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A Utopian Project of Identity: the Case of Helena Modrzejewska

In 1876 the celebrated Polish actress Helena Modrzejewska set out for America with her husband and a group of friends, including Nobel laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz, to establish a utopian farming community in Anaheim, California. Her emigration and subsequent career on the American stage inspired Susan Sontag's *In America* (2000).

When the utopian farm project failed, Modrzejewska committed herself to learning English and reestablishing her stage career. Her first audition, itself a humbling experience for such a renowned artist, secured not just one evening's performance as she had hoped, but an entire week's worth, not to mention arousing interest of stage directors, companies, the press and audiences. Because it became a springboard to her later success in America, Modrzejewska describes it in detail in her memoir, *Memories and Impressions*, along with the torturous preparation and language lessons that accompanied it.

Madame Modjeska was asked to prepare a short fragment and her choice was the last act of *Adriana Lecouvreur*, a play in which the main protagonist is an actress. The scene Modjeska acted out to prove her acting skill and to be given a chance to act for American audience is the scene of death, in which Adriana is poisoned by her rival. For the character of the play, Adriana, this is also a scene of reconciliation with her lover and a final declaration of her true vocation that is acting. Dying, she no longer recognizes her beloved, but she proclaims herself to be Melpomene thus with her final breath renouncing worldly passions for art.

This moment proved to be the turning point for Modjeska and her career in America; hence, it is a scene of death that is the new beginning. I do not wish to prove the long proven (by T.S. Eliot, "in my end is my beginning" or by Nietzsche or by Maria Janion, "living, we lose life"); rather, I am more interested in the fragmentary, in what I see as a series of certain aborted and renewed attempts, carry-

ing a symbolic meaning, revealing the identity of an artist in exile as necessarily founded upon failure and rejection.

Blanchot points to the “doubling” that we have to take into account when speaking of suicide (107): it is “I” who kills “myself,” so the action is performed as if by one subject upon another; and a similar doubling can be perceived in the scene of Adriana’s death chosen by Modrzejewska. Modrzejewska finishes with her life as a utopian farmer; yet she ‘chooses life’ as an actress. The actress Adriana has to pass away for Modrzejewska to start a new phase of her life, and what I see as a covert suicidal act proves not only productive and life-giving, but it is also strictly connected with the place where it is carried out, and this place is crucial in a double sense: as California and stage. “Death, in the human perspective, is not a given, it must be achieved” (96), writes Blanchot, and this is what Modrzejewska does in undertaking the decision to act out the death scene. “The decision to be without being is possibility itself: the possibility of death” (96), thus Blanchot remarks upon suicide. This fragment is curiously reminiscent of how emigration is depicted. Possibility itself, that is, what cannot be achieved ‘here’, what can only be carried out ‘out there,’ an immigrant’s dream, the American Dream. The only aim of any movement or action, as Freud would have it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is death; the gesture of choosing a death scene for a fresh start of a stage career seems to endorse this view.

As is usually the case with writing about death, one borders on the naïve and the banal, which testifies all the more to the impossibility of conceptualizing one’s mortality. It is only possible to write of death on the terms of life. It is the negative description of what death is not: it cannot be contained in words, because the language remains the proof of life, even if we accept its being borne out of the death drive. So it seems that the movement represented when it comes to writing about death is circular, that is, it means going round in circles back to life, and curiously enough, for the protagonists of *In America*, it seems that the land standing for what is customary and recognizable, that is, representing life, is Poland: “Poland was circles – everything familiar, saturated, centrifugal,” whereas America possesses the qualities of an unknown territory: “Here the country, ever more spacious and thinly marked, streamed and spiked in all directions” (Sontag, 313). The latter is a country in which the very possibility of death is denied; yet at the same time it presents death as an option, as the only option of survival, so it seems.

In the case of Poland circularity means familiarity, whereas in the case of California – just the opposite, which is revealed in the episode when Zalenska discusses a play in which she is to act the role of Frou-Frou, who dies at the end. Peter, Zalenska’s son, wants a different ending to the story: “Why does Frou-Frou have to die? ... She could jump up and say, I changed my mind. ... Then she could go out to California and go up in an air-ship and say, Try to catch me if you can” (Sontag, 328). Here the naïve character – which reminds one of the Romantic notion of “the child is father of the man” (Wordsworth) – is telling the truth about

the meaning of California, the place where one can escape even the limitations of death.

