

Eleonora Duse: Let Me Have My Wings

1

Waiting to go on stage as Hedda. I am already Hedda, but thinking and feeling my way more deeply into the part. Checking to see that the pistol is in the right place. Last night I almost shot Judge Brack. He said he could see it in my eyes. He told me – after the curtain – that I should ease my performance back. He said that Sarah would have winked with her upstage eye. I told him that Sarah could never be Hedda. I told him I had good reason to shoot him – some night I might actually do so and that would be that.

2

Alone and cold. It is quiet and it is dark. Shivering under the thin blanket. Waiting for my mother and father to come back. This hotel room is cold. No money for candles or coals. They are acting in a play. The theatre is warm and bright and clean. Oh how I long to grow up so I can act on the stage.

3

I arrive quietly in a town. I bundle up so no one can see me. I avoid the crowds at the station. I shun all requests for interviews. I ride in a blind-drawn carriage. I set up my shrine in a hotel suite. The maids are instructed that I need my quiet and my rest.

4

An article about that novel! – what is it called? – The Flame! Well tell me why on earth would you come to me? There is no connection – whatsoever – between that novel and my life! No! – absolutely not! No! – I have never read it! Nor do I ever intend to read it! – not even one scurrilous page!

5

I have no life of my own. I am only alive on stage. I Am Hedda, or Marguerite or Theodora or Cleopatra. I am these people and they are me. Outside the spotlight there is darkness. There is no such person as Eleonora Duse.

The Making of Eleonora Duse

1

I believe that the whole world is my heritage, so I have no compunctions about setting a novel in a culture that other people might tell me is not my culture. On the contrary, I believe that the cultures of time, place, race and religion are important and valuable in our lives, but second in importance to our common culture of human dynamics, which follow similar manifestations in all times and places.

2

Another strong appeal of the life and career of Eleonor Duse was that she is an actress who spends her life creating the great roles of the dramatic repertoire. This, too, promised a feast of potential imagery.

3

We all struggle to live our lives as best we can; we all have the opportunity to explore the information of our lives as potentially-interpretive-imagery; we all respond to that opportunity in our own ways.

4

It wasn't until I started to read the Duse biographies that my reading of her life and career caught up with my reading of the D'Annunzio novel. As it did so, I began to feel that the crisis of the publication of the novel was not that it was true – an aging actress is forced to face the public depiction of her age – but that it was – the main character of my novel would believe – a false presentation both of herself and of the relationship.

5

In the poetic-novel, the 'plot' is an envelope which holds the imagery by which the main character is considering his or her life in thought-segments, one image-unit and one chapter at a time.

Planning Eleonora Duse

1

Duse's relationship with D'Annunzio is in the past, with a present-crisis being the publishing of the novel, *The Flame*, which now is an image-crisis, a self-image crisis, for the main female character.

2

The past life of the main female character from birth, or youth, to now – the information-quarry / image-quarry of her entire life and career as a counter-balance to the alarming realization that the limited information-quarry / image-quarry of her relationship with D'Annunzio (a few years / one of her relationships) might become – to the public / to herself, if she isn't careful – the defining objective correlative, image-pattern, image-myth of her entire life and career.

3

My task, as with all of my novels from now on, is to compress a vast quarry of imagery – all in patterned relationships – into a form of 50,000 words: the 'john-passfield poetic-novel'.

4

The proposed novel is shaping up as: – Duse is an older accomplished actress who has had a full life & career when she meets the young writer, D'Annunzio. She sees his youth, enthusiasm & energy as a source of inspiration for the next stage of her own career. And – D'Annunzio is a young poet of promise when he meets Duse. He is gearing up for his great life's work. He sees the older actress as an accomplished artist with a high level of achievement & cultivates her as a source of inspiration for the next stage of his own career. This 'agenda cross-purposes' – and their love – account for the harmony-storm alternation in their relationship.

5

Later – Two crises: 1. D'Annunzio offers *La Citta Morta*, his play, to Bernhardt, Duse's rival, & this causes a break in the relationship – 'the agendas-at-odds'; and 2. D'Annunzio writes & publishes a novel, *The Flame*, in which he portrays himself as: – the young, uprising, future artist of great accomplishment, who needs to be served – by the older actress – in the interest of art & of society & of the world, and – the older actress as a spent force, in terms of her own career, useful only as his muse – a reminder of past achievement in the field of art – now fit only to sacrifice her fading, spent career in order to serve his rising, more important, soon-to-be greater career.