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APPROPRIATED VOICE IN SHARON POLLOCK'S ANGEL'S TRUMPET

Dans sa pièce *Angel's Trumpet*, Sharon Pollock remet en question la signification du processus d'enregistrement et du sujet enregistré. La vérité réside-t-elle dans notre façon de vivre notre vie, ou dans la multiplicité des moyens à notre disposition pour les enregistrer? *Angel's Trumpet* est un autre portrait par Pollock d'une femme créative qui lutte contre les entraves sociales et les rôles qui nous sont attribués pour exprimer ses désirs et ses besoins. Dans ce cas, il s'agit de Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, peintre, écrivaine, danseuse, épouse et mère. C'est aussi la mise en scène d'une situation dans laquelle quelqu'un approprie la créativité et la vie d'un autre. Encoder en « fiction » la vie d'autrui, est-ce un acte d'exploitation? Scott Fitzgerald transforme en fiction la vie de son épouse Zelda, et quand cette dernière tente de récupérer sa vie dans ses propres écrits, Fitzgerald insiste que la matière lui appartient—tant les mots que la femme. En montrant la résistance de Zelda face à l'appropriation et à l'objectivation de son mari, Pollock révèle comment cette dernière se réinvente continuellement, son être toujours en devenir. Zelda joue sa vie en timide autoportrait.



They were all happy to exist in a man's world—they preserved their individuality through men and not by opposition to them. They would all three have made alternatively good courtesans or good wives not by the accident of birth but through the greater accident of finding their man or not finding him.

(F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* 53)

In all of her plays, Sharon Pollock is interested in the significance of the recording process as much as in the recorded subject. In her programme note for the premiere production of *Angel's Trumpet* by Theatre Junction at the Dr. Betty Mitchell Theatre, Calgary in March 2001,¹ she points to the question that is central to the play: “[W]here does the truth lie? In the living of our lives, or in the multiple ways and means we have of recording them?” *Angel's Trumpet*² continues Pollock's exploration of creative women who struggle against social inhibitors and prescribed roles to express their own desires and needs, playing out their lives in multivalent,

self-created roles. In *Moving Pictures* (1999) Pollock places the life of Canadian filmmaker Nell Shipman on stage; in *End Dream* (2000) she plays out the last minutes in the life of a Scottish nanny as that character dreams her own murder. The subject of *Angel's Trumpet* is Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald—painter, writer, dancer, wife, and mother. *Angel's Trumpet* is further complicated by the issue of the appropriation of another's creativity, and of another's life. It raises the question of whether the encoding of another's life as "fiction" is an act of exploitation. Scott Fitzgerald writes the life of his wife, Zelda, as fiction, and when she attempts to reclaim it in her own writing, he insists on ownership—both of the words and of the woman. In showing Zelda's resistance to appropriation and objectification by her husband, Pollock plays her as continually reinventing herself and always in process. Zelda performs her life as self-conscious autobiography. Resistance to appropriation is effected through shifting, multiple role-playing.³

In *Angel's Trumpet* Pollock portrays the aesthetic and emotional relationship of Zelda and Scott as confrontational and destructive—a struggle over the artistic ownership of lived experience. In her programme note she provides an interpretation of this conflict that reveals her preoccupation with appropriation and exploitation—with the "use" that artists make of the lives of others: "[...] the nature of the ownership of a life and its transformation into a literary (or dramatic) text, and whether one individual's urge to self-expression can be justifiably sacrificed if it's deemed necessary for the self-expression of a genius." In effect, she also challenges her own use of Zelda's life to interrogate personal and public aesthetic and moral conundrums.

Zelda's life has been freely inscribed in the novels and stories of her husband, whereas her own works remain literary and autobiographical curiosities. Despite the attempts of her grandchildren to recuperate her writing and painting in collections published in the 1990s, her life is still more an object of scrutiny than her art, as is evidenced by the publication of yet another biography in 2002 entitled *Sometimes Madness is Wisdom: Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald: a Marriage* by Kendall Taylor, and by websites entitled "The Legend of Zelda" and "How Crazy was Zelda?" (Kramer). In the 1970s feminist critics recast her as a symbolic victim of patriarchal oppression and as a paradigm for suppressed creativity—another woman trapped behind "Yellow Wallpaper" and driven mad by her male "caregivers." Her death by fire in Highland Hospital was transmuted into an image of transcendence, Jane Eyre's alter ego reborn from the flames.

