

On problems of communication and the process of maturation in Richard Strauss's *Salome*¹

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In this paper I propose a different approach to the reading of *Salome*, as is constituted by a woman reader. It is not necessarily a feminist reading that is defined by the biological definition, of man and woman, which exposes masculine manipulation by a radical interpretation of the text. My suggestion is based on the theoretical premise that the woman reader reconstructs the double identity, of the reader as subject, and the read as object (Lubin 1993, p. 66). In this form of reading I intend to point out how the new Otherness is generated by Salome in such a way that a dialogical relation between the context of writing and the context of reception and reading is re-established. Once the dialogue between writing and criticism knowledge is revealed, a balanced relation between the extremes of passion takes place. It consists of the preservation of minimal distance; between Self and Other on the one hand, and the desire for intimacy, to an extent of symbiosis, on the other.

Let me begin with a quotation from the libretto, which would serve as a motto for my presentation:

“Ah! Warum hast du mich nicht angesehen, Jochannan?Warum sahst du mich nicht an? Hättest du mich angesehen du hättest mich geliebt” (Ah! why did you never look at me Jochannan?.....If you'd but once looked at me you would have loved me).

¹ In *ICMS7 Proceedings*. Richard Littlefield (ed.) Imatra: International Semiotics Institute and Indiana University Press.

Salome's words, the conclusion of her *Liebestod* in Strauss's opera, convey the tragedy of the princess of Judea, realizing at last that Jochanaan has never really seen her and that there had been no possibility for her to enter his world, or for him to enter hers. She imagined that they had been in a dialogue; she has done her best to draw the prophet into her feminine discourse, a discourse in which she was the prime mover. Sadly, the girl has never achieved such a discourse with anyone. She remains alone, and her revolutionary program is in vain.

Salome, in fact, is trapped in a "solipsistic discourse" (Abbate 1989, p. 114), a discourse in which opera protagonists are unable to listen and become aware of the music and text resounding around them.

Listening, according to Roland Barthes, means "to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the 'underside' of meaning" (Barthes 1986, p. 249). But neither Jochanaan, nor Herod seem to be able to listen to the underside of the sonorous world around them.

In fact, when Salome tells Jochanaan that he had not seen her, she is telling him that had he given up his preconception concerning Difference, he would have been able to get out of the trap of the masculine paradigm in which he was abducted. Thereafter he would have been able to constitute a dialogical relationship with her. But the male protagonists in this drama, Jochanaan and Herod, are captured in a male dominated cultural construction, which determines the way in which men and women are written into cultural processes. In their perception-construction there is a power relation between a hegemonic center and a woman, who represents racial and sexual Otherness. Salome, as she questions the problems of gender, class and race, is thus

interpreted not for what she really is, but as an image that appears in the masculine mind. This sort of interpretation, which takes place in language, creates an artificial split between portrait and person, signified and signifier, the subject who speaks and the object that is gazed at (Feldman 1999, p. 61).

In terms of a male-dominated culture, then, the princess of Judea becomes an irresponsible, capricious, and corrupt entity, that is the cause of men's downfall. Not only is she unable to attain a communicative relationship with men around her, but she also leads them to their destruction. From the nineteenth-century perspective, Salome is the embodiment of the stereotypical Romantic *femme fatale*, a male idea rooted in the immemorial perception of Otherness and a theme that became almost an obsession in Western Europe. Arising from a masculine style of thought she appears in male narratives as beautiful, irresistibly attractive, and mysterious. Unlike the traditional female image of patriarchy, dependent on the male physically as well as spiritually, this sort of Other is an independent entity; powerful, initiating and dominating. Yet being also beautiful and erotic, she is associated with seduction and corrupting forces, which are manifested within unbounded sexuality and bareness.

But *Salome* is not merely a commodity text from a male-dominated culture. The opera, based on Wilde's drama, is characterized by symbolic elements, which epitomize the inversion of relations between a hegemonic center, on the one hand and a woman altered by her gender and race, on the other. Consequently, the text becomes rebellious: it establishes new poetic rules and sets up a different narrative, which change the order of things in the operatic discourse.

A subversive reading of Salome's text, from a woman's point of view, reveals problems of communication, stemming from the different perception of gender. For Herod, who is located at the top of the male hegemonic pyramid, his stepdaughter is

just a naive and inexperienced adolescent, whose strength lies in her beauty and her ability as a skilled dancer. He is therefore confident that the young princess can easily be manipulated into his own mental script: she will dance for him and thus satisfy his lascivious desire, and in return, he will grant her with whatever her mind can possibly think of.

Obviously, Herod does not think of the possibility that although young and inexperienced, Salome might make demands he would be unable to fulfill. According to his perception of gender, young girls like his stepdaughter are infantile enough to be manipulated by elderly man: "Salome, Salome, dance for me, I beg of you. I am rather sad tonight, so dance for me," he begs her in his own immature way. Following the mistake many adults make with little children, he promises her costly gifts, which (once again, in his perception of gender) are supposed to please her forever. Expensive jewels, crystals, turquoises, onyxes and other precious objects are only part of the catalogue his promised presents.

Imprisoned in his male-dominated royalty, Herod does not seem to realize that once he asks Salome to dance for him in return for his expensive gifts, an unwritten contract is constituted, in which there are two parties, two personalities and two individual minds. Since the parties have not settled for something specific, and since Salome has not yet specified what exactly it is that her heart desires, the terms of the contract stay enigmatic. Only one thing is certain: once Salome dances, she will be entitled to have whatever her heart may desire.

While Herod is imprisoned in his own desires, the young princess, although not exactly in the mood for dancing, realizes that this is her chance to be granted any wish. However, as a product of a culture in which gender roles are strictly defined, she perceives the superiority of the royal male over his subordinates in general, and

over women in particular. Clearly she must make sure, time and again, that Herod understands his part in their deal. She asks three questions and makes one final statement to remind him that he has to fulfill his part in the unwritten contract that precedes the dance: “Do you really mean you will give me anything I may ask for, Tetrarch”? “You swear it Tetrarch [namely Herod]”? “By what token will you swear it Tetrarch?” “Remember the oath you’ve taken Tetrarch”.

Enraptured in his lust, Herod becomes totally unaware of what surrounds him. Like a person in a hypnotic state of mind, who keeps repeating a mantra, he goes on and on with his promise as he begs Salome to dance: “If you will but dance for me, then you may have whatever you desire. Your wishes shall be granted”, “Nothing, nothing you ask will be denied to you; though it be half of all my royal realm”, “I swear it, Salome....By my kingdom, by my own life, by gods I honour”, “I shall keep the oath I have taken”, “Dance for me, I beg you, Salome”.

Once the conditions of the contract seem clear to both Herod and Salome, a reversal of gender roles is displayed. With an I-You reference (namely, in a direct speech), Salome moves into the center of the narrative and thereby changes the operative discourse. From an adolescent, who was previously an object of her stepfather’s gaze, Salome turns into the subject who speaks out and advocates artistic freedom and self-awareness. “Ich will für dich tanzen” (I will dance for you), she says to Herod, making sure that he, and the rest of the spectators, understand that not only is she conscious of the sonorous world around her, but that the dance – the artistic expression – proceeds from her.

In her rhetorical gestures, in which direct discourse is established, Salome enters culture and generates a new sort of Otherness. Instead of a male projection, which is perceived primarily as a sexual predator, as well as the embodiment of

seduction and destruction, she becