

Elektra from the lower depths?

Rethinking the collaboration between Gertrud Eysoldt and Hugo von Hofmannsthal

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Abstract

The role of women artists in the theatre reform of the early 20th century is usually underestimated. This paper strives to reassess the agency of a female performer (Gertrud Eysoldt) in this process, concentrating on the premiere production of *Elektra* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1903, Kleines Theater). Hofmannsthal wrote

his version of *Elektra* not only for Max Reinhardt's company (which he considered to be a new kind of theatre) but also specifically for Eysoldt, and this article focuses on the communication between them. The main sources for this research are texts written by the actress: her article for a newspaper and her letters to Hofmannsthal (published in 1996) and Hermann Bahr (unpublished, Austrian Theatre Museum). These texts are analysed more from the perspective of their poetics than from the perspective of the facts they convey. Eysoldt's autobiographical writings reveal an unexpected facet of the 'dionysism' that may have attracted Hofmannsthal. Finally, a question is raised about the meaning of the shift that Hofmannsthal made by offering the performer a re-writing of a foundational myth of patriarchal culture.

Keywords: women's agency, women's autobiographical writing, gender bias in theatre historiography, body in performance, Gertrud Eysoldt, Hugo von Hofmannsthal

I. *Introduction*

Feminist scholars have developed a plausible theory that theatre in ancient Greece appeared as a result of appropriation of certain forms of performativity practised by women, namely, those of lamentations. As Gail Holst-Warhaft puts it: "Tragedy [...] is, at least in part, an appropriation of the traditional art of women and we sense in its language, its inscrutable echoes of music and dance, an older body of ritual, a sub-stratum which informs and at times intrudes itself into an urban, male art" (Holst-Warhaft, 1995, 11). Theatre did not simply overtake some elements of the women's lamentations. While the patriarchal culture reproached the excess displayed by women during these performative activities, theatre made this excess

to serve the patriarchy. "...[T]heatre uses the feminine for the purposes of imagining a fuller mode for the masculine self, and "playing the other" opens that self to those often banned emotions of fear and pity", writes Froma Zeitlin (Zeitlin, 1996, 363). Ultimately, however, "tragedy arrives at closures that generally reassert male, often paternal (or civic), structures of authority" (p. 364).

The statement of "an appropriation of the traditional art of women" is based mainly on the facts of social life (restrictions and bans against lamenting women) and the way theatre functioned in the Greek polis: as annual festivities important for civic education of citizens (= men) and closed for women (as performers and/or spectators). Thus, summarizing feminist investigations in this field, Ellen-Sue Case wrote: "The tragedy incarcerated unruly lamenting on the streets in the physical boundaries of the theatre, where a few might lament, while the majority watched, seated and still" (Case, 2007, 121). All this should not only make one rethink institutional traditions of theatre as such but also cause alarm about the tendency to mute the facts of (suppressed) participation of women in the emergence of anything important that not only is evidence of historic injustice but also leads to essential distortions in understanding of the cultural change in question.

Often, however, this process of what I called "suppressed participation" is not so obvious, as in such cases in which the state issues decrees against female performativity and then simply forbids women's participation in the newly emerged institutional form of performance (although it is due to a sort of feminist lens that these facts from the history of ancient Greece have become noticeable and important, because "normal" historiographical accounts do not highlight them).

This article addresses a case that is astonishingly similar and astonishingly different from that of the birth of theatre in ancient Greece¹. Max Reinhardt's staging of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* with Gertrud Eysoldt in the lead (Kleines Theater, 1903) may be said *to have given birth* to the formation of

director-centred theatre in Germany. As time went on, theatre historiography promoted the figure of director in this process, acknowledged the impact of the playwright and did not forget about Eysoldt – although in these accounts the actress always remained rather a subordinated element. However, while working on the research project *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the Female Performers of His Work*, I ran upon some documents that make me think that the relationship dynamics of these three persons did not limit the role of Eysoldt to that of comprehension of the ideas of two men. Rather, these documents suggest that, at the moment of the birth of the director-centred theatre, those whom we logically consider as protagonists of this cultural change used (and, at least partly, appropriated) specific female performativity (marked by some critics of the epoch as *hysterical* and by others as *maenadic* or *Dionysian*²). We know quite well that, as for Hofmannsthal, he looked for such performativity in the art of his time – to obtain inspiration and to use it to his own artistic ends. Moreover, in considering the inspiration from such dancers as Ruth St. Denis or Grete Wiesenthal, their decisive importance for the relevant texts written by Hofmannsthal after his encounters with these representatives of *free dance* seems to be fully acknowledged (see Brandstetter, [1995] 2015, Fleisher, 2007, Fiedler, 2009, Schmid, 2009). However, in the case of *Elektra*, one usually tends to overlook this pre-existence of the creative practice of artists such as Eysoldt, while at the same all possible inspirations that came from the written word (Nietzsche, Bachofen, Rohde, Freud, Bahr) are thoroughly examined (see, for example, Jens, 1955, Politzer, 1974, Worbs, 1983, Nehring, 1991, Vogel, 1997, Greiner, 2013, Eder 2014).

In her seminal book, Gabriele Brandstetter not only followed Hofmannsthal's encounters with the important dancers of his time but also drew attention to his aesthetics of dialogue with the past (and, specifically, with ancient culture

represented by classical artwork): “Hofmannsthal develops his idea of a movement relationship between an artwork and its beholder by combining a model of visionary perception, that is, an aesthetics of affect, with an aesthetics of creation that emphasizes corporeal immediacy” (Brandstetter, [1995] 2015, 84). According to Brandstetter, this idea “leads us directly to *dance*” (p. 84): “This form of dialogue is highly specific: the dynamograms are translated from static sculpture into dance movements” (p. 84). By this, in a way, Brandstetter explains Hofmannsthal's interest in dance as an art form. However, one may say that if Hofmannsthal felt the need for such dialogue with antiquity, he also needed a mediator for such a dialogue. In other words, Hofmannsthal himself did not dance, but projected this “corporeal immediacy” for those through whom he could enter this kind of dialogue with antiquity. This is true not only for dancers but also for such a drama actress as Eysoldt, whom he met a couple of years earlier than St. Denis or Wiesenthal.

It is well known that although Hofmannsthal had been thinking about a new version of the Elektra-myth for a long time, he received the strongest impulse for writing during the guest performances of Max Reinhardt's theatre in Vienna (May 1903) and subsequent communication with him and Gertrud Eysoldt in the house of Hermann Bahr. It seems, however, that Eysoldt's impact has not been sufficiently explored, in spite of the fact that the words she wrote upon reading the text are quite often cited in the literature. Particularly, according to her letter, the writer revealed something important in her inner self that she had tried to conceal, even from herself. Unfortunately, this acknowledgement tends to be cited rather exclusively as a sign of the actress's readiness to incorporate the writer's vision onstage. As we will see, however, Eysoldt ascribed much more meaning to what she considered as the revelation of her inner self by the Austrian writer. Was what she had accumulated in herself up to the moment of her meeting with

Hofmannsthal (and what, in spite of her feeling that she “concealed” it, was somehow revealed to the writer, both through her acting and through her behaviour offstage) not a contribution to the deed of creation of this literary work?

In this article I propose to read Eysoldt's autobiographical writings (partly published, but partly completely overlooked) as for traces of her reflection on these topics. First, though, I would like to explain why it seems to me so important.

It is evident that Hofmannsthal envisaged his *Elektra* as a certain cultural mission: to undo the work of Goethe and Winkelmann and to propose a vision of antiquity that would offer a response to the turbulent contemporaneity. In the words of Michael Worbs, “hat er versucht, die in Tragödie des fünften Jahrhunderts tradierten Überreste mythischer Vorzeit zu rekonstruieren...” (Worbs, 1983, 279). For Eysoldt to accept the part of Elektra, however, meant to undertake a mission in an even more tangible way. Thus, after having read the text she wrote: “Ich habe das Gefühl, dass ich sie nun einmal spielen kann” (Eysoldt & Hofmannsthal, 1996, 9). Nevertheless, it was no question for her whether she would play this part. No doubt both the writer and the actress felt that their missions overlapped. Did they, however, overlap completely? Do we have any chance of obtaining an idea of a special “mission” of Eysoldt in this part?

