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First-Person Writing, Four-Way Reading

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Hybrid modes, narrative theatricalities

In my presentation I intend to deal with three interrelated issues: first, the status of the first person material within what narratology terms as free indirect discourse; second, cross-gendering that can be effected by this stylistic procedure, especially if it purports to represent a character's hysteric symptoms, and third, ontological and ekfrastic criss-crossings that can be thus produced, involving a representation of another artistic medium that, besides language, uses other material such as the human body and the space, as theatre and acting do. The narrative representation of the experience of acting will prove to have some consequences for the discussion of the former two issues: such inter-medial encounter plays upon the effects of an art that first, provides actuality and embodiment to the narratological metaphors of the spatiality and temporality of the text - just as to those of voice, person, and internal or external focalization - and second, an art that is to this day referred to as both inducing and characteristic of hysteric symptoms (Showalter, 1997, 100-102). Finally, while tackling the question of first-person narrative authority, I will argue that the short story I am to talk about provokes a confusion of what we conceive as the outside and the inside of either the text or the embodied self. The way this story is told seems to enact what Shoshana Felman proclaimed to be the crucial "discovery" of psychoanalysis: "that human discourse" is "constitutively the material locus of a signifying difference from itself", made by a "language that the subject cannot recognize, assume as his" and "appropriate" (1987, 77).

The example I am about to analyse in order to address these issues is the short story *Behind the Mask*, which was written by the most famous Croatian modernist author, Miroslav Krleža, in 1933., as a part of a much larger whole, his genealogic cycle entitled *The Glembays*, embracing nine prose fictions and a drama trilogy. As opposed to the rest of the prose section of the cycle, *Behind the Mask* only tangentially deals with a member of the family Glembay - a certain pauperized lady, named Laura Lenbach. Her salon - known to the Croatian reading public as the salon from Krleža's play *In agony*, the second part of the drama trilogy - here merely provides a setting for the intimate confession of an actress, dame R. Stoltzer, to unknown listeners. The entire story is told in free indirect discourse, apart from the first sentence which is a classical induction of a third person narrative told by the omniscient narrator: "In the millinery salon owned by Lady Laura dame R. Stoltzer was sitting and speaking about her stage fright".

The story then continues as a *disguised* presentation of first person material, since the confession concerns the most intimate of an actress's experience, usually perceived by actors to be "shameful, a kind of degrading disease, something akin to leprosy, which is best kept a dark secret" (Havas, in Ridout, 2006, 52). There is of course nothing unusual in free indirect discourse rendering vivid the depths of a character's consciousness through "internal focalization": we learn about dame Stoltzer's personal memories of all previous instances of her stage-fright, about the deadly dread felt the night before, her fear of getting old and losing her memory, her confused sensing of the back-stage atmosphere, and her horrifying perception of the audience as a "black mass" and a "beast", as well as about a mystic state in which she finds herself while acting, but we learn also about the excruciating physical symptoms of her stage-fright – aphasia, sweat, heart beating in her throat, fainting, shivering, sighing and suffocation, pressure in her chests, blurred vision and paralysis, whose intense evocation gives them a flavour of an almost erotic, masochistic pleasure, something that could be said as stemming from the polymorphous sensitivity that Luce Irigaray reclaims for women's sexuality, in sharp contrast to the masculine obsession with visual perception.

The rhythm of the story, as we mentioned, engages in temporal and ontological meandering that first leads us back to the night before, then to the past 20 years of the actress's suffering and then forth to the seemingly immediate future of her entrance onto the stage, then back to her wish to escape, after which the story suddenly jumps to her final triumph and the standing ovation she receives, lasting "one full minute". The confession also constantly oscillates in-between the inner model of the movements of the character she has to embody, and her own desperate self, that regresses into an immobilized "girl in fear of spanking". The preponderant psychonarration recreates the confused state of her mind and body during the endurance of stage-fright, evoking it so powerfully that the narration collapses into the overall illusion not of its former, but of its present and shifting *durée*, as if the character became the sole narrator, engaged in the alternate subjective dilatation of the "actual" time spent upon leaving the dressing room to enter the stage, and the compression of the one spent on the boards during the entire performance.