In the introduction to *The Collected Writings* Zelda's daughter, Frances Fitzgerald Lanahan Smith (Scottie), denies the accuracy of this martyr script—although it “reads well, and will probably remain part of the ‘Scott and Zelda’ mythology forever” (v). From Scottie's point of view, her mother “was surprisingly emancipated” (vi) for a woman born in 1900 in the American South. She more or less did what she pleased in her personal and social life, acting out the part of a flapper in the 1920s—a role which she characterized in one of her essays entitled “What Became of the Flappers?": “I believe in the flapper as an artist in her particular field, the art of being—being young, being lovely, being an object” (*Collected Writings* 398). Scottie interprets her parents' relationship as symbiotic: one of mutual love, dependence, and exploitation. In her opinion, her father “greatly appreciated and encouraged his wife's unusual talents and ebullient imagination” (v). He arranged a showing of her paintings in New York in 1934; supported the production of what he considered her “woefully bad” farce, *Scandalabra* (qtd in Milford 278); edited her short stories; and paid for her ballet lessons in France for three years when she was in her late twenties. According to Scottie, although “[h]e did raise a terrible row when she published her novel, *Save Me the Waltz* [...] this sort of competition is traditionally the bane of literary romances” (vi). Zelda's letters to her husband, most written when she was voluntarily hospitalized, are full of her expressions of love for him, of her admiration for his writing talent, and of apology (although her “contrite tone” may be read as ironic):

Your dear letter made me feel very self-condemnatory. I have often told you that I am that little fish who swims about under a shark and, I believe, lives indelicately on its offal. Anyway, that is the way I am. Life moves over me in a vast black shadow and I swallow whatever it drops with relish, having learned in a very hard school that one cannot be both a parasite and enjoy self-nourishment without moving in worlds too fantastic for even my disordered imagination to people with meaning. (*Collected Writings* 465)

Despite this apparent self-deprecation, however, Zelda wanted to serve something greater than herself and to lose herself in the process. In her autobiographical novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, her heroine, Alabama, experiences a forgetfulness of self that creates a truer self through her rigorous ballet practices: “By springtime, she was gladly, savagely proud of the strengths of her Negroid hips, convex as boats in a wood carving. The complete

control of her body freed her from all fetid consciousness of it [...]. Her life outside was like trying to remember in the morning a dream from the night before" (*Collected Writings* 127).⁴

Both Zelda and Scott wrote novels based on their marriage: *Save Me the Waltz* by Zelda in 1930 and *Tender is the Night* by Scott in 1932. Zelda sent her manuscript, considered by her biographer Nancy Milford to be "[...]so deeply autobiographical, the transmutation of art into reality is incomplete[...]" (224), to Scribner's before Scott had seen it. Her novel had been written over a period of two months while she was hospitalized for schizophrenia. Fearing that her novel would preempt his own, based on similar material and on which he had been working for the past four years, Scott wired Scribner's that Zelda's novel would "[...] seriously compromise what literary future she may have and cause inconceivable harm in its present form . . ." (qtd in Milford 217). When this attempt to block publication failed, he insisted that Zelda cut or change a significant portion.

Angel's Trumpet focuses on one confrontational episode between Zelda and Scott and is based on the account provided in Nancy Milford's 1970 biography, *Zelda*. In 1933 Scott Fitzgerald requested that Zelda's psychiatrist, Dr. Rennie, meet with them at their home in Baltimore, ironically named "La Paix," to prove that she was incapable of making her own decisions and to assert his authority over her course of "treatment." In particular, however, he wanted to establish, personally and legally, whether he could stop her writing because it affected her health—and because it undermined his own writing career. Milford describes Dr. Rennie as "intensely interested in literature" and an aspiring playwright (260). He was fascinated by both husband and wife and tried to check the deterioration of their relationship, which he saw as having three parts: the struggle between them as creative artists, each jealous of the other; the conflict caused within Zelda by trying to have a career as a writer while at the same time fulfilling her obligations of home and marriage; the conflict caused by each not performing the "roles" required of each other (Milford 261).

Pollock dramatizes this "interview" in the form of a trial, with the doctor (renamed Renton) as more an arbitrator or referee than a judge. Initially he provides Scott with the opportunity to state his case, questioning him on significant details. The "character" of Zelda is created through this male interaction while she sits silently, her back to the audience, or prowls around the periphery of the room. Once Zelda begins to speak, Dr. Renton says little, functioning as an unwilling and conflicted witness to the verbal



Set of *Angel's Trumpet* by Terry Gunvordahl.

