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LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S "A PAIR OF EYES; OR, MODERN MAGIC" — A DENUNCIATION OF ARTIFICIALITY

When on October 24, 1863, the thirty-first issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* revealed to New England's Victorian readers an anonymously published story of a little portentous title "A Pair of Eyes; or, Modern Magic," few booklovers could connect it to two other stories, i.e. "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" and "A Whisper in the Dark," that had appeared in the newspaper earlier in the same year, also without their author's name attached to them. Fewer New Englanders still would associate "A Pair of Eyes" with Louisa May Alcott, known then to the public as the author of juvenile *Flower Fables*, her widespread fame as a writer of domestic fiction yet to arrive in five years. The "blood and thunder" story, for which Louisa May Alcott earned a scanty sum of $ 39, helped her pay the crippling bills incurred by herself as well as by her father. At the same time, it did not thrust her up the artistic ladder, and none of her twenty nine sensational stories did — had they been marked with Louisa's name, they would have certainly proved "detrimental to [her] reputation as a writer."[1] Indeed, Victorian society refused to accept anything that would mar its fostered morality, sensational tales in particular.

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[1] Miriam Squier's letter to Louisa May Alcott, 5 January [1864?] (Houghton Library, Harvard University).

Yet, it is hard to believe that within a few years Alcott would turn out such a number of one-dime stories for the mere purpose of maintaining her family. The tales, for that matter, are meticulously composed with passion and artistic fervor that Alcott herself dubbed "the vortex." As such, these thrillers supply invaluable data which posit Alcott simultaneously inside and outside the domain of typically Victorian domestic literature: while Alcott's compliance with the rigors of sentimental writing is indubitable in case of her flagship novels, her sensational stories paradoxically place her in opposition to Victorian modes. "A Pair of Eyes" appears particularly emblematic for Alcott's anti-sentimental inclination, and therefore might serve as an exemplary instance of condensation of the themes that pervade her blood-and-thunder stories.

"A Pair of Eyes" is, first of all, a tale of the theater, the esoteric world of artists in which the realm of the make-believe — or, in Lacanian terms, the province of the Imaginary — merges with the symbolic sphere of sentimental conventions and becomes absorbed by the latter. The theater is, in other words, a place where the play pretends to be real, where the artificial acceptably passes for the natural. Still, as "A Pair of Eyes" aptly illustrates, the artificiality of the theater is in fact not fully compensatory where the natural is lacking.

Max Erdmann, the protagonist of the tale, is working on a painting of Lady Macbeth, yet he cannot accomplish his artistic endeavor:

> my picture must still remain unfinished for want of a pair of eyes. I knew what they should be, saw them clearly in my fancy, but though they haunted me by night and day I could not paint them, could not find a model who would represent the aspect desired […] (59)

Thus, he fails to find the model for his painting among the actresses, supposedly capable of assuming any favored expression. Max Erdmann must therefore remain inseparably tied to the lack he unsuccessfully yearns to fill in the theater. The lack of eyes, for Freud obviously exemplary of psychic castration, serves here another purpose: as Lacan has it, the gaze that Max Erdmann searches for is *objet petit a*, the lack itself and, at the same time, the representative of the object of lack, symbolically providing the subject with a makeshift substitute for the desired object, forever lost in the subject's entry into the Symbolic.

Consequently, Max Erdmann, a bachelor, functioning every day in the symbolism of Victorian conventions, adopts art as his *objet petit a*, atoning

in this way for his eternal lack of the primordial sexual union with a woman: "Art is my wife, I will have no other!" (66) In doing so, however, he fails to recognize the artificiality of art itself, its symbolic nature. The theater, in result, together with its double-faced actresses, cannot fulfill his desires as it operates exactly within and thanks to the unacknowledged Symbolic. Erdmann then takes neither the theater nor art for what they are; instead, he irresistibly searches for the imagined, or — if only to emphasize Erdmann's inability to productively exist in the realm of the Symbolic — the imaginary gaze.

In a scene that may therefore appear paradoxical at first blush, Erdmann stumbles upon the desired eyes exactly in the theater, just as he is about to leave it after another unsuccessful pursuit of the Imaginary in the realm of the Symbolic. The eyes belong to formerly blind Agatha Eure, "the haughtiest piece of humanity ever concocted," (64) a Victorian painted woman *par excellance*. It is no wonder then that she is to be found in the theater; the artificiality of her behavior, entirely ignored by Erdmann, is nonetheless aptly observed by his friend Louis:

> Miss Eure is a Diana toward men in general, and leads a quietly luxurious life among her books, pencils and music, reading and studying all manner of things few women of two-and-twenty care to know. But she has the wit to see that a woman's mission is to be charming, and when she has sufficient motive for the exertion she fulfills that mission most successfully. (65)

Yet neither Louis's descriptive words nor the spuriousness of the place frequented by Agatha Eure can discourage Erdmann from engaging himself in the relationship with the painted woman. Miss Eure becomes his model, and soon begins her devilish play with the artist, irreparably hooked on her symbolic eyes.