Yet this ultimate place seems to be the Protestant vision of heaven: it is described as “the Laborer’s Paradise” (Sontag, 121). It is then supposed to unite two conflicting tendencies. Endowed with the quality of a paradox, it has to be read in a circular fashion, in which the answer points towards the question. How is California characterized? “Salubrious Climate. Fertile soil./No severe winters. No lost time” (Sontag, 121). If the time cannot be lost, then it cannot be “had”, it has to cease to exist altogether. California, then, must be the land of eternity, and hence the land of death.

The circular motion: going back to the event forestalled suggests not only the obvious inescapability of death, but being stuck on it and reviving the melancholic longing for the lost object.

Melancholic repetitions and circularity can be discerned in Modjeska’s memoir, as well. When discussing the beginnings of her American career, Modjeska emphasizes the fact that she had to visit the theatre three times and ask friends’ assistance to get the audition. “I was sure of success from the very beginning of the rehearsal” (342), she claims, yet before the final attempt, she admits seeing the situation as “hopeless” (336) and her friends thinking of the very prospect of acting in English as “unrealistic” (335). Yet, she tries, she does learn English and she succeeds. The story of her triumph is a story of multiple endings, abandoned attempts, and halted developments. She had to fail as a member of the farming community in order to recreate herself as an artist. She had to reject Polish, German and French, the languages she had been using up to this point, in order to act in English. Finally, Adriana Lecouvreur – an actress – had to die for Madame Modjeska the actress to be born.

This symbolic aspect of death is realized in the act of naming. Even though Modrzejewska was not the actress’s true name to begin with, she changed her name to Modjeska, to make it pronounceable for English-speaking audiences. In Sontag’s novel, the main protagonist, Maryna Załężowska, changes her name to Maryna Zalenska for the same reasons. In Sontag’s novel, then, the name serves to illustrate the predicament of a destabilized identity, with several levels of deferral of meaning, eluding the reader from the very start. The act of changing name is not uncommon for emigrants, yet what I wish to point to is its symbolic meaning as an act of rejecting the paternal nomenclature and structures of belonging. The name is as if no one’s name, since its bearer is produced on the spot; it is adopted by a person who shrugs the past and creates her new identity for her own purposes.

The two protagonists are doubly removed from the real life; Zalenska as a character who is not meant to be the fictional representation of Modjeska, but as a character who is supposed to be a fiction of a fiction, whereas Modrzejewska, removed from her linguistic environment, is deferred even in the gesture of shortening her name (which was her stage name in Poland, not her family name) for

the purpose of making it easier to pronounce for her American audience. Such melancholic deferral creates a space that is unreal yet reveals the fissures in reality. This space I will understand as one connected with the turn towards the maternal, yet paradoxically, one that can be reached only with the separation from the maternal body, which by Lacan is associated with the entrance into language (Lacan, xxi). The space created for the characters in those two texts will be the testing ground for the very idea of exile, for the possibility of departure from the dominant economy of language and identity.

Here choosing a new name is connected to the fact that Modrzejewska abandons her native language and chooses her career in English. The phrase in Polish is “father tongue” (*język ojczysty*), which suggests that what the actress rejects together with the language is the paternal structure of language. She chooses English as her adopted language, the language that can never become her *mother tongue*. What she endeavors, as an artist choosing career in another language, is to reject both parents, mother and father tongue, and hence become parent-less, border-less, without past, unattached. It can be read, then, as a radical rejection of any stable identity altogether.

It comes as little surprise, of course, that America will be designated as the space of immigrant dream, the space where one can escape all previous limitations. Yet the break from the past is not always imagined as desirable, of which we are reminded in Franz Kafka's *America*. In the opening passage the Statue of Liberty is described as holding a sword instead of a torch. Not a benevolent but rather a menacing symbol of the place, it can be read as representing a threatening, castrating Father, suggesting that there is no escape from the masculine topography and economy of the language.