Photo courtesy of Terry Gunvordahl.

and emotional violence, ineffectually attempting to interject some reason into the process and easily silenced by Scott. The other witness is a silent stenographer who exactly records the words of Scott and Zelda. Pollock specifically identifies the significance of the stenographer in the stage directions: “*The sound [of the keys] as LAHEURSA transcribes and records the meeting provides an aural counterpoint to, and comment on, the spoken words, as well as on their transformation from spoken to written with attendant interpretive variance* (168).

The fictional name of the stenographer suggests her heuristic function—“allowing or assisting to discover” (*The Canadian*

Oxford 662). Her black coat has a red lining, suggesting her creative, transformative significance—like Zelda’s red ballet slipper that lies on the floor beneath a charred and skeletal minimalist sculpture, and her dress “in shades of red to pink” (169), anticipating the fire that consumes her in the hospital nine months after this meeting. Laheursa speaks the first word in the play—“Zelda”—announcing the woman whose life will be the subject of public scrutiny; then she is silent. Only the tapping of the keys indicates the recording of the interrogation and response. It is Scott who insists that every word be recorded: “It has standing with Zelda and me. The words. Material. Concrete. Captured. Not ephemeral. Eternal. Enduring. I endure. Endure, Zelda!” (172). At the end of the play, however, Laheursa hands the complete transcript to Zelda, who scatters the pages, suggesting that the words belong finally to her, to do with as she wishes. Although Scott has instigated the recording of her words, he cannot own them. They are transcribed by someone (significantly a woman under his direction), but in the transcribing they are transferred to a more public domain, to be “read” by whoever has access to them. In delivering them to Zelda, Laheursa signals that since they are the words that record her life, she should disseminate them as she wishes. Pollock’s stage directions describing Zelda’s response suggest both her acknowledgement and disinterest: “ZELDA looks at the first page, it drifts to the floor, similarly so the second. All of the manuscript pages slowly rain from ZELDA’s hands down onto the red slippers as music grows” (224). She denies Scott ownership of her words.

Pollock uses the words of Zelda and Scott from Milford’s excerpts of the 114-page transcript to paint their backgrounds. Scott Fitzgerald had given the young resident physician, Dr. Rennie, a detailed case history, describing Zelda’s wild youth, her promiscuity, her unusual relationship with her parents. Many of Zelda’s and Scott’s words in Pollock’s play are taken verbatim from this transcript; for example Scott’s rhetorical question, “Shall we go back to Zelda hanging off her mother’s teat till the year she was three? Spoilt rotten by ... her mother Minnie! Her father Judge Sayre, and the whole wretched family who now blame me for her condition” (186-87). Zelda’s responses are described by Milford, and dramatized by Pollock, as unruly but meaningful: “If her thoughts were unruly, they nevertheless carried enormous meaning to Scott and it was from an emotional rather than a rational language of meaning that she wrote. Its limits, and they were severe, were that she depended on too private a mode of commu-

nication” (Milford 212). In effect, then, Milford as biographer functions as the stenographer/transcriber of their confrontation, and Pollock transposes the recorded words into art. She effects the artistic aspirations of her subject, Zelda, who explained in a letter to Scott that she wanted “[. . .] to open some new facet of the stark emotion or to preserve some old one in the grace of a phrase” (*Collected Writings* xxvi).

Initially, Zelda is silent in *Angel’s Trumpet*. Scott begins the trial with a command—“Now. To begin” (169)—and instructs Dr. Renton how to position the three chairs for each participant, like a stage manager or director of the play to follow. He bullies Dr. Renton into compliance, threatening to sabotage his professional ambitions and to stonewall his chances of publishing. He clearly outlines his priorities—the survival of his work, his child, himself, his wife. He delineates his own role as protector and provider and Zelda’s as helpmate, mother, and muse. By engaging in “competitive work” she has undermined his authority. However, although his words are threatening and egotistical—“[. . .] if the ultimate price to be paid for my survival, is her sanity [. . .] then that is the price that must be paid” (183)—Pollock tempers his autocratic posturing with his memory of an earlier, almost idolatrous relationship with Zelda:

I admit it! I loved her courage, the supreme self-confidence and untutored defiant intelligence. I loved the absence of any feeling of inferiority, the lack of self-doubt or regret, I loved the sincerity and the selfishness. Utterly selfish. I loved the flawless skin, the savage eyes, and the burnished hair, I loved the covetous glances, I loved knowing what others sought, I had. (188)

It is also evident, however, that Scott has created Zelda to suit his own needs and desires.