Their first painting session reveals at once the power cumulated in Agatha's gaze; when she appears in front of the painter meticulously clothed as Lady Macbeth, Erdmann is at first, unsurprisingly, unable to distinguish the natural from the artificial:

> It seemed as if my picture had left its frame; for, standing on the narrow dais, clearly defined against the dark background, stood the living likeness of the figure I had painted […] and fixed upon my own the weird, unseeing eyes, which made the face a pale mask, through which the haunted spirit spoke eloquently […]. (66-67)

Paradoxically enough, only when mingled with artificiality, can Agatha's nature become transparent for Max Erdmann. When Miss Eure, the evanescent embodiment of art, eventually makes a gesture, the painter grasps her individual symbolic existence in its entirety. Yet, the scene is blatantly reminiscent of the startling denouement of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait:" just as Poe's romantic protagonist, having accomplished his portrait, descries the abhorrent truth, Max Erdmann for the first time learns about the duplicity of his long-awaited model. When Agatha noiselessly orders him to embark on his work, Erdmann mutely replies: "if she likes the theatrical style she shall have it. It is evident she has studied her part and will play it well, I will do the same […]." (67) In result, the conversation, enacted in silence, inaugurates the couple's combat for symbolic domination over each other.

Max Erdmann loses the first battle when Agatha's gaze, full of mesmeric energy and still holding sway over the painter, casts him into a weird reverie, in which he involuntarily reveals to her his mental and emotional addiction to art. He seems to lose for the second time when, contrary to his previous declarations, he resolves to marry his model. In this way he violates the sentimental ideal of marital life as begotten of mutual love and sincerity. Max Erdman, for that matter, could not be any further from any affection towards Agatha: "Other men married for the furtherance of their ambitions, why should not I?" (70) Not only does he therefore turn out to be as theatrical in behavior as his fiancée is, but he also lays bare the hypocrisy of contemporary middle class which transformed the moral principle of sincerity into fashion masking true emotions. In Lacanian terms, far from meek succumbing to the rules of the Symbolic that he now easily recognizes as impossible to escape from, Max resolves not only to play by them but to abuse them. In this he proves as inapt to properly function in the symbolic order as he had been before he deigned to acknowledge its existence.

Unsurprisingly therefore, the protagonist's marriage, erected on falsity and dissimulation, proves to be a failure within one year. Impassive to both emotional and sexual love that Agatha offers to him, Max Erdmann directs his feelings exclusively towards art, thus challenging his wife to win his devotion by force. She succeeds in doing so by a strangely effective means: whenever the painter is away, he begins to feel such an irresistible urge to return to his wife that he becomes unable to concentrate on anything, even on art, until he finds himself safe and sound at his home hearth. Upon a chance discovery in a doctor's house Max learns about magnetism and im-

mediately ascribes his so far unaccountable feelings to his wife wielding the new, terrifying power. Allegedly defenseless against it, the painter escapes from his wife to another of their estates, where he now indulges in practicing the same extraordinary science to the detriment of his wife.

Were the conflict percolating the tale so easily and exclusively reducible to such a quasi-scientific explanation, the tale would prove as simplistic in expression as Alcott would appear a mediocre writer. However, in an uncannily phantasmal climax Max Erdmann conjures up his wife's image from which he learns that she has gone blind again. Now it is his turn to summon his wife, who submissively comes to him just to die in front of is eyes. Yet, the narrative, spun in the critical moments in a chimerical, queerly obscure manner, introduces intellectual uncertainty into the story. The painter's last words of the culminant scene, "I woke to see what I had done," (80) call into question the alleged validity of at least half of the protagonist's tale, now likely to be regarded as dream-like account of the mental combat between two sexes rather than realistic description of events.

In a phantasmagoric atmosphere, the reader unveils the true meaning of the story, assigning now to Max Erdmann the role of the emblem of Victorian deceit *par excellance*. Having finally grasped his *objet petit a*, the source of the insistent gaze, and satisfied in this makeshift manner his desire, the painter seemed to be recuperated to the symbolic order he had been operating in. Yet, at the same time he abused the rules of the Symbolic, metonymically substituting his love to art, destructively symbolic itself in its excess, by feigned marriage, devoid of true feelings. His final fate of the sole caretaker of his blind son, about whom he learns after Agatha's death, of the winner who is nonetheless unceasingly troubled by the ethereal voice of the loser, appears therefore legitimized.