However, if one still dreams of escaping linearity and phallogocentric order, America seems to play the role of the new space perfectly. How is this space characterized in the novel and the memoir? The points of correspondence seem curiously similar, with the emphasis on the sense of a break with the past, yet an unreal one. It is the space where one is removed from the past, or rather, creates a new sense of beginning and thus attempts to escape the linearity of time. The levels of deferral pile up, because it is not enough to go to the United States as such, one has to go further, and in both discussed texts this place is California. In Sontag's novel, the depiction is quite straightforward: as one of the characters wonders, “Doesn't it seem very American ... that America has its America, its better destination where everyone dreams of going?” (120), commenting not only on the space itself, but also illustrating the character of the immigrant nation, in which everyone envisages a space of an ending, of a final destination. Even more explicitly, it is described in the following words: “California, the ending, the last beginning” (Sontag, 327). The emphasis is on the dream quality of the place, where anything is possible, and the American dream can be carried out, pushed to the limit, though it never in fact comes true. Described as such, it becomes the

boundary of one's vision, which reminds one of death that can also be imagined as the space and time of abolition of the categories of possibility and limit.

The very title of the novel, *In America*, seems to suggest an attempt at stabilizing the identity of an artist, placing it in a certain place, in contrast to Modrzejewska's own impressionistic title, evoking fleeting nature of memories, yet at the same time, it might be read as an expression of certain helplessness in describing the emigrant's experience. This helplessness, in turn, characterizes emigrant experience when it comes to linguistic and cultural fluency. An emigrant cannot be described accurately and cannot fully represent herself.

The final scene of the novel deprives the actress of her voice, being narrated from the point of view of her stage partner, Edwin Booth. Drunk Booth ridicules Modrzejewska's accent: "No one mentions your accent anymore, it is part of your magic, but eet ees ver-ree, verr-ree noticeable;" however, he grants that "accent and all, you phrase better than most who own the language" (Sontag, 372). Thus, in one sentence, Booth hails Modjeska as the best Shakespearian actress of "the English-speaking world" at the time and moderates the compliment by commenting on her accent. Language here is perceived to delineate boundaries of a certain community, yet those who belong to it – that is, those who speak English – are not of equal status, since there are those, in Booth's expression, who own it. The question remains, who are those that constitute the remaining part: do they rent the language, or perhaps, inhabit it? In other words, what is the status of Modjeska and the like, those who master the language, perform in it, perform their identities in it, yet do not possess it by the virtue of birth? And, more importantly, what motivates them to risk losing status, lowering their social rank and being mocked by the "owners" of the language?

The emigrants by definition have a troubled relationship with their adopted language, this conundrum being particularly pronounced in the case of an artist working with the material of a language, and depending on the language for the very artistic creation. Hence the reason for taking the risk of acting in a foreign language must be crucial for the very creation of an artistic persona.

An emigrant artist figure Zalenska expresses a wish, "to be done with mourning! To live in the present! In the sun! She was soaking up light" (Sontag, 159) after she reminisces her "lost daughter," admitting, "that memory still ached" after sixteen years (Sontag, 159). That sums up the whole project: emigration, farming utopian community, California endeavor. All of it, leaving the old life, and the old continent, is subservient to one goal: to be done with mourning. Mourning is what a melancholic has to get over, yet what she can never succeed at. That is why Zalenska has to go back to acting, has to learn English, to embark upon her "new" career. Language is necessary to reinvent her acting persona, to shed the old sorrow, to bring grief to an end – a project, it eventually turns out, that is bound to fail. The maternal body, the residue of creativity in Kristevan terms, hence tantamount to the artistic creation, is here linked inextricably with melancholic longing

and loss. The only place one can conclude a period of lifelong mourning seems to be California.

In Sontag's novel, California's exceptional status is recognized and scrutinized. Booth comments, "you like California, a good sign in a European" (384), in this phrase designating to California a crucial condition of difference. This place possesses the radical quality of otherness, being not only the farthest destination for an emigrant, but also a quintessentially American space, too American even for Americans.