When she finally does speak, Zelda rejects his objectification of her: “He thought he could wear me like a rose” (188); however, she also admits that she “[. . .] played the role well when it suited” (188). Early in their marriage both played other roles in a drama that vacillated between farce and tragedy: “Each of us thought we were the major character in our own sensational tale [. . .] I was his fictional girl, and I loved him [. . .]” (194). Zelda has enjoyed and exploited the roles provided for her by Scott, but she now struggles towards creative and personal independence, to speak and write her own words, instead of reading a script he has provided. The verbal duel that makes up the rest of the play bears a strong resem-

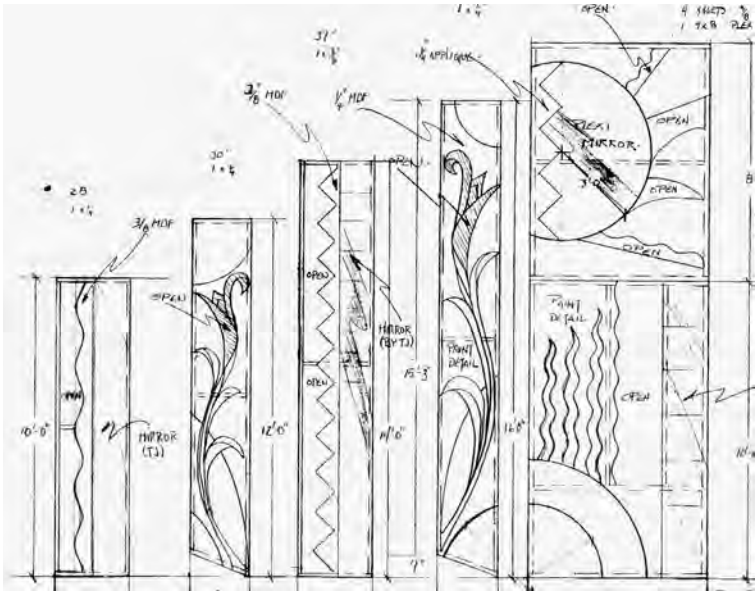
blance to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The Fitzgeralds' past disappointments and failures—infidelities, alcoholism, abortions—become ammunition in the struggle for survival. The balance between mutual destructiveness and co-dependence is precarious. Zelda reminds Scott that he has used her words—from letters and diaries—in his stories and novels and that she has provided the model for Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. She asserts that her own words should count—that she should count. She will write out of her whole body and mind:

I will write! With this!
Her hand to heart. Her actions will grow increasingly violent as she mounts an attack on herself.
And this! (*clutches her stomach*)
And this! (*both arms embrace herself*)
And these! (*strikes her legs and falls to her knees*)
And this! And this! And this! (*holds both her hands out and up, hitting at herself*) What these have seen and heard! (*her eyes and ears*)
[...]
And what has come from here! (*her mouth*)
While splintered shards of meaning
Striking her head with both hands, flailing at herself as SCOTT struggles to hold her, speaking softly under her words, crooning to her as if she were a baby, while she continues over his words.
turn and twist in here but sometimes still and beautiful!
Muddled! Disjointed! Out of tune and out of time you tell me but it's all I have to Shape and Mold! What else can I make something from, but this Poor Thing? It's all I have, why can't I? It's mine! Why not? (220)

Scott comforts her and whispers his love for her but undermines her need to write her life with his opinion of her as a third-rate writer, whereas he is a writer “of some talent and genius” (221). As is typically the case in Pollock's plays, both sides of the case are convincingly expressed. Zelda's compelling emotional appeal for self-expression is balanced by Scott's judgment of the relative merits of their writing. Zelda's life and art have been of interest only because of her association with him. Pollock's personal view of Zelda's art, however, is sympathetic: “her writing is very rich with metaphor and interesting insight and intuitive leaps” marked by “wonderfully creative and free descriptions of the thought processes” (qtd. in Clark). Her words *are* worth hearing.