I propose to approach *Elektra*'s text as a result of Hofmannsthal's reading of Eysoldt's creative individuality and his projection of a certain mission that he could propose for her on the base of the potential he sensed after having seen her onstage and offstage. This means that (although Eysoldt claimed to accept Hofmannsthal's reading completely) his vision should not necessarily have been identical with her own reading of herself. Analysing Eysoldt's writing, we not only receive a chance to grasp the reason why the actress felt herself appropriate to incarnate Hofmannsthal's *maenad*, and, moreover, to consider herself as a coauthor of this vision. In this sense, the writer's text and the contemporary

reviews prove to be insufficient if one wants to have an idea not only about “the mission of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*” but also about “Eysoldt's mission as Elektra”.

However, to judge the latter without taking into consideration Eysoldt's writings has been a normal practice. The material about the premiere and subsequent guest performances is abundant and seems to be enough to develop an idea of what this Elektra could be about (especially if we take into consideration that many contemporary reviews tended to draw attention to Eysoldt's complete identification with Hofmannsthal's text). However, when overlooking Eysoldt's own writings, we leave an important part of Eysoldt's vision unread. Comparing with what happened in ancient Greece, one may say that an important part of what can be called specific female performativity (not really fixed in words) is left beyond the discourse, because due to the process of its appropriation only its reflection produced by the culture of patriarchy has remained. However, if the part is omitted then the whole is also distorted. The attempt to read Eysoldt's autobiographical writings cannot claim to reconstruct *the whole*, but it can make us aware of a distortion that took place at the moment of the appropriation. Eysoldt's texts draw attention to some motifs that the reviewers either read differently or omitted altogether. The reasons could dwell in the traditional *literature-centrism* of theatre criticism and/or critics' unwillingness to evaluate positively what can be called *female dionysism*, but one cannot also exclude that these motifs were not so evident in the performance or muted by the text of the play. The precise reason will remain unknown. It seems, however, that independently of whether one can ever hope to claim that these motifs truly constituted an important part of Eysoldt's performance, their disclosure from her autobiographical writings can represent a certain important value in itself.

II. *Why Trace Eysoldt's Path to Her Role? Elektra in the Literature of Question*

Eysoldt's performance in the premiere of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, directed by Max Reinhardt (Kleines Theater, 1903), has been described many times (first in theatre criticism, then in theatre studies), and many different meanings have been inscribed into it. For example, when a theatre reviewer wanted to condemn Hofmannsthal for having “perverted” Sophocles in his re-writing, he (and it was always *he*, not *she*!) could have preferred to detach the actress from the field in which the decisions were made and to present her in his article as a mere medium of the (malicious) intentions of the author. At the same time, there was seemingly no contradiction in declaring Eysoldt an excellent medium for the task!

For later generations of theatre historians, whether this *Elektra* would be presented as voicing the intentions of the author, the director or probably even the actress herself once again depended on the teleology of their writing. Thus, from the perspective of a feminist researcher, it would be quite logical, after reading the play and some of the theatre reviews, to accuse Hofmannsthal and Eysoldt of “the sensational portrayal of *Elektra* [...] as a ‘hysteric’ or ‘unnatural’ woman, the decadent and demonized *femme fatale* made famous in the art, literature, and music crowding fin-de-siècle salons and stages”, as Nancy Michael put it (Michael, 2001, 82). In this account, however, Eysoldt is a *Galatea*, and Hofmannsthal is one of her *Pigmaliions* (p. 84). Another feminist scholar, Jill Scott, while criticizing Michael for having perceived “*Elektra*’s triumphant *Totentanz* as a celebration of the resumption of male dominance”, writes that “[o]ne can understand much of her criticism of Hofmannsthal, but in Vienna around 1900 a woman dancing alone on stage, barefoot and without a corset, can simply not be a confirmation of patriarchal rule” (Scott, 2005a, 176). At the same time, Scott herself seems to be unaware that the characteristics she mentions — such as being “barefoot” and “without a corset” — belong to the performance alone and are absent from Hofmannsthal's text. In fact, the staging of this text in 1903 was often described on

the basis of conclusions derived from the *text* interwoven with a sort of legend that had been functioning around the *performance*.

A different approach — and a highly characteristic one in terms of its *teleology* — is that of Erika Fischer-Lichte, who placed *Electra's Transgressions* in the prologue of her book *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*. Of course, here, the performance is decisive but in quite an unexpected way. Although one cannot suspect this author of underestimating the director's role, in her narration, Fischer-Lichte is quite determined to suggest that the principal innovation of this Elektra — namely, that fact that “[b]y transgressing the boundary between her semiotic and her phenomenal body, Eysoldt sacrificed her own physical integrity” (Fischer-Lichte, 2005, p. 9) — was the decision of the performer herself. Thus, for example, Fischer-Lichte writes,

From the reviews, whether positive or negative, it can be concluded that Eysoldt used her body in a way which had not been witnessed on the stage up to then – that she created a new kind of acting. Above all, the critics emphasize the excess of her acting and its enormous intensity. With these characteristics, as one critic notes, Eysoldt violated the norms of ‘strength’, ‘dignity’ and ‘sonorous tone of voice’, valid at the time for performances of Greek tragedies in particular. Instead, the critics noticed her ‘nervousness’, ‘unrestrained passion’ and ‘hoarse roaring’. Those who felt repelled by this claimed that the boundaries ‘between the healthy’ and the ‘abnormal’, the ‘pathological’ were thereby transgressed. In the view of many a critic, the ‘screams and the fidgets, the exaggeration of the dreadful, distortion and degeneration all along the line’, the ‘passion growing into absurdity’, were ‘only to be explained by recurring to the pathological’. Accordingly, they rejected Eysoldt’s movements as ‘unbearable’, without ‘measure’ and

'restraint', and her transgression to the 'pathological' as dissolution of the self.

(Fischer-Lichte, 2005, 2-3).³

Actually, I am eager to agree with Fischer-Lichte on Eysoldt's involvement, but I would like to develop the argumentation more transparently.

III. *Elektra vis-a-vis Earlier Roles by Eysoldt*

Hofmannsthal had seen Eysoldt not in her most famous roles, which, by that time, were notably Lulu in *Erdgeist* by Wedekind and Salome in Oscar Wilde's drama (the creations with which both the reviewers of *Elektra's* premiere and theatre historians have eagerly connected Elektra), but in the rather subordinate role of Nastya in *The Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorki.

So, a presumption that Hofmannsthal could be inspired by Eysoldt's 'demonic' heroines, is wrong even from the perspective of facts⁴. Besides that, there seems to be a crucial difference between Elektra and the roles Eysoldt played before. Most of the reviewers of *Erdgeist* and *Salome* claimed that Eysoldt's performance was *par excellence* intellectual, though some treated it as the principal shortcoming of the creation and attacked the actress's inability to present a creation, in their words, integral in its corporeal qualities. Sometimes this reproach is articulated in a hurtful manner. For example, in the role of Lulu, according to Arthur Eloesser, "sie bleibt [...] den täuschenden Schein der Weiblichkeit [...] schuldig",⁵ while *Berliner Zeitung* names her an actress "ohne alle Mittel die 'Frau' uns zu geben".⁶

Later, when comparing the Lulu of Eysoldt to that of Maria Orska, Bernhardt Diebold played with the words of the title of Wedekind's drama: in Orska's creation, he claimed, "war von Erde viel, von Geist nicht eine Spur". He wished, however, that this kind of corporeality could be added to Eysoldt's "geistscharfe"

creation (Diebold, 1928, 53). These kinds of antinomies permeated much of the contemporary criticism.

One may suggest that Elektra was the first role (or the first role that we know of as such) that somehow appealed to Eysoldt not on a rational level but on the level of her bodily experience or, better yet, that the experience did not differentiate between “earth” and “spirit”.

Thus, it would be extremely interesting to trace how this role was created and how the bodily impulses of the actress were liberated.

IV. *Eysoldt's Elektra: Rupture with the Past?*

However, here — as in many other cases — one runs into a lack of documentation. Nothing except for the letter cited above and another letter written at the same time to Hermann Bahr has been identified as documents generated by the actress herself dating from the period of her work on the role.