As the stage actress explains in her memoir, the spot in California chosen by the Polish colonists was so beautiful that it resembled stage setting more than natural environment (307). Modrzejewska filters the space around her and interprets it as belonging to the sphere of art. Even though the party is there to cultivate land on a farm, this land is transformed into a set of props from a Shakespearian play, which in a way explains the failure of the whole enterprise. The space acquires meaning only when it seems to be what it is not, when it is interpreted according to a different key. It is made familiar not through – what would seem easier – comparisons to Poland, but rather, through comparison to stage. The choice of a place to farm was dictated by the presence of German settlers there: the vicinity of neighbours speaking a familiar language was thought to make it easier for the Polish colonist to settle, since they spoke hardly any English upon arrival. It is German, then, that is chosen as the language for the new life. English becomes a language of the new stage in Modrzejewska's career after the failure of the farming project. The actress has to abandon the Californian utopia in order to be able to reinvent herself as an English-speaking artist.

For Pola Negri, this utopian quality connected with California and more specifically, Hollywood, is crucial in her creation of an artistic persona. Hollywood, in her own words, existed really just as a certain vision, and the facades of buildings could not conceal its mythic character (189). Both actresses compare the place to props and sets, choosing not to notice its physical aspect, but rather, endow it with a symbolic value. California for them is not in any sense more real than stage or set. But just as much as being on stage or on the set is the ultimate dream for the two characters, California is the ultimate destination for an *émigré*.

This definitive quality appears in both memoirs. Beginning at the East coast, emigrants finalize their journeys in California, which gains the quality of a distilled, sublimated immigrant dream. Being the "last beginning" (Sontag, 327), it is a place of no return, thus sharing crucial attributes with death. If it is death that the emigrants are seeking, why is it attractive, or, indeed, necessary?

"Having death within reach, docile and reliable, makes life possible, for it is exactly what provides air, space, free and joyful movement: it is possibility" (97), asserts Blanchot, and in this statement presents a possible answer to the question posed above. Death, like emigration, is a radical rejection of the previous course of life. Being able to flee makes life bearable. The possibility of escape is tempt-

ing; and it remains a condition of freedom – which is precisely what emigrants to America are supposed to find there.

Part of this escape is rejection of the mother–father tongue (depending whether the reference point is English or Polish). As was hypothesized above, the flight from a native tongue might be seen as an attempt at escaping patriarchal structures of language and of society, and this view is endorsed by Kristeva, who sees an artist as “turning away from this sacrificial, paternal function” of language (106).

I see the loss as connected with the artistic performance as well as with the entrance into the language in the Lacanian sense. In order to be able to use the language, which is the tool of creativity for the figure of the actress discussed, the person must undergo separation from the mother. The condition for entering the language is the rejection from the source of primeval sense of oneness, and this traumatic process reminds one of the hardships of immigration. Kristeva illustrates the predicament of being a foreigner as such: “Not speaking one’s mother tongue. [...] Thus, between two languages, your realm is silence” (275), and she adds, “Silence has not only been forced upon you, it is within you: a refusal to speak [...]. Nothing to say, nothingness, no one on the horizon” (276). This loneliness, being devoid of the ability to use the language, stretches to the infinity: the horizon is empty, the world silent. To emphasize the traumatic quality of the experience, Kristeva thus characterizes the loss of one’s linguistic environment: “The foreigner [...] has lost his mother” (267). The fact that it is not both parents that one is supposed to lose in the process, but the mother, is fortified by the phrase ‘mother tongue,’ in which emigration and initiation into the language are combined. In Polish, however, the corresponding phrase will be “father tongue;” thus in the case of a Polish émigré a phrase more accurately describing their situation would be, “the foreigner has lost her father.” It seems, however, that the paternal law is imposed on her and there is no escape from it. There is always a figure willing to speak for her, to represent her, to silence her.

In the narration in Sontag’s book, the main protagonist remains mysteriously devoid of voice in the last scene. The whole chapter gives voice to Edwin Booth, an actor who plays with Zalenska, while she is given one line only to show mercy on the mean, drunk, rambling Booth. In a monologue he describes his life and acting career, among other issues. The reader knows the reaction of Zalenska, but not what she says. And it is Booth who tells her she speaks with an accent she has been trying so hard to eliminate. In this gesture she is relegated to the place of a foreigner and is meant to remain there. Nothing can change the fact that she has lost her mother–“father” tongue. Even though she immigrated to California, the land of fantasy, this fantasy is bound to remain unfulfilled.

