others who share their stories. Because of this I am constantly checking myself, as to not cross and boundaries while still staying true to myself.

5) An essential feature of the conversation is that I listen to what nature has to say. Attentiveness allows us to hear, not just listen to what is being presented to us, it is the quality of open interest of what each other has to say. I interject and respond. I am actively giving form to the conversation through my questions and concepts I gather along the way, here there is movement between attentiveness and active contributing.

6) In the course of this, and any real conversation the partners change and evolve, we have grown from the start of the conversation. I have gained experiences from this conversation, grown qualities I did not hold before, and have gotten to know the world around me more deeply. Through interacting with the female body, in an “experiment” we change it in some way. I have taken what I have learned and applied it to myself physically and emotionally, as has the female body. We as a species are interwoven with the female form, in this way the woman’s

body is finding new expression through the process of human knowing; whether that be practicing yoga, training to be a doula, or working in the porn industry.

The moment we wake up to the fact that we are a part of this world and the women surrounding us the captivity of a dualistic view ends. Once we engage in a conversation such as this one in order to get to know these women we are freed to engage as participants in the world.

7) In this conversation I take responsibility for all that I say, for I cannot distance myself from the process and its results.

### *Engaging the Conversation*

In 2011, my senior year of high school I had an intrauterine device implanted into my uterus. My only thought on the matter was that I was going to college the next year, and knowing that I would be sexually active I did not want to worry about any sort of pregnancy from not taking a pill or simply a condom breaking. Looking back on this decision I began questioning why I really got the IUD, and what stigmas or cultural implications come with taking birth control.

In America most young girls are not taught to tune in with their menstrual cycle. Our monthly period is looked upon as a burdensome high stress time, where our mood swings, pregnancy is a risk, and all we want to do is clean up our mess and go on with the day without giving it a second thought. It is easy to forget, with negative thoughts running through our heads that our menstrual cycle is all about reproduction. While it is very true that reproduction is a fact of coming into puberty we do not need to fear that process of our own body. If young girls and boys were educated by our mothers or even health teachers about this cycling we would more understand our own bodies and what we and others, as women are capable of. We have all

arrived on this earth from the beauty of birth, why not understand it? (Madsen “Listening to our Menstrual Cycle”)

So that is how it begins. Something captivates your interest, and you move towards it. Thus the conversation began. With these thoughts omnipresent I spent most of my time reading to understand about the past. After I read I would take time to look inward and reflect upon what I had learned, whether that be to spend time supine on the ground visualizing the structure of my internal organs, I look to *The Female Pelvis, Anatomy & Exercise* by Blandine Calais-Germain or take time during my new found cycle to let my emotions come fourth and let them go in one breath. I see myself as a student of Goethe just as Henri Bortoft was; instead I looked at the female form as he looked at the problem of wholeness in quantum physics. Now, I held a mantra of his in my mind to help me along the way, “the way to the whole is into and through the parts” (Bortoft, 1996, p. 12). And in every part you discover a new phenomenon, with new questions rising to meet it.

### *Exact Sensorial Imagination and Living Understanding*

After I have spent my time ingesting and mulling over what I have learned I made sure to reflect inward. Through reading my texts I have come to understand that both the female and male have a pelvic nerve but with a female that nerve can connect to many more areas of the pelvis that relate to stimulation. Every woman is wired differently. Some women’s nerves branch more in the vagina, others branch more in the clitoris. Some branch to the perineum, or at the mouth of the cervix. With my mind’s eye I consciously reimagined the female form of myself and others, wondering what we all have in common. This process of conscious picture building

is what Goethe called “exact sensorial imagination” (Goethe, 1824; Miller, 1995, p. 46) When I practiced this type of picture building, I grow more connected to what I am observing.

But there was something else. The female body began to reveal herself as a process. When I began observing I had many separate images instilled into my brain, parts of the body that I was hyper-conscious of stuck out more than others; it was not until I brought all features of the body to a leveled field of view did I see this beautiful creature as whole. The life of the female body plays itself out, either fighting or sub-missing the fact of their own ever unfolding and slow decay of organs. Here we may enter into transformation through observation and imagination.

So to begin to grasp the flow of life and its defining qualities in the female body, I had to work to make thinking fluid. Now I would like to show you my attempt to give a portrayal, to paint a picture with words of this form. I hope to give you an in-depth look into another being we think we know and understand.