The actress is, however, as we heard at the start, *speaking* about her stage-fright, so that there cannot be question of what Dorrit Cohn called "a transparent mind" (1978) that the narrator seems to have intruded into, but rather of what narratologists would classify as "reported speech". We could then rightfully wonder whether, when the actress mystifies her experience with drastic images, she is not in fact just making a spectacle of herself, delivering a magnified version of the backstage myth, all the more so since she herself seems to insist that "all her life she has been doing nothing but lying and stealing and cheating". Is this backstage myth not, after all, a true interest of all audiences that can never be truly appeased, the one, furthermore, akin to the very mystery of the female body as the hidden source of all representational activity, modernist in particular? However, if what follows can easily be transformed "back" into direct address of the character, how are we to treat the insistence of the author to cover it over by a third person narrative frame? How can we claim that this cover can not be reduced to a mere function, but is to be treated as an audible voice, presumably also inhabiting the same diegetic level as the character of dame R. Stolzer? What makes us think that the narrator is a male ventriloquist transmitting a visceral female experience, the preferential topic of the

so-called “*écriture féminine*”, in which the body is said to govern not only as the very medium of discursive gender differentiation, but primarily as a thematic interest – the very locus of resistance, as Helene Cixous insists, to its confiscation by the patriarchal gaze (Clément et Cixous, 1975, 179)? If the heroine of the story is, as we are told, speaking out loud, we could easily imagine the narrator being present in the salon, if we did not know from Krleža’s play entitled *In agony* - itself a part of the *Glembay* cycle from which the set of the story is borrowed - that this particular salon is in principle a place of female gathering and gossip, indeed, a place where lady Laura’s lesbian circle finds refuge, and therefore a communicative context required precisely for *écriture féminine*, a discourse of a woman addressed exclusively to women (Rubin Suleiman, 1986, 13-15).

But why would we presume the narrator to be a man? Is it perhaps because, if we follow Genette, we take this omniscient and extradiegetic instance to represent “in fact” the author himself – incidentally, the author Krleža, married to an actress, Bela Krleža, who played in the plays of his *Glembay* cycle, and who, as Genette mockingly comments the attribute “omniscient”, “does not have to know anything since he invents everything” (1988, 74)?¹ But if the narratorial voice is on another ontological level, that is, outside the story (if not the text itself), he can not be inside the salon, and, taking stylistic profits aside, there is no evident *thematic* need either to cover dame Stoltzer’s voice in a double-voiced, hybrid discourse. So what makes us define it as a double-voiced discourse? If it is a combination of the third person narrative and the internal focalization, then we should know that there are theorists, such as Ann Banfield (1982) and Monika Fludernik (1993), who entirely dismiss the dual voice theory, suggesting that in free indirect discourse, either, as Banfield insists, nobody speaks, or, as Fludernik warns, we must as readers choose between the narrator’s “I” and the deictic “self”. Since our narrator does not refer to himself in any way, we could then infer that dame R. Stoltzer is the only one who speaks – at least within the fictional realm of the story, even if she happens to refer to herself as “she”, not “me”.

¹ On Genette's tendency to blur the distinctions between the author and the narrator, see also Fludernik, 2001, 622.