Modrzejewska in her autobiographical account also devotes several pages to Edwin Booth and their friendship. She does mention him giving her advice on pronunciation, which is rendered as well in Sontag’s novel. Yet a more telling episode is the one in which she gives speech after the closing night performance

at the Booth Theater. She performs this honorary function and she is never in fact relegated to the position of a silent foreigner, which is of course understandable when it comes to autobiographical writing. Not only does she speak, even if she cannot find proper words in English, but they also communicate with Booth as actors, suggesting that words are not necessary when two artists exchange their ideas of art. Despite obvious obstacles, she grants herself the power to communicate, which Zalenska is devoid of in Sontag's fiction, and in contrast to Sontag's protagonist, she gives herself the right to have the last word. Modrzejewska mentions her last performance with Booth, saying that she had a premonition they might never see each other again, which she then says was true, as she went to Poland and when she arrived back in the States, Booth had died. In fact, when she got back, Booth was still there and lived for another year. Perhaps Modjeska omitted this fact for the sake of a smoother narration. Perhaps, in her narrative, she granted herself the right to decide about life and death of the characters, as the author was not yet dead back then. Whatever the case, it was Sontag who took revenge on Modjeska in her novel, on behalf of Booth, and silenced the actress, sentencing her to oblivion, and calling Modjeska – Zalenska, while letting Booth appear under his real name.

We might be tempted to present Sontag, the literary critic, as performing the symbolic maternal function for Sontag, the novelist. Thus the punishing mother, not father, exercises her power, imposing regulations and moral law, at the same time (this being a common practice, as Foucault taught us) trying to render this power transparent. We might see Sontag, the author of *On Photography*, as interfering with the narration and designing a scene in which a "specimen of American womanhood" takes photographs of the colonists in their rough settlement in California. Thus Sontag, the motherly figure, deprives her character of a voice: hence the loss of mother tongue, the language bestowed by the mother, is definite.

Thus, in Modrzejewska's case, the punishing agency reaches further than one might expect. In Pola Negri's case, being a silent movie star, that is, using silence as the very tool for enacting her identity, meant a transgressive breach of the paternal law, but the history corrected this violation as well when the advent of the talkies brought the end of the fabulous career. As long as California remained a place of silent fantasy, it is also a place of exercising ultimate freedom.

In order to achieve artistic freedom, both actresses have to abandon the space governed by the paternal law, the "Name of the Father," and set out to the place where they can create their identities without the parental support. The loss of mother, and consequently, the loss of mother tongue remain central to the performance of their identities. Yet they remain trapped in the play of imagined loss and grief, hence enacting their identity as melancholic artists. The effect of silence imposed on the character is strengthened by the circularity of their emergence as cultural icons: the real life characters are used as material for the characters of biographies, then into personas in fiction, and finally, are combined with their

existence as icons of stage or screen. The effect of silence, their removal from life, the deferral, is finite.

The question of circularity is worth stressing here: although Zalenska/Modjeska left Poland in order to “rough it” in the States, seduced by the idealistic, utopian notions of the Paradise in California, she learns that utopia, being no-place, is impossible to reach, and she learns it the hard way. Unwittingly, she keeps going back in circles to her old life – always paying attention to the aristocratic titles of the Poles she meets, and also emphasizing the noble character of Americans she encounters, thus never abandoning her old-continent ways and hierarchical vision of the society.

Before she goes back to Poland (and she will cross the Atlantic fifteen times), she goes back to her acting career, finding it impossible to live up to her romantic ideals of cultivating land, living in communion with nature and close to Mother Earth, as she says in her memoirs. The circularity of her movements finds completion when Modrzejewska settles finally in California, her original destination in the States.

Quite paradoxically, then, the price for an attempted escape from the Law of the Father and the symbolic order is the loss of mother/tongue, which is, simultaneously, the very condition for freedom, which proves impossible. Being stuck on this loss produces melancholic desire for oneness, which means repeating the gestures that are supposed to free us from the painful feeling of a loss. Desire for oneness means desiring death. And this death is realized in California.

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