### *The Female Body- A Portrayal*

A woman stands naked in front of a mirror, what are her features that define her as a woman? What feature characteristics are more susceptible to attracting a partner? Her hair on her head and under-arms, her breasts, her pubic hair, and her genitals will be looked upon. Almost all of the physical traits that woman hold can be attributes to sexual signaling, this signaling has been programed into our genes over time in order to attract a mate. As a female, one needs to invite a man into her life in order to copulate with him, reproduce, and keep their lineage going through their offspring. In this observation of the female body an internal conversation starts to

happen with myself. I begin to understand that I may separate any sexual negativity that the realm of sexual signaling and its inclinations hold in order to use this lens and be unbiased.

Starting with the top of the head one often finds long locks of hair atop a woman's form. With hair growing around 5 inches a year there is ample room for experimentation of length, style, and color. With the possibility for a full head of hair that frames a female face comes sexual attention. Now one may shave off all of her hair, or style it up in a bun or pressed to her head to mute her femininity or one may try to emphasize her sex appeal. The most common way women alter their hair to attract a mate is to dye it blond. This is in fact a sexual signal, compared to brown or red hair natural blond hairs are the finest; fine hair is smoother and softer which engages a tactile alluring function. (Morris 16)

Moving south we come to the female armpit and find it either shaved or unshaved. An unshaven armpit holds scent glands for a longer period of time, attracting men whether they know it or not. But because in this day and age we are often in very close social situations, having a pungent odor emitting from under our arms, possibly attracting others is not something that is commonly acceptable. (Morris 118)

Behold the female breast. The breast, like the female body can be categorized into two categories, parental and sexual. The breasts themselves can produce milk for their child containing proteins, carbohydrate, fat, cholesterol, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, sodium, magnesium, iron, vitamins, and antibodies. This is the parental function of the breasts, now there is one problem with the function of the breast and that is its hemispherical shape. This shape makes breast feeding difficult for the infant to latch onto; other primates only have flat breast plates and a long nipple for their young to suckle from. Unlike them, human females now have a

sexual function to their breasts, one for signaling a mate. The signaling is not only visual but once they are touched or caressed they become tactile stimuli for their mate. (Morris 144)

The female genital hair is similar to that of the function of armpit hair, which stores pheromones to sexually signal a partner. The hair atop the vagina works as a barrier of sorts, protecting the skin during intercourse and against the elements and diseases that could travel to our genitals. On the other side of the spectrum, pubic hair has been seen as manly and unfeminine, this resulted in shaving off some or all ones pubic hair. When this alteration was applied the sexual stimulation that seeing a woman's entire "vertical slit" was more enticing than it being covered in hair. Weather a female trims her pubic locks or lets them grow as they may this is a quality that defines women. (Morris 197)

Now under that possible pubic hair lays the glorious vagina. Following the pattern of the women's breasts, the vagina holds a parental and sexual function. Let me walk you through a timeline of the females' sexual arousal. Phase one, the start of sexual arousal: Vaginal lubrication begins within the first minute. The inner two thirds of the vaginal canal begin to expand. The cervix and the uterus are pulled upwards. The outer labia begin to spread apart, as the outer labia swell and the clitoral tip becomes engorged with blood and grow in size. Phase two, full arousal: Lubrication slowly eases off and the inner two thirds of the vagina is now fully expanded. The walls of the outer third of the vaginal canal are swollen from increased blood flow to that area. Then the vaginal opening decreases by 30 per cent, due to swelling of the vaginal walls. The outer labia are so spread apart that the vagina itself is more conspicuous. The inner labia are now at least twice as thick and the clitoris is fully erect. Finally comes phase three, orgasmic climax: The outer third of the vagina undergoes rhythmic muscular contractions. The first, most powerful contractions occur every eight-tenths of a second. The number of contractions per orgasm varies

from 3 to 15 as muscular contractions occur throughout the pelvic region, and then the clitoris, labia, vagina and uterus all return to their normal, relaxed condition. (Morris 213)

Now, the parental function of the vagina involves the conception of the child, the child bearing process, and birth. The female reproductive system contains two main sections, the vagina and uterus, which act as the receptacle for semen, and the ovaries, which produce the female's ova. The vagina is attached to the uterus through the cervix, while the uterus is attached to the ovaries through the Fallopian tubes. At certain intervals, the ovaries release an ovum, which passes through the fallopian tube into the uterus.

The fertilization of the ovum with the sperm occurs at the ampullary-isthmic junction which is why not all the intercourses result in pregnancy. Then the ovum meets with a sperm and may penetrate and merge with the egg, fertilizing it with the help of certain hydrolytic enzymes present in the acrosome. The fertilization usually occurs in the oviducts, but can happen in the uterus itself. The zygote then becomes implanted in the lining of the uterus, where it begins the processes of embryogenesis and morphogenesis. When the fetus is developed enough to survive outside the womb, the cervix dilates and contractions of the uterus propel it through the birth canal, which is the vagina.