Or should we rather, following Richard Aczel (1998), re-think the category of the narratorial voice in qualitative, rhetorical and stylistic, and not just linguistic terms? This would definitely help us in accounting for the mixture we are faced with in the text: on one side, visceral sensations, tastes and smells, damning and cursing of the actor's lot, crude comparisons of the audience to the black mass or the beast as well as of the actress to the animal tamer, insistent repetitions and exclamations, even parts of sentences printed in parenthetical marks, as if they were sudden flashes of insight or irrepressible associations, and on the other, refined vocabulary and poetic imagery, synaesthesias, complicated syntax, and the like. But why would we attribute these to the separate narratorial idiom and not to the "reported" rhetorical capacity of the fictional speaker, the actress herself? Is it because of the annoying continued employment of third person references or perhaps because the latter features characterize the idiom of the author in other parts of the cycle, indeed, in all his other works? If we want to avoid such recourse to the empirical author fallacy, that leads us again to the meta-level of the story, we could return to the reported monologue, but then we would be additionally struck by some curious auto-referring of the actress, for instance, to "her miserable subject", that ironically intensifies the discursive hybridity of her confession. Is it a stylistic marker of her hypertrophied self-importance or the narrator's hint at the gravity of implications the whole story raises for every subject, and not only for actors? How come she medicalizes her experience through the use of terms such as "half-consciousness", "depressing force", "unconsciously", "infantile dread", "subjective vulnerability", "morbid illusions", "panic", "sclerosis", "weak nerves" and "paralysis", as if somebody else were pronouncing a diagnose of her as an ordinary hysteric? And how do we know, in fact, that all these words were spoken by her and not one of them silently thought - perhaps precisely those written in parenthesis - or added by the narrator's urge to translate and interpret what he heard, if he were there, or invented, if we opt for the extradiegetic one, the one only seemingly entering her transparent mind? When pondering upon these questions we could conclude that all these versions are possible and that, to quote Lacoue-Labarthe on the narrative

technique in Diderot's *Paradox of the actor*, "nothing, absolutely nothing allows us to decide" (1989, 250).

I did not quote Lacoue-Labarthe accidentally, for his insistence on the particularity of Diderot's "exercise in both homologic and chiastic figuration"- that is, of his "enunciation of the paradox involving a paradox of enunciation" - pertains to the same problem foregrounded in Krleža's short story, the narrative representation of the actor's experience, moreover, of his or her subjectivity. Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, let me remind you, denies the assumption that great acting requires a refined sensibility of one's own, stating squarely that "being nothing" is the very source of the great actor's "aptitude" to be everything. The paradox, therefore, as Lacoue-Labarthe insists, "states the *law of impropriety*, which is also the very law of mimesis: only 'the man without qualities', the being without properties or specificity, the subjectless subject (absent from himself, distracted from himself, deprived of self) is able to present or produce in general". Diderot's text, Lacoue-Labarthe argues, produces itself the described paradox: it vacillates between narration and dialogue, with the subject narrating it that simultaneously inhabits the outer frame of the treatise in the role of dispassionate observer, and the inner frame of the dialogue, in the guise of one of the dialogic partners, who is passionately defending the thesis of the actor's paradox: "At the same time excluded and included, inside and outside ... the enunciating subject occupies in reality no place, he is unassignable: nothing or no one", so much so that the thesis itself is "unsettled" (ibid, 251).

Krleža, however, represents the experience residing on the other end of the anti-emotionalist-to-emotionalist spectrum, of the actress's total immersion into the role, and its attendant malaise, the stage fright. Interestingly, this nausea and anxiety, according to Nicholas Ridout, stems as well from the "uncertain transition" between the self and the other happening in the actor, the crisis over the relations of inside and outside, the lack of distance between oneself and the character, which results in a revulsion and phobia, a visceral excess "unhealthily disproportionate to the magnitude of its ostensible cause" (Ridout, 2006, 56): that is, a host of debilitating physical symptoms resulting in "depersonalization" – which, to

complete the paradox, is precisely the desired state for Diderot's dispassionate actor of genius. Krleža sharpens this irony, since he picks as his character an actress that figures as the very emblem of Diderot's despised sensibility and female passivity, indeed, a typical modernist hysteric. Her situation is shown to epitomize the convergence of discursive, poetic, technological and socio-economic forces that, according to Ridout, engendered the stage-fright: financial dependence upon the middle class, naturalist poetics, the invention of electric light that darkens the auditorium and makes it into a threatening "black mass", but above all, the revolutionary advent of psychoanalysis, the science and cure for the soul which in many ways parallel the actor's training in exploring her emotional memory.