Furthermore, how can the process of liberating bodily impulses be documented in the first place?

Looking at Eysoldt's photos, one can see an enormous rupture between the role of Elektra and Eysoldt's previous roles (while there seems to be almost no such rupture between her early roles and her portrayals as Lulu and Salome). *Elektra* is the first production in which her hair is unfolded, while her body, sometimes in extremely expressive poses, is easily perceived underneath the simple costuming.

But how did these decisions come to Eysoldt? Were they prompted by the director? Were they the actress's decisions once she identified with the role? We do not know. However, I think that we may follow Hofmannsthal's process of reading Eysoldt and see how, in a way, he inscribed this reading into his own work, finally producing the striking effect of Eysoldt's self-identification with the part of Elektra.

Fischer-Lichte draws attention to the fact that in her first letter to

Hofmannsthal, Eysoldt named one of the effects that the text had on her as “violence”. According to the main arguments of her book, Fischer-Lichte notes the decisive influence of this moment:

Eysoldt revived this experience of reading the play in her acting. The violence that was done to her as she read was repeated in the acts of violence which she performed on her own body when playing Electra. By transgressing the boundary between her semiotic and her phenomenal body, Eysoldt sacrificed her own physical integrity.

(Fischer-Lichte, 2005, 9)

Earlier in the book, when introducing the main theme of her work, Fischer-Lichte writes that in addition to the two sacrifices in the text of the play itself, there was another sacrifice that was “actually performed: the self-sacrifice of the actress Gertrud Eysoldt” (p. 9).

However, having dealt with Eysoldt’s correspondence as with the complex and contradictory whole, I very much doubt whether this rhetoric of “violence” taken from her letter can be instrumentalized in such a manner. In her letters Eysoldt wrote much more about the effect of the revelation of her inner self (that made her to reject some conforming modes of life) than about “violence”. Why should her creative act be explained with the parallelism of the creative act of the author (he committed violence to her and she commits violence to herself) and/or with the plot of the play (that included two sacrifices)?

V. The Lower Depths

But before I proceed with reading of Eysoldt's autobiographical writings, I want to discuss briefly the evidence about her part in the *Lower Depths*. Unfortunately, it is extremely scarce since it was the first performance to introduce this drama by

Gorky to the German-speaking theatre; thus, most reviewers simply analysed the text itself. Second, the production was mainly praised for *Stimmung* and the *ensemble*. Thus, as a rule, few suggestive words were added about separate actors, if at all. However, *summa summarum*, this multiplicity of voices can help us *map* what Eysoldt's Nastya might have been.

First, Nastya somehow evoked images of abundance, and most of the critics felt the need to stress that the role was full of contradictory extremities. "Eine köstlich versumpfte Schlampe war Frau Eysoldt"⁷, wrote a reviewer of the Berlin premiere. "Eigenartig war Frl.Eysoldt im sprunghaften Wesen der Nastja, die zwischen der Dirnenrohheit und den weinerlichen Romanphantasien schwankt", wrote another.⁸ In Vienna, Eysoldt's Nastya was labelled "prächtig gezeichnet[...]"⁹ by Max Burckhard, while Emil Pernersdorfer found her to be „eine köstliche Charge“: "Schlumpiges Wesen und drängende Liebesehnsucht vereinigen sich hier zu einem äußerst drolligen Ganzen, in dessen Innersten doch viel Rührendes sichtbar war".¹⁰ "Gertrud Eysoldt als Dirne: schlampig gekleidet, hysterische Stimme, leicht zu Tränen der Wut gebracht, sentimental verbogen, unnormal, ein armes Ding, das Besseres verdiente."¹¹ This example is already a description that uses the vocabulary that Elektra would awaken to the full extent: her fury and a hysteric twist of her body would be read as signs of both abnormality and dionysism. The small role of Nastya may turn to prepare the bodily experience of Elektra, and thus stand much closer to it, than Lulu or Salome.

Second, what the reviewers stressed in the character of Nastya was that she escaped into her phantasies. For example, Marie Luise Becker, who published an article dedicated to the actress soon after *The Lower Depths*, wrote that in her "lies", Nastya re-invented reality: "Nur lügen, - lügen, - in dies öde trostlose Leben alles Helle hineinlügen!" (Becker, 1902/1903, 639).

To these sources, which are referenced in different combinations in various

related scholarship (Niemann, 1993, 82–84, Niemann, 1995, 56–60, Heininger, 2015, 65), I would like to add some additional material that has largely gone unnoticed. It conveys impressions of the guest performances that included *The Lower Depths*, the first of which took place just after the Viennese performances in 1903 (till the WWI Budapest remained the main scene of the guest performances of the Reinhardtian company). Thus, according to the evidence of Gyula Szini, Eysoldt “played Nastya with the female genius”: “She told the story of the imagined love with a fairytale, beautiful face. She was phenomenal”.¹² However, the next year, another critic, Jenő Kovacs, published an article dedicated specifically to Eysoldt, with the words:

Those who saw and praised the strumpet of Reinhardt's *The Lower Depths* in the guest performance last year don't know Gertrud Eysoldt. Sure, she was also able to play out the scenes from *The Lower Depths*: with the great truth of the naturalist acting and detailed authenticity, she showed that the case of a fallen girl was also ‘a human case’. Like when rulers, when visiting foreign countries, dress themselves in the foreign uniform — and bring with them their royal gestures, their royal gazes.¹³

This strange feeling, which other critics probably did not dare to admit, could potentially have been inspiring for Hofmannsthal as well.

However, it seems that another group of evidence, which concerns ephemeral events such as the meeting in Bahr's house, is much more interesting for the purposes of tracing the creative impulses of *Elektra* — both those of the play and those of the performance.

VI. *What Actually Happened at Bahr's House?*

In 1915, Eysoldt wrote a text titled ‘Der Dichter und die Schauspielerin’ for

Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt. It describes the first guest performances of Kleines Theater and Neues Theater in Vienna (May 1903) and a breakfast at Herman Bahr's villa at which Hofmannsthal not only was introduced to Reinhardt but also promised to write *Elektra*, with Reinhardt as the prospective director and Eysoldt as the lead actress. This meeting, however, is also mentioned in Eysoldt's letter cited above — the letter in which she asks Hofmannsthal to write new roles for her. This was, in fact, only the second letter that she sent to the writer. The first was sent right after having read *Elektra* (and a month before its premiere); the second was written 10 months after the premiere, and, in a way, it summarized the essence of what she called “rätselhafte innere Beziehung” she felt that she had with the man.

Ich habe die Empfindung, als läge ein breiter Streifen Leben bei Ihnen, und lockt mich und macht mich ruhelos, sobald ich an Sie denke. Es ist sicher etwas ganz Künstlerisches – was im Grunde dieser starken Empfindung nach Ihnen verlangt. Ich denke dabei nur an den Sturm Electra,

writes Eysoldt, adding:

Und ich denke weiter zurück an unsere erste Bekanntschaft – als ich tiefseelig Ihr Naturell empfand. Ich denke an die breite Terrasse und die weiter Ferne, die sich ausbreitete und die wie eine Verbrüderung schien zu meiner innere Glückseligkeit. Viel viel Leises, Traumhaftes spielt in jene Stunden hinein – viel, was nur wie eine Andeutung an mir selbst vorüberglitt – aus Tropfen Blutes zusammengesetzt – die aus vergangenen Bildern sich lösten. Zärtliches dankbares Glück.

(Eysoldt & Hofmannsthal, 10).

This is the private letter.

In the text for the publication 11 years later, Eysoldt gives her first impression of Hofmannsthal as a “[k]ühl, höflich” man whose behaviour is “zurückhaltend”. Although everyone knows that the day before he marvelled at her Nastya in *The Lower Depths*, upon their introduction, the actress feels as if he does not see her at all. In addition, he is the only one who distances himself from the group conversation.

After the breakfast, everybody goes to the terrace.

Ich war froh, mit den Hunden spielen zu können - an mir riß dieses Unpersönliche eines Menschen, den Bahr zu Reinhardt und mir in Beziehung hatte bringen wollen.