The ova, which are the female sex cells, are much larger than the spermatozoon and are normally formed within the ovaries of the female fetus before its birth. They are mostly fixed in location within the ovary until their transit to the uterus, and contain nutrients for the later zygote and embryo. Over a regular interval, in response to hormonal signals, a process of oogenesis matures one ovum which is released and sent down the Fallopian tube. If not fertilized, this egg is flushed out of the system through menstruation. Once the female has given

birth then her menstrual cycle may come back and she will continue to have her monthly cycle, to facilitate possible life in the future.

### *The Whole in the Part*

When I see the relation in all aspects between the female body parts and organs I begin to actually see the figure purely. Before I had seen solid objects- the different parts of the female body in their size, shape, and location; now I am experiencing the qualities and functions that are expressed through these parts. And these qualities may not be a thing, which is why it may be difficult to describe these qualities so that someone else can see what I am talking about.

The female body's features are that of a vessel able to bare children, and parent them. We can see its characteristics, but we can also see more. Each part of the female body can hold tension in it, and through that tension comes emotion.

Throughout this field study I realize that I was almost always hyper-aware of my own body. With so much time spent retaining information about my vagina, my pelvis, and all of the negativity pointed towards this region of the body I began to feel the pain for myself. I could now easily visualize the inside of my pelvic cavity as this only heightened my tension. The pain felt as if my right fallopian tube was in a constant dulled contraction. It is truly remarkable what the mind and body may latch onto and feel more deeply.

### *The Unity of the Organism*

As the process of knowing unfolds-the conversation with the female body-you begin to see the unity of it. Human beings are a species that can be defined by a combination of friendliness and curiosity, which has been made possible by an evolutionary process called

neoteny. This is the retention of juvenile characteristics into adult life, though men and women have not followed this trend in the same way. Men are more childlike in their behavior, while women are more childlike in their anatomy.

### *Doing Goethean Science*

One of the problems with talking about doing Goethean science is that the essence is in the doing itself.

### *Preparing the Body- A New Attitude of Mind*

All science has its roots in human questioning and the search for understanding. The core principal of the Goethean approach is the realization that one must develop new ways of knowing in order to give any sort of justice to what you are observing. For this attitude of mind to spark every fiber of one's work means removing obstacles from your path- habits of mind that have had me search for single causes, theories, and explanations. Here I question what the habits of my own mind are, how may I harness them? Where is my disconnect of self and body? Where is the likeness between male and female human beings, I have been focusing on the disconnect but where do they meet equally? Where is the tension set? If my mind is cluttered or my sights are honed in on one specific answer I remember this description of the soul of a Goethean Scientist:

That we should set aside all previous habits of thought, see through and break down the mental barriers which these habits have set along the horizons of our thinking, and in full intellectual freedom proceed to lay hold on those genuine philosophical problems still awaiting completely fresh formulation which the liberated on all sides disclose to us- these are hard demands. Yet nothing less is

required...To move freely along this new way without ever reverting to the old viewpoints, to learn to see what stands before our eyes... (Husserl, 1913/1962, p. 39)

### *Practicing Goethean Science*

*The Riddle.* This is the beginning of any investigation. I am drawn to a specific phenomenon and want to get to know it better. And the riddle that draws a specific person is the beginning of a pathway into the world that is precise, but can be shared with others.

*Into the Phenomenon.* In studying a living organism, one wants to gain a many-sided picture of the life of the organism. My path has been to get to know the female body through as many lenses as possible, through a zoological standpoint, a feminist view, through the eyes of a man, a woman, and myself. To understand these points of view it is necessary to interact and utilize the work that others have produced in this topic of study.

*Exact Picture Building.* As my studies continue I get to know the female for, as well as my own more deeply. While using The Female Pelvis: Anatomy & Exercise by Blandine Calais-Garmain and Vagina: A New Biography by Naomi Wolf I may visualize my body with eyes closed, with no references, in silence.

*Seeing the Whole.* This is the step that I have been preparing for with this work. This is what can reveal itself in the course of one's striving to get to know a phenomenon. Now I am knowing. So when Goethe writes there is "delicate empiricism which makes itself identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory" (Goethe, 1829), then the theory is to be understood in the sense of a seeing with the mind or beholding. There will be no end to this work, yet there may be a full circle of events and ideas. This end brings us into a glimpse of being-the riddle-that

formed the starting point of the investigation. As a beginning, it is the soil for further work and vital new insights. Goethe's approach to science is itself a fertile idea that still has ample life to unfold.

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