Sentimental writers of manuals of advice would cheerfully welcome Erdmann's case as an example of the destructive power of deceit. Alcott's handling of the theme is, however, more elaborate. Apart from the analysis of Erdman's failure as a husband, artist, and man, she cloaks her narrative in the veil of uncanny atmosphere which only amplifies the dark sides of the protagonist's psyche. Agatha Eure, in consequence, turns out to be not only the desired possessor of strangely insistent eyes; her mysterious gaze is also the gaze of the Lacanian other, under which the painter is to find his place in the symbolic order of Victorian era. However, Max Erdmann refuses to submit to the call of the other; he prefers to chase evanescent signifiers of wealth and social appearance, turning himself in this way into a vivid meta-

phor of Victorian hypocrisy. Through "an unseen retribution heavier than human judgment could inflict," (80) awaiting death and possible slippage back to the Imaginary, forever haunted by Agatha's voice, the voice of the other which he can no longer answer, Max Erdmann — the great abuser of the symbolic order — ends up as its most pitiable victim.

"A Pair of Eyes" is therefore truly a story about the theater — the Victorian playhouse of deceitful appearances and mischievous conventions — and about its actors — human subjects, embroiled in the intricate maze of the symbolic representations of sentimental world in which the artificial often passes for the natural, with dreadful consequences. It is also a story about Victorian art and Victorian artist, the former mimetic of the artificiality of Victorian life, the latter, in a romantic fashion, favoring fake creativity to ethical behavior. With the story, evocative of her other gothic thrillers, Louisa May Alcott surfaces then as an apt critic of the symbolic era into which, in a genuinely Lacanian sense, she was inserted rather than as a compliant follower of its spurious conventions.

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„A PAIR OF EYES; OR, MODERN MAGIC" LOUISY MAY ALCOTT JAKO ODRZUCENIE SZTUCZNOŚCI

Streszczenie

Louisa May Alcott, urodzona w 1932 r., jest znana zarówno amerykańskiemu, jak i polskiemu czytelnikowi głównie jako autorka słynnych *Małych kobietek* i kilku kontynuacji tejże powieści, a więc jako typowa przedstawicielka sentymentalnej szkoły powieści wiktoriańskiej. Tymczasem niedawne odkrycia amerykańskich badaczy literatury ujawniły kilkadziesiąt gotyckich opowiadań autorstwa Louisy May Alcott, które publikowała w XIX-wiecznych czasopismach amerykańskich pod pseudonimem Ann Barnard. Zarówno tematyka, jak i stylistyka owych opowiadań odbiegają znacznie od wiktoriańskich zasad obowiązujących ówczesnych pisarzy, a przede wszystkim pisarki. Czytelnik na próżno będzie się więc doszukiwał w tych opowiadaniach umoralniających wersetów czy gloryfikacji patriarchalnego systemu społecznego XIX-wiecznej Ameryki.

Opowiadanie analizowane w artykule jest przykładem owej antywiktoriańskiej wymowy nieznanego dotąd dorobku literackiego Louisy May Alcott. Główny bohater opowiadania, Max

Erdmann, w poszukiwaniu idealnej modelki do swego portretu Lady Makbet zakochuje się w uosobieniu wiktoriańskiej hipokryzji i sztucznego sposobu bycia – w aktorce Agacie Eure. Louisa May Alcott kreśli ironiczny obraz owej miłości, ukazując destrukcyjną moc wiktoriańskiego modelu życia, podszytego wszechobecnym fałszem. W artykule opowiadanie jest analizowane jednocześnie na kilku płaszczyznach, gdyż Alcott krytykuje tu wiktoriańską hipokryzję, posługując się symboliką teatru i teatralnego zachowania, podpierając się ówczesną modą na *quasi*-naukowe wyjaśnienia emocjonalnych lub intelektualnych problemów czy wreszcie czerpiąc z bogatej gotyckiej stylistyki. Tam, gdzie w analizie opowiadania natrafiamy na typowo gotycką dwuznaczność i pozorną niejasność, z pomocą przychodzi metodologia badań literackich opracowana przez Jacques'a Lacana, która pozwala wytłumaczyć antywiktoriańską wymowę gotyckiego charakteru twórczości Louisy May Alcott.

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Słowa kluczowe: Louisa May Alcott, literatura amerykańska, literatura gotycka, psychoanalityczne badania literackie, literatura kobieca.

Key words: Louisa May Alcott, American literature, Gothic literature, psychoanalityc criticism, women's literature.