Wie es nun aber auf einmal kam - weiß ich nicht mehr - Hofmannsthal hatte plötzlich die Unterhaltung an sich genommen - er ging im Zimmer auf und ab - immer hin und her - und sprach - ich schaute auf, ich blieb im Bann - er sprach leidenschaftlich - gezielt - in einem eigenen Rhythmus - und mit einem geistigen Tempo - das ein Jubel für mich war. Es erregte mich heftig.¹⁴

What is astonishing in these two flashbacks is their visuality, which seems to be a reverse image of the sets in *Elektra*. On this day, Eysoldt feels full of happiness and interconnected with nature —with a faraway landscape and with the animals at her feet to play with whom meant to her a joyful escape from the company of the man restrained by cultural conventions. However, the set of *Elektra* would be “[d]er innere Hof, begrenzt von der Rückseite des Palastes und niedrigen Gebäuden, in denen die Diener wohnen” (Hofmannsthal, 1979, 187). As one of the servants mentions, they set Elektra “den Napf mit Essen zu den Hunden” (p. 188). She is banned from the palace, but she is also cut off from the landscape, enclosed in this

inner courtyard — and the fact that this scenery captured the utmost creative impulses of the writer is confirmed by a note from Bahr dated July 21, 1903. Hofmannsthal had told Bahr about the main idea of the work, and in the latter's note, the heroine appears to be already caught in this kind of scenery:

Ich bewundere, wie fein er die 'Elektra', indem er die Wirkung ganz auf das verwilderte, zu den Sklaven verstoßene, hysterisch gewordene, arme, verblühte Mädels stellt und das Stück im Sklavenhof, wo es von ärmlichen gepeinigten Gestalten wimmelt, die bald nur hinter den Fenstern auftauchen, bald zu irgend einer Verrichtung oder durch Neugierde herausgetrieben werden, spielen läßt [...].

(Bahr, 1997, 348)

The heroine is enclosed in this inner courtyard, cut off from nature, and at the same time, she is already strongly associated with the animals in the opening words of the text.

Elektra springt zurück wie ein Tier in seinen Schlupfwinkel, den einen Arm vor dem Gesicht.

ERSTE.

Habt ihr gesehen, wie sie uns ansah?

ZWEITE.

Giftig

wie eine wilde Katze.

(Hofmannsthal, 1979, 187)

Bahr reads the slaves' yard as being reminiscent of *The Lower Depths*, as seen by Hofmannsthal: "Dekoratív und überhaupt scenisch [sic!] hat er sie eigentlich völlig ins 'Nachtasyl' gesteckt, das auf seine Phantasie sehr stark gewirkt haben muß" (Bahr, 1997, 348). Some critics have also stressed this affinity.

However, I would like to call attention to that moment in Eysoldt and Hofmannsthal's meeting when her play with the dogs became a spark for the poet. It is surely not an accident that Eysoldt somehow identifies this moment as the inspiration for the whole creation.

This moment may have reminded Hofmannsthal of a scene from *Il Fuoco* by d'Annunzio, the autobiographical novel (1900) in which the Italian presents his love affair with the great actress Eleonora Duse as an important cultural project of reviving the Dionysian in modern theatrical art. Hofmannsthal knew the novel and even intended to write a review of it.

The crucial scene in which the author's alter ego, Stelio, begins to understand the Dionysian potential of his lover (in the novel, the actress bears the name Foscarina), takes place when they both visit a Venetian lady who owns a large number of dogs. What happens, precisely? On the surface, nothing special, but the reality is quite mysterious when one looks deeper.

[Foscarina] heard [Stelio] speaking of things that were alive, of limbs apt for the chase and the capture, of vigour and dexterity, of natural power and the vigour of blood [...] and she herself, with her feet in the warm earth under the breath of the sky, in her dress that was similar in colour to the tawny plunderer, felt a strange primitive sense of bestiality rising from the roots of her being, something that was almost the illusion of a slow metamorphosis in which she was losing a part of her human consciousness and becoming a child of nature, a short-lived, ingenuous force, a savage life.

Thus, was he not touching the obscurest mystery of her being? was he not making her feel the animal profundity from which the unexpected revelations of her tragic genius had sprung forth, shaking and inebriating the multitude like the sights of the sea and the sky, like the dawn or the tempest? When he had told her of the quivering *sloghi*, had he not divined the natural analogies from which she drew the powers of expression that had set poets and peoples wondering? It was because she had discovered anew the Dionysian sense of nature the naturaliser, the ancient fervour of instinctive and creative energies, the enthusiasm of the manifold god emerging from the ferment of every sap that she appeared so new and so great on the stage.

(D'Annunzio, 1900, 240-241)

Taking into consideration the importance of Duse not only to the whole European culture, but also to Hofmannsthal (who dedicated several important articles to the actress) and the intense sense of *searching of the Dionysian* shared by D'Annunzio and the Austrian author, one should not underestimate the possibility that Hofmannsthal saw Eysoldt playing with dogs through the lens proposed by *Il Fuoco*. But even if this hypothesis is wrong, D'Annunzio's novel provides an important context of the quest for modern maenad common to the both authors as well as to many of their contemporaries. What connects both episodes - that in the novel (inspired with the biographical events) and that in the real life - is a sense of a hidden meaning.

VII. *Eysoldt Reads Elektra*

The motif of disclosing what was hidden under the surface is a leading one in Eysoldt's writing as well.

Thus, in her first letter to Hofmannsthal, she writes:

Sie haben nun ein paar Monate mit meinem brennenden Leben geschrieben – Sie haben aus meinem Blut alle Möglichkeiten wilder Träume geformt – und ich habe hier ahnungslos gelebt und an Sie nur in heiteren buntfarbigen Stunden gedacht – sorglos gewartet auf das Ereignis, das Sie mir bringen würden. [...] Und Sie haben inzwischen fern von mir alle wilden Schmerzen, jener einstigen Zeiten – alle Empörungen, die meinen schwachen Körper je geschüttelt haben – all dies *unendliche brünstige* Wollen meines Blutes sich zu Gaste geladen und schicken es mir nun zu. Ich erkenne alles wieder – ich bin so furchtbar erschrocken – ich entsetze mich. Ich wehre mich – ich fürchte mich.¹⁵

She is even more straightforward in the letter to Bahr:

Heut Nacht habe ich an Hugo v. Hofmannsthal geschrieben. Ich habe seine Elektra gelesen. Ich empfinde sie wie eine Vergewaltigung an mir – als hätte es mit meinem zweiten Ich zusammen ein Leben gelebt. [...]

Ich bin heut morgen noch zerbrochen – im Aufwachen schon spürte ich, dass mir Nachts etwas an der Seele geschehen ist, was all meiner Ruhe, all dem, – was ich spielend an Leben wirke in mir und um mich – feindlich – und aufreizend entgegen ist. [...] – Sie wissen ja nicht, Hermann Bahr, wie ich leide, wenn man mich will und findet – ich möchte immer vorübergleiten an den Menschen, dass sie mich nicht anrühren und da wo ich liebe – ruhe ich aus von mir, ich schlafe dann – ich fürchte jeden lauten Zuruf – denn ich erdrücke mit meinen Kräften, wenn ich wache, ich zerstöre mich.¹⁶

What an astonishing diagnosis of one's life! In this context, one can evaluate the act of acknowledging what *Elektra's* author disclosed ("Ich erkenne alles wieder ..."). But, what, in fact, was disclosed?

In one of her later letters to Bahr (with whom she had a much more intimate relationship than she had with Hofmannsthal), Eysoldt writes about something that, as she states, she does not dare to confess to anyone, explaining the reason: "als wäre ich indiscret damit, als lauschte ich an verschlossenen Türen".

However, behind these "verschlossenen Türen" is her own sensual experience, which she otherwise does not dare to admit, and she explains why: she uses the word "Ehrfurcht" to describe what she feels "wo es sich mir ganz enthüllt der Körper"; she admits that she is "seliger in der Sinnlichkeit als Tausend Andere und beredter darin vielleicht auch". Ultimately, she mentions that "eine blöde Menge" would surely re-name it as "Perversität" and that she is infinitely astonished by this word: "Ich habe Millionen Freiheiten in mir - und mein Spiel mit ihnen ist eine Kunst und ein schöpferischer Trieb - wüsste ein Mensch, wie schwer diese Leidenschaften auszutragen sind"¹⁷.