Zelda remains undefeated in *Angel's Trumpet*. Like the actress, Kate, who assumes the direction of the murderous scenario in Pollock's *Saucy Jack*, she foresees her antagonist's final exit, in this

case Scott's anti-climactic death in his Hollywood apartment: "Putting his writing aside, eating a chocolate bar, while reading the football news from Princeton. His fluttering heart? Like a sparrow in a bully's fist. Stopped" (223). And she envisions her own death as an apotheosis: "Highland Hospital. Top floor. Doors locked. Windows barred. Six women consumed by fire. Zelda Sayre. Fitzgerald. Identified by a slipper that lies beneath some bones. Realized at last! Transformed! Transcendent in the flames!" (223). She has lived and died like the wild young women she emulated in Owen Johnson's 1914 novel *The Salamander*: "adventurous, eager and unafraid" (Johnson, qtd in Mallick's review of *Sometimes Madness is Wisdom*). Pollock was particularly intrigued by Zelda's reference to herself as a salamander—a mythical creature "that can live in fire and be transformed by it. It cannot actually die" (qtd. in Clark). Zelda's life is transformed through her own words and those of Scott Fitzgerald, and these in turn have been transformed into a dramatic investigation of the process of creativity.



Set design of *Angel's Trumpet* by Terry Gunvordahl

Like Scott Fitzgerald, Sharon Pollock uses Zelda's words in *Angel's Trumpet* to make her own point about appropriation of voice. She speculates on the "property" which is transposed into art,

using the words of one of Zelda's many letters to Scott in which she cites Aristotle to clarify her opinion on the relationship between life and art, in effect sanctioning Scott's "transposition" of *her* life: "[H]e said that all emotion and experience were common property—that the transposition of these into form was individual and art. [. . . T]o open some new facet of the stark emotions or to preserve some old one in the grace of a phrase seem nearer the artistic end" (qtd in Gordon). For Pollock, "the conundrum of the artist" (qtd in Clark ES6) in *Angel's Trumpet* is complicated by the constraints and assumptions of society in respect to women's roles, which result in an inhibiting self-censorship and a compliance that often results in exploitation. In Pollock's drama, Zelda plays out the highly conflicted role of self-assertion and self-denial: she is both artist and model, integral voice and appropriated voice. As Pollock explains in Bob Clark's review of *Angel's Trumpet* for the *Calgary Herald*:

Recently it's been a female character who is unable to conform to what is expected of her (or whose) sense of herself doesn't conform to what she's told she should be. . . . Here is someone who began as a very strong individual . . . and who gradually through pressure begins to self-censor and to become what others say they [sic] are—as a means of defence or even as a means of perverse victory when they have very little avenue for real victory. (qtd in Clark)

Pollock appraises the personal price paid by a willful, creative woman for her art. And, as in her other dramatizations of strong-minded, imaginative women—*Blood Relations*, *Moving Pictures*, *End Dream*—the price is high: madness, isolation, or early death. Zelda's death by fire at the age of 48 is presaged from the beginning of *Angel's Trumpet*—by the flame that flares from Scott's cigarette lighter and the red slipper that she holds in her hand.

The play's title also alludes to Zelda's creative and destructive proclivities: *Angel's Trumpet* is a poisonous lily that grows in the American South where Zelda was born in 1900, one of six children of a judge in Montgomery, Alabama. Zelda was fascinated with bold and exotic southern flowers and was particularly fond of calla lilies as subjects for her paintings. These paintings exhibit a disturbing, menacing beauty, recalling the psychic distortions of the works of Vincent van Gogh, whose work she found both repelling and seductive: "Those crawling flowers and venomous vindictive blossoms are the hallucinations of a mad-man—without organization or rhythm but with the power to sting and strangle" (qtd in Milford 215).

In *Angel's Trumpet* Zelda's schizophrenia functions as both a metaphor for creativity and as the consequence of a repressed creativity. Her illness signals the appropriation of her life and words by the individual on whom she was emotionally dependent and whose dominance she resisted. *Angel's Trumpet* may also suggest the Last Judgment and Zelda's religious obsessions and visions, which she expressed through her portraits of contorted nude angels. In the end, however, the last judgment of her life and art is left with the audience. ❁

NOTES

1. My thanks to Sharon Pollock for providing a copy of the unpublished MS of *Angel's Trumpet* for the first draft of this paper, presented at the conference of the Association for Canadian Theatre Research at the University of Toronto, May 2002.
2. Sharon Pollock also directed the world premiere of *Angel's Trumpet*.
3. In her essay, "Sharon Pollock's Portraits of the Artist," Sherrill Grace locates these fragmented elements of self-representation, self-invention, and self-discovery in Pollock's plays through the practice of "autobiographics" (125).
4. This philosophy has some resonance with that of Martha, the farm wife in Pollock's play *Generations* and (one is tempted to suspect) with Pollock's own belief.

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