By endeavoring, therefore, to recreate the split consciousness of the actress, enmeshed in what Lacan named hysterical *extimité* - a combination of exhibitionist exposure and of revulsion and alienation from her own self - Krleža employs the point of view that seems to be originating both outside and inside of the actress's body, a voice that vacillates in-between someone else's and her own, and a hybrid mode situated in-between silent inner narrative discourse and a mimesis of publicly spoken, theatrical monologue. The narrative presentation of the story prevents us thus from ever deciding who is reporting the experience of stage-fright, especially since its free indirect speech manages to make us feel it, even if the heroine is perhaps exaggerating, mystifying and faking to have felt it, true to the paradox of the actor, whose art, according to Diderot, is to make the spectator feel what the actor in fact acts dispassionately. By employing this technique Krleža produced indeed a Bakhtinian "activation of the discourse of the other" (Bakhtin, 1984), with its full psychoanalytic implications. The first person material of an actress in the state of stage-fright could not have been represented through direct discourse, since this discourse could never be the actress's own, but necessarily the discourse of an Other, whether it be the Other to whom the speech of the hysteric is unconsciously addressed, or the Other of the patriarchal medical discourse, suffusing her reporting with all the interiorized terminological "proves" of her disease, or perhaps the discourse of the playwright that wrote her theatrical monologue: to complicate the metaleptic entanglement, we could as easily hypothesize that "the millinery salon

owned by Lady Laura”, in which dame R. Stoltzer is supposedly sitting and speaking about her stage-fright, does not refer to the setting, but rather to the stage design borrowed from Krleža’s play *In agony*, and that the actress is in the middle of a rehearsal for the very role of Lady Laura, incidentally, a suicidal hysteric as well. Is dame R. Stoltzer then reporting on her actual experience of the night before, no matter how exaggeratedly dramatized, or engaging in an acting exercise, a playful pause in-between the phases of the rehearsal, in which she plays in just another short piece of Krleža’s invention, the one in which her own stage-fright is dramatized?

Behind the Mask represents, I argue, what Emma Kafalenos named a “double-coded form” (2003), since it includes the embedded section of another art-work - an actress acting, all the more so since the narration represents both her own creative process and her end product. The story thus creates confusion between the embedding and the embedded voice, the direct discourse of mimetic representation and the indirect discourse of diegesis. Since we as readers are denied access to the actual oral discourse and vocal delivery of the actress, they do not only remain, as theoreticians of free indirect discourse insist, in principle “irretrievable” (Azcel, 1998, 479), but can here be, as discourse and voice external to the narration itself, eventually imagined as being already doubly coded as well, as the discourse and the voice of a character at a further remove, the one the actress is only acting to be. This *mise-en-abyme* effect of Krleža’s narrative trick has indeed its gravity beyond its ostensible “cause”. Irretrievability of identity is not, after all, only the lot of actors and hysterics, but of all of us as “miserable subjects”, trembling in the backstage of our minds and theatres of the world, incapable to appropriate a discourse and a voice we could call our own.

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Curriculum vitae

Lada Čale Feldman was born in Zagreb, Croatia, in 1963. She is Professor of theatre studies and literary criticism at the Department for Comparative Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb University. Her areas of research include theatre and performance studies, literary theory and gender studies. First having taught French and Latin in the School for Foreign Languages (1986-1991), from 1991 to 2005 she worked in the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb, where she became a senior research associate, dealing mainly with political performance and gender studies in folklore research. In 2005 she moved to the Department for Comparative Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, where she obtained tenure in 2010.

She is author of five books (*Ivo Brešan's Theatre*, 1989; *Play-within-the-play in the Croatian Theatre*, 1997; *Eurydice's Turns*, 2001; *Femina ludens*, 2005; *In the Canon, Studies on the Double*, 2008, co-authored with M. Čale) and co-editor of two volumes of ethnographic writing (*Fear, Death and Resistance, an Ethnography of War: Croatia 1991-92*, Zagreb, 1993, with I. Prica and R. Senjković, and *Ethnography of Indigenous Socialism*, 2006, with I. Prica). She published numerous articles both in Croatian and international publications. She received two national (*Petar Brečić* award for the best book in Theatre studies in 2002; The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences annual award in 2009) and an international award (*Martin Stevens* award, together with Max Harris, for the best essay /published in *Comparative Drama*/ in 2004, by Medieval and Renaissance Drama Society).

She is also the former President of the Croatian Semiotic Society and, having co-organized the 15th Annual Conference of Performance Studies international in 2009, a former member of the board of this international organization.