In her correspondence with Bahr, Eysoldt begins with appeals that seem to be quite conventional expressions of falling of love with the man. However, what follows is rather unexpected. Eysoldt gradually initiates her addressee into her unconventional sexuality. In her letters, she speaks of *Sehnsucht* in regard to Bahr, but at the same time, she mentions her liaison with Edmund Reinhardt (as the background of her life that is somehow known to everybody — she names him "Menschenkind"), and after a number of pages filled with explanations of what is so unique and specific in her relationship with Bahr, she may add a note on Hofmannsthal and then resume: "Ich denke immer an Sie Beide zugleich".¹⁸ However, at one point she explains her relationship with Hofmannsthal as quite different from that to Bahr: "Ich glaube nicht, dass ich hier als Frau empfinde - ich

habe ein knabenhaftes schönes Gefallen an ihm"¹⁹. In a later letter (October 12, 1904), after a kind of hesitation, she tells the addressee the story of her passionate love for a woman 10 years previously that had remained "unerfüllt", "ein Nieerrungenes"²⁰ that was, in fact, an enigma she has begun to understand only now. Comparing these letters to the others available, one might suggest that Eysoldt chose Bahr to be her confidante in matters that she did not dare to articulate to anyone else and probably did not dare to articulate to herself before *Elektra*.

All this, however, maps the territory of "Millionen Freiheiten", otherwise hidden, that she allowed herself to play with onstage.

Of course, to suggest that Elektra could serve Eysoldt mainly as a means of coming out seems to be unlikely, simply because the play does not actually contain any material to perform such coming out of — if not to equate homosexuality (as some critics did) with the asceticism that Elektra chose for herself and the feeling of her exclusion from the process of procreation ("Ich bin nicht Mutter, habe keine Mutter [...]"; Hofmannsthal, 1979, 220), which is one of the main motives of Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*. Instead, I would like to draw attention to what Eysoldt herself named as 'millions of freedoms' and to raise the question of what it was in Hofmannsthal's creation that was particularly liberating for Eysoldt.

In her letters—including those written right after reading *Elektra* for the first time—she constructs herself as a "schwacher Körper" that needs to hide itself; otherwise, she would not be able to bear "alle Empörungen" that she would have to endure. The text of *Elektra* found her at a moment when she felt that she could hide herself very well: "Und was ich hier lebte - war weiches wärmendes Fürsorgen um ein mir liebstes Menschenkind, und ein Ausruhen von tausend Leiden vergangener Jahre." (Eysoldt & Hofmannsthal, 1996, 9) Elektra is somebody who rejects this soft warm hidden place, but this "weiches wärmendes

Fürsorgen”, which is otherwise expected from a creature with so-called *true femininity*, is also a powerful source inside Eysoldt’s Elektra —something that she rejects not (only) in others but (also) in herself.

Thus, “Millionen Freiheiten” dwell in the gesture of rejecting the already known patterns of femininity (represented, of course, not only by Chrysotemis but also by Klytaemnestra and the female servants, who are also the object of Elektra’s scorn).

VIII. *Hofmannsthal’s Shift from Reality to Eternal Myth*

Let us return to the first meeting of Eysoldt and Hofmannsthal.

Eysoldt bans herself from gathering — rejecting its norms of superficial communication. She goes to play with the dogs and enjoys, as she states, the strange joy and happiness resulting from this abandonment.

Hofmannsthal, however, reads the tension underneath. Most likely, for him, the picture overlaps with what he had seen the previous evening: the extreme passion of Nastya, who, in her fury, negates and destroys the world of her master, Baron, who dared to question the world of *her* phantasies.

Regardless, Eysoldt insists that she was happy to play with the dogs and to be rid of people; Hofmannsthal reads the utmost pain into this picture—and, after having received the text, Eysoldt recognizes it as a truthful understanding of what is inside her as an individual.

In her summary of the critics’ opinions, Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests that Eysoldt worked upon the audience through the mere intensity of her physical presence, the “excess of her acting” and “the highest level of ecstasy from the very first scene” (Fischer-Lichte, 2005, 2, 4). Although it is an exaggeration that the critics of the early 20th century would write mainly about this (most importantly, according to the rules of theatre reviews of the time, they analysed the text and

not the performance), if we try to dissect the parts of the reviews that were dedicated to Eysoldt's performance and put them together, then Fischer-Lichte is probably right about the importance of the actress's physical presence for the spectators, even if they were not always fully aware of it. In this vein Fischer-Lichte writes,

The critics who passed a positive judgment on Eysoldt's acting particularly emphasized the contrast between her tiny, delicate body and the enormous power of her passionate, forceful movements. 'In the lead, Gertrud Eysoldt who played Electra with the eerie impulsiveness of a fanatical revenge demon: simply in the bare contrast between her tiny physical stature and the great power of her temperament.' This power also came to the fore in acts of violence which Eysoldt performed on her own body when, with 'chopped hurried movements' and 'convulsive spasms' or other kinds of movements, 'which were taken to the highest level of ecstasy from the very first scene', she forced her body into extreme exertions.

(Fischer-Lichte, 2005, 4)²¹

IX. *Eysoldt's Autobiographical Writings as a Source*

Alongside the article in *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt* and letters to Hofmannsthal, I consider the letters to Bahr to be unique documentation of the impact Hofmannsthal's Elektra had upon Eysoldt and the impact she had upon this Elektra (taking into consideration that the relevant line of her correspondence with Bahr was initiated by the letter written right after the first one sent to Hofmannsthal and dedicated to the same subject). Other than in these texts, Eysoldt never articulated what actually had impressed her so much in Hofmannsthal and in this role. Everything else we know about this Elektra are the

opinions of the critics, who had a different profession and a different position in the gender hierarchy and in the social system generally. They were taking part in a complicated ideological battle that pressed them to define whether the writer Hofmannsthal was their ally or enemy, and this influenced the way they would describe Eysoldt's creation and the way they would evaluate it (although sometimes it was evaluated highly with comments on the totally unacceptable character of the play). As a rule, the reviews did not presume that the actress was responsible for the message the performance conveyed. They rather considered her as its transmitter. The reviewers, of course, most probably knew nothing about the impression Eysoldt produced on Hofmannsthal and about their meeting; the writer did not make announcements for the press that he had written this part precisely for Eysoldt and the critics didn't ponder on that fact. If somebody was puzzled with the way the atmosphere of *Elektra* resembled that of the *Lower Depths*, the comments on this fact were rather sarcastic (see Jaron et al., 539-540). None of the critics presumed that this play and Eysoldt's appearance as Nastja could have served Hofmannsthal with a source of inspiration. Elektra as the lead character of Hofmannsthal's play and Eysoldt as Elektra were viewed from the perspective of the reinterpretation of the eternal cultural values and great myth of antiquity by the contemporary artists and not from the perspective of the current stage of the development of theatrical paradigm in general and/or a critical point in the career of the given actress.

It is, however, the perspective that I would like to adopt: what did this part mean for Eysoldt at this stage of her artistic development? It surely grew out of what she had accumulated before ("...Sie haben inzwischen fern von mir alle wilden Schmerzen, jener einstigen Zeiten - alle Empörungen, die meinen schwachen Körper je geschüttelt haben - all dies *unendliche brünstige* Wollen meines Blutes sich zu Gaste geladen..." she wrote to the writer, Eysoldt &

Hofmannsthal, 1996, 9), but at the same time it was a sort of uncovering of the hidden potential, a rejection of one's own past and an act of transgression.

However, everything that can be said about the reasons of such an impact will remain a hypothesis. Still, I feel it is important to model a network of possible interactions between persons and texts.

In the article written for the newspaper, Eysoldt describes Hofmannsthal exclusively through his appearance: his looks, his manners, behavior, gestures, movements and finally the energy of his speech. Eysoldt seems to exclude the main medium of the poet: the word. Characteristically, she seems to forget what exactly he spoke about but writes down "the stage directions": a restrained man suddenly explodes, emanates energy, and becomes, in a way, transparent, disturbing and important for her. The text does not name the reason for this explosion, and by this somehow suggests that it was connected with the scene described just before it: Eysoldt's withdrawal from other guests (first of all, from Hofmannsthal, because of his unwillingness to communicate) and her play with the dogs. It seems that her reluctance to take part in the conventional societal games opens up the writer to energetic response ("...er sprach leidenschaftlich - gezielt - in einem eigenen Rhythmus - und mit einem geistigen Tempo..., p.5).

Is not it, however, the same trajectory that was delineated in her first letter to the writer? In this epistolary text Eysoldt presents herself as a person who knows how to confine herself and to hide her inner self from other people and who, however, was made suddenly burst out with the storm of emotions. Now the reason is named: it is Hofmannsthal's text. But what does she mean exactly? By that time she had already played a number of roles that freely could be called transgressive. Nevertheless, she obviously thinks that even in those roles that meant provocations for others, she still hid herself.

Let's return to those former roles that critics so eagerly associated with

Elektra: Lulu and Salome (the latter one in two different productions: in 1902 and 1903), and Henriette from *There are Crimes and Crimes* by Strindberg (1902, the German title for this production was *Rausch*). These roles were perceived by the reviewers as a series of “demonic women,” about whom it was written that they were „die personifizierte Sünde,²² “Giftschlange”,²³ “die Zeugungs- und Todesgöttin zugleich”²⁴. Henriette is called a modern Astarte in *Rausch* (knowing Strindberg’s style, one feels bitter irony in this definition), but Eysoldt’s heroine is also associated with “Astarte” (and, respectively, her male counterpart is called “Astartepriest”) in the reviews of *Erdgeist*²⁵. However, we shouldn’t be misled by these definitions. Even if one can deduce from some of these descriptions that most probably Eysoldt developed a snake-like and/or cat-like style of movements for these roles, the corporeal experience was surely not the focus of these creations. I have already mentioned that the reviewers of the epoch dedicated considerably less place to the scenic interpretation preferring to discuss the literary text in detail. Thus, the visualization of the scenic images was not perceived as a primary task. Yet, *Elektra* already did have a quality that eventually made the reviewers fill their texts with the verbal visualizations of movements, while *Rauch*, *Erdgeist* or *Salome* still lacked it.

In these roles Eysoldt could rather impress – even shock – the audience with the articulation of a persistent will of a woman; this was, however, enough to read it as an attack of sensuality, since the patriarchal culture always presumes that woman’s will is about distracting man from the spiritual and attracting him to the corporeal. However, if a female character was so “demonically” active, the (male) audience somehow expected the explanation of this fact: her appearance had to conform with the norms of “seducing female body”.

It is difficult to say how Eysoldt managed the fact that her physical givens were not of that kind to conform to those expectations. There is no evidence in the

reviews that on the first nights of these productions Eysoldt would handle that fact, as „mäßig schöne Schauspielerien“²⁶ (Richard Nordhausen, 1903, in Jaron et al. 530) she undertakes such roles as Salome or Lulu (to whom at the same time some idolatrous phrases of their male counterparts are directed), as a deliberate artistic provocation. In fact, her photos from these roles testify that probably she did want to conform to the expectations mentioned above: the costumes, poses and facial expressions of the photographic Lulu and Salome of hers are conventionally „feminine“. In contrast, later reviews contain the hints that her attitude to (what was perceived by the reviewers as) her corporeal inadequacy became much more conscious, and actually subversive and provocative.

„Von Anfang bis zu Ende spielt sie mit der Verstandeshelle und -kühle, die das einzige, aber über alle Maßen Bewunderungswürdige an diesem seltsamen Menschen ist, dessen Frauenleibrudiment auf zwei Knabenbeinen ruht und von einem bösen Bubenkopf überhöht wird“ – wrote Walderman Bonsels in 1908 (quoted in: Seehaus 1973, 389). In 1911 a reviewer in Königsberg described her entrance as Lulu as a provocation: „Wenn sie ... auftritt, das knabenhafte Körperchen überschattet von einem lächerlichen Riesenhut, der nur dazu bestimmt zu sein scheint, dieses unscheinbare Gaminengesichtchen noch seltsamer erscheinen zu lassen, dann geht eine Enttäuschung durch die Reihen des Hauses. 'Donnerwetter! Lulu soll doch schön sein? Eben erst sagte der Portaitmaler, sie sei ein Engelskind, bei dessen Anblick ihm die Knie zitterten. Und nun *das da?!'*“ (p. 388).

I would suggest that this new aesthetics in handling the physical givens of her body was also the result of her experience with Elektra. However, both earlier and later reviewers praised her neither for the attempts of being a conventional beauty nor for the corporeal grotesque, but for the intellectual aspect of her performance. Regardless, if later she learned to accept, to use and to convert into

an artefact that corporeality which the reviewers had persistently referred to as non-normative, the corporeal experience did not become the primary source for the creation of these roles. Characteristically, the texts of *There Are Crimes and Crimes*, *Erdgeist* and *Salome*, while giving so many examples of how “the male gaze” can be verbalized, hardly provide any insight of the way the heroines experience their own body.

Against this background, Hofmannsthal’s play offered something quite different. The way its characters grasp reality can be defined as „thinking through the body”. And the title heroine is the best example of it. She is obsessed with defining her own bodily experience, but this „thinking through the body” also permeates her attitude toward other characters: her mother, sister, brother and even to the secondary figures. (It should be stressed, that for Eysoldt this should not have meant the shift from the intellectual to the pure corporeal; as we will see, Hofmannsthal’s Elektra rebels against the version of femininity as dwelling into the unconscious).

The corporeality is also different. This time it is far from the imitation of the accepted ideals of beauty; Eysoldt doesn’t have to conform neither to the tastes of petit-bourgeois (as it seems to be the case with her photographs as Lulu and Salome) nor to those of the decadent aesthetes (who appreciated her snake-like movements and sometimes even compared her to the Pre-Raphaelites’ women). In a way, this „different” corporeality might have had Nastya in *The Lower Depths* as its predecessor. This is why I would prefer to treat the Hofmannsthal’s proposed text to the actress not only as exclusively his own achievement, but as a result of his reading of a specific experience inscribed in the body of the actress and its translation into the verbal images. It is quite possible that it would have been enough for Hofmannsthal to see Eysoldt offstage, but the fact that he also had seen her onstage in this very role supports my presumptions. However, the language of

the reviews of *The Lower Depths* suggest that this role was perceived on the level of a purely artistic achievement in the frames of naturalistic/mimetic imitation. It was quite far from the transgressions of Elektra that would shock the audience. Once again, *The Lower Depths* is another text that gives no hint how the female character defines her corporeality.

As for Hofmannsthal's drama, it should have caused the shock already to the actress who read the script because of its condensation of the images of body so distant from the conventionality (but probably close to the way Eysoldt herself experienced her own body). It is symptomatic that Eysoldt never commented on that content of Hofmannsthal's drama that had captured the reviewers' attention to the utmost degree, namely on Elektra as an embodiment of hate. Thus, from some feminist standpoints, such as those represented by Nancy Michael, she can be seen as a transmitter of misogynist ideas, while her strange silence on the meaning of the play she promoted with her performance makes her compliant with the cultural system that eagerly reanimates one of the basic myths of the patriarchy. At the same time, the outburst of "thinking with/through the body" in her correspondence with Hofmannsthal and Bahr testifies to the revelation the text produced in the actress. While playing a role in the revision of a patriarchal myth, she also transmitted this very revelation that was hardly compatible with the patriarchal system. Thus, the meaning of such a cultural event as the premiere of *Elektra* differs substantially whether we accept a literature-centered or performance-centered point of view.

To my mind, the paradox of this role is that the frame of the patriarchal myth may blur the fact that the source of this performance might have been the energy of rebellion of a subject who had been systematically marginalized, weakened in her self-esteem, "kept out" and had grounds to feel herself excluded also from the repertoire of the accepted gender roles. The most blurring is the fact that Elektra

's rebellion is directed against another woman – her mother Klytaemnestra. Moreover, from the feminist standpoint it is in the handling of the latter that Hofmannsthal reveals himself as distancing from any pro-feminist revision of the Greek myth most of all. Namely, his re-writing deprives Klytaemnestra of any arguments to defend her deed (she doesn't cite the fact that Agamemnon sacrificed her daughter Iphigenia), of any real strength and power, and more importantly, it deprives her of her wit and her rhetorical skills²⁷. Presuming that Hofmannsthal's drama was not just a re-writing of Sophocles's eponymous tragedy, but a response to the myth of Atreidae generally, it is worth mentioning, that Hofmannsthal blurs the fact that originally such female characters as Klytaemnestra were constructed as threatening to society because of their usurpation of what was reserved for men: a manner of speech and deeds appropriate to full citizenship²⁸. A pro-feminist re-writing would have had to address and reevaluate this issue, but with Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* this was not a case. At the same time, the text offered other possibilities for the critique of women's subordinate position. Eysoldt could read Klytaemnestra as a woman escaping thinking and choosing to live in the unconscious («immer bist du als wie im Traum», as Elektra says to her, Hofmannsthal 1979, 199) or, if acting, then defying the responsibility for her deeds. In Hofmannsthal, the act of Agamemnon's murder acquired exclusively "feminized" characteristics, as constantly stressed by Elektra. Namely, when reconstructing the murder of her father she underlines that this way it could have been committed only by a woman (who, lacking real strength, is pressed to act in a deceitful and sly manner; because of this, Elektra also names "Weib" Aegisth).

In a way, Hofmannsthal's text didn't give Eysoldt the material to question the foundations of the patriarchy, but it gave material to reject some models of femininity and to claim the right to be different. For this Elektra, Klytaemnestra is

not only a woman who committed a murder, but – probably, most importantly – a sexual object totally subordinated by a desiring man. (Paradoxically, Klytaemnestra comes to Elektra to complain about Aegisth's influence over her; but Elektra obviously condemns the mere fact of such a subordination). In Elektra's mind the scenery of intimacy between spouses/lovers (a bed, a bath) would constantly return as a scenery for a murder, culminating in her vision of the hunt for Klytemnestra: "...willst du nach rechts, / da steht das Bett! nach links, da schäumt das Bad / wie Blut!" (Hofmannsthal 1979, 209). This is a culmination, but otherwise Elektra constantly fantasizes about the inner space of the home as dangerous and treacherous. One may say that it is not only the vision of woman as subordinated to the sexual desire of man that revolts her, but the home itself as "woman's place". Her exile from the house is rather her own choice, but also her own choice is not being married and not bearing children (while in the Sophocles tragedy this fact was defined as a consequence of the usurping politics of Klytaemnestra who didn't want Elektra and Chrysothemis to bear legitimate heirs of Agamemnon). Returning once and again to the riddle of her own birth from Klytaemnestra's body, Elektra is puzzled by the unconscious character of the process of procreation. (Another version of the "unconscious body" Elektra confronts is, of course, her sister Chrysothemis).

In contrast, Hofmannsthal's Elektra presents herself as ruling her own body, even if the results of her "downplaying" this body make her ashamed before Orestes (whom she feels obliged to explain the deeper sense of such a downplaying). Another thing that equally may blur the fact of Elektra's control over her body is her definition of what happened with it in the terms of "sacrifice". In her speech to Orestes, Elektra admits that she had sacrificed her beautiful body and beautiful hair to the dead father; moreover, she experienced a sort of pressure from the dead to do so. However, she is not presented as a zombie or a hypnotized person subordinated to an alien will. Beginning from her very first appearance in

the tragedy, Elektra is active in her excessive ritual of mourning, she calls Agamemnon herself (and it is not he who would haunt her), and it is also she who decides what performative acts (including those that deconstruct and even ruin the normative female body) will apply to this mourning. Developing the thought of Fischer-Lichte, one may say that if Eysoldt transcended the delineation between phenomenal and semiotic bodies (that brought her closer to Marina Abramovic than to the actresses of her own time), the model for such a transgression was the heroine of the literary text she played. Hofmannsthal's Elektra commits the act of sacrifice through the act of corporeal metamorphosis (that presumes the rejection of the patterns of the femininity normative in the patriarchy society). Whether Hofmannsthal understood it or not, this Elektra refers to those "unruly mourners" on the streets of Athens whom Solon tried to confine with his decree while the establishment of the institution of theatre might have been, according to feminist scholars, a strategy to appropriate this kind of performing activity²⁹.

If we choose to distance ourselves from the terminology of "sacrifice", it is not difficult to notice that on the stage of Elektra's one-person theatre once and again the same scene is enacted: the murder of Agamemnon (including the scene of its repetition, for this is the way the murder of his murderers is envisaged). It seems to be very similar to that disturbing way of mourning that reenacted the injustice and passionately called for justice that feminist scholars claim to be a predecessor of theatre in ancient Greece. Thus, Elektra refers to the figure of the female mourner as a forerunner of the performing arts as such. Eysoldt could feel in such a character a potential of transgression that defines the creative power of the body anew. Thus, it seems to be a mistake to judge her words and actions as "rejection of femininity"³⁰. Rather, one might define it as a *revision* of femininity, a revision that probably was first undertaken as early as Solon's epoch through the specific performativity of female mourners. It reclaims the body and sexuality for

the purposes of a creative action in the world to that degree that completely defies the normative “usages” of female body in the patriarchal society (as an object of desire and a source of procreation). What make me think that it could be the mode of reading compelling to Eysoldt are the relevant motives of her autobiographical writings. As *Elektra*, Eysoldt enacted a more radical version of herself.

X. *The Transmission of the Misogyny or the Expression of Liberated Femininity?*

It is important, however, to understand, that in every single review, all the comments about enormous energy, bestiality, etc. are associated with the concrete interpretation of the Greek myth and are by no means regarded as qualities to be judged *per se*. They are explained in these texts only in connection with the deeds of the past that *Elektra* persistently reminds herself of — and thus reconstructs in minute detail — and with the deed of vengeance that *Elektra* is constantly phantasizing about. The reviewers tended to read *Elektra* in the line of “demonic women”, and the rupture with the former characters went unnoticed.

Hofmannsthal diagnosed the liberation of *Elektra*’s desire as suicidal, and the reviews seemed to confirm this diagnosis as for the performance.

Surely, reviewers represented but a part of the audience while there might have existed other readings of the Eysoldt’s creation that remained muted. Nevertheless, it is clear that such *Elektra* could have been and actually was used by the dominant discourse against the ideas of women’s liberation. It would not be an exaggeration to state that *Elektra*, after all, represented a certain trap for Eysoldt and that it failed to become an adequate territory for a creative game with the hidden “millions of freedoms” she wrote about in her letters to Bahr.

When comparing later works of Hofmannsthal to *Elektra* Eysoldt, in an indirect way, pointed out what she appreciated in that play: “Die Elektra ist heisser

und strömt stärker, ich liebe sie mehr mit dem Temperament“, wrote she about *Das gerettete Venedig* in 1905 (Eysoldt & Hofmannsthal, 1996, 16); “Eine Zärtlichkeit in der Figur möchte ich aber auch – eine Flamme“, was her wish for the next role (p.22). Finally in 1913 she summarized: “...es ist das verwandte Wesen der Temperamente, das dunkle Etwas, was Sie trieb Electra zu schreiben, - mich ergriff davon geschüttelt zu werden bis in´s Innerste“ (p.92). Was it, however, inevitable that a writer who had “das verwandte Wesen der Temperamente” confronted the actress with a text that ultimately confirmed the patriarchal order?

The following question may sound weird, but, from the perspective of the development of Reinhardt´s theatre and Eysoldt´s career in particular it is quite justified: What was the meaning of the shift made by Hofmannsthal, both from the socially concrete milieu of *The Lower Depths* to *Elektra* and from the sunny terrace with the playful dogs to *Elektra*?

In short, through this shift, the potential of the female excess that negates the existing reality is placed into the framework of the myth, which is dedicated to the reconstruction of the patriarchal order and bears the status of a *chart* for European culture. Nastya´s revolt against Baron is, of course, fruitless and has no importance in the life of the society (unlike that of the princess Elektra against the queen Klytaemnestra), but it implies further questions about the existing order in which oppression works in multiple configurations and at the intersection of gender and class. Hofmannsthal renders the situation at the level of *an eternal myth*. Klytaemnestra descends to the slaves´ courtyard just as Vasilissa in *The Lower Depths* descends to her tenants, but since Elektra is, in a way, only *disguised* as a slave to use her self-humiliation as a sacrifice, the social is banned and does not play any role in the reflection upon the piece.

No less disturbing is the re-interpretation of what can be labelled the interconnectedness with nature and natural forces. The memory of playing with

the dogs³¹, which would repeatedly return in Eysoldt's recollections about her first meeting with Hofmannsthal, seems to be an unconscious gesture with which she would like to juxtapose these two visions, of joy and of pain, thus somehow bringing the overlooked aspect of joy back into the picture and by this, defying the pain as the dominant emotion for her Elektra (that was somehow conceived that day).

XI. *A Conclusion of Sorts*

It is not enough to say that for *Elektra* Eysoldt was an *author's inspiration*, for she also provided Hofmannsthal with a kind of specific energy, enabling him to preview a performance onstage that would realize the idea of "the maenadic". The text she received, however, was for the actress self-revealing and liberating and at the same time confusing and obliterating as for the source of this energy and her inner experience. In her autobiographical writings Eysoldt makes statements about her identification with the work as well as tries to express something which goes beyond that reading of her individuality which she believed Hofmannsthal's Elektra was. Not only these overt *statements* but also these subtle *expressions* need to be noticed and interpreted and need to become a part of narratives about this crucial event in the theatre history.

1 To clarify, in this text I use the metaphor of “birth of theatre” only as an ironic parallel to the
famous work of Nietzsche.

2 As I argue in the part IX, if we are to search for the reference in the ancient Greece, then
probably the performativity of excessive lament practiced exclusively by women would be
most appropriate one. However, Hofmannsthal and his generation preferred the associations
with the “maenads”.

3 In this quote, Fischer-Lichte cites a number of theatre reviews, most of which are
anonymous or signed only with initials. The reviews are from the Theatre Studies Collection
at the Cologne University.

4 This connection is however suggested, for example in Michael, 2001, 80, Scott, 2005b, 78.
Carsten Niemann and Joy H. Calico even claim that Eysoldt’s performance of Salome
inspired Hofmannsthal to write his *Elektra* (Niemann, 1995, 62, Calico, 2012, 63).

5 Arthur Eloesser’s review published in *Vossische Zeitung*, 18.12.1902 (Fetting, 1987, 211).

6 *Berliner Zeitung*, 17.01.1903 (Niemann, 1993, 69–70).

7 Norbert Falk’s review published in *Berliner Morgenpost*, 25.01.1903 (Fetting, 1987, 220).

8 Alfred Klaar’s review published in *Vossische Zeitung*, 24.01.1903 (Fetting, 1987, 228).

9 Max Burckhard’s review published in *Die Zeit*, 3.05.1903 (*Gastspiel des Kleinen und Neuen
Theaters im Deutschen Volkstheater 1903*, 1968, 113).

10 Emil Pernerstorfer’s review published in *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 2.05.1903 (*Gastspiel des Kleinen
und Neuen Theaters im Deutschen Volkstheater 1903*, 1968, 113).

11 Max Lesser, *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 31.01.1903 (quoted in Niemann, 1993, 82–84).

12 Gyula Szini, *Pesti Napló*, 17.05.1903. My translation from Hungarian.

13 Jenő Kovács, *Pesti Napló*, 02.05.1904. My translation from Hungarian.

14 Gertrud Eysoldt, ‘Der Dichter und die Schauspielerin’, *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt*,
30.04.1915 (reprinted in Eysoldt & Hofmannsthal, 1996, 5).

15 The letter is undated. Leonhard M. Fiedler assumed that the letter was written on September

29, 1903 (Eysoldt & Hofmannsthal, 1996, 9.). The letter to Bahr, from the collection of the Austrian Theatre Museum, was dated October 3, 1903, and in it, Eysoldt mentioned she had just written to Hofmannsthal; this makes me believe that the first letter to Hofmannsthal was instead written on October 2.

¹⁶ Letter dated October 3, 1903, Austrian Theatre Museum. My transcriptions of the letters follow the orthography and the punctuation of the original. The same strategy was adopted by the editors of the Eysoldt – Hofmannsthal correspondence that I cite in this article without changes.

¹⁷ Letter dated September 7, 1904, Austrian Theatre Museum.

¹⁸ Letter dated August 28, 1904, Austrian Theatre Museum. It was already so in her very first letter to Bahr, written on July 29, 1903: she longs to stay with the addressee alone: „wir hätten uns soviel zu sagen, weil wir so stark erleben – es hätte mich gefreut einmal keine andere Natur fühlbar in der Nähe zu haben, mit Ihnen allein zu sein“; and at the same time, she writes that her connection with Hofmannsthal is actually deeper because it also transcends the words (Austrian Theatre Museum).

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Austrian Theatre Museum.

²¹ Once again, a number of the reviews from the collection of the Theatre Museum in Cologne are cited in this fragment.

²² J.N-n on Henriette in *Rausch*, the review published in *Neue Preußische Zeitung*, 15.10.1902, quoted in Jaron et al., 476.

²³ Isidor Landau, the review of *Salome* published in *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, 15.11.1902 (Fetting 1987, 194).

²⁴ Heinrich Hart on the female characters of the modernists, the review of *Erdgeist* published in *Der Tag*, 19.12.1902 (Jaron et al., 492.)

²⁵ Heinrich Hart, the review of *Erdgeist* published in *Der Tag*, 19.12.1902 (Jaron et al., 492),

Siegfried Jacobsohn, the review of *Erdgeist* published in *Die Welt am Montag*, 22.12.1902, (Fetting 1987, 209).

²⁶ Richard Nordhausen, the review of *Salome* in *Die Gegenwart*, 1903, nr 43 (Jaron et al., 530).

²⁷ „These plays show how women’s uncontrolled speech disrupts the male-governed household and city unless it is suppressed or transmuted into a ritual form. This feminine verbal license works in tandem with a common plot type in tragedy in which the male head-of-household or husband is temporarily or permanently away from the home, thus leaving the women to their own devices...” (McClure 1999, 7). This citation refers also to the plays dealing with the circumstances of Agamemnon’s murder. According to Froma Zeitlin, Klytemnaestra in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* is a “shrewd, intelligent rebel against the masculine regime” and threatening because of „riddling doubleness of her language”; before Agamemnon is murdered he is already defeated “in the verbal exchange between himself and Clytemnestra, a debate that is specifically posed as a power struggle between male and female in which male eventually yields” (Zeitlin 1996, 89, 357, 92).

²⁸ In *Oresteia*, “Clytemnestra is repeatedly characterized as speaking like a man”, although in fact she performs “both masculine and feminine verbal genres” (McClure, 1999, 3, 71).

²⁹ On the practices of afflicting one’s own body by the female mourners and the subsequent suppression of these practices see McClure, 1999, 44-46. More on the reasons and consequences of the laws issued in Athens and other Greek cities against the female mourners, see: Foley 2001, 22-24. Holst-Warhaft, who argues that the tragedy appropriated the genre of women’s lamentation, shows that “an understanding of how laments function in societies where they constitute an important part of the rituals of death is essential to an informed reading of Greek tragedy and, conversely, that Greek tragedy can tell us much about the art of lament and why it posed a threat to society” (Holst-Warhaft 1995, 9). In turn,

Sue-Ellen Case insists that “[n]ot only did Solon pass a law to keep women off of [the streets], confined to the home, but the men must have their disruptive tendencies incarcerated for their ‘womanly’ attributes. The solution was the tragedy” (Case 2007, 121).

³⁰ The reading in the terms of rejection/perverting feminine “nature” permeated the texts of the reviewers of the premiere. Recently, scholars rather used such terms as “challenging” (the norms of femininity). In turn, Antonia Eder, for example, writes that Elektra’s isolation results “aus dem Versagen der Mutter, der natürlichen Weiblichkeit” (Eder 2012, 158).

³¹ In fact, in her letters to Bahr, Eysoldt repeatedly returned to this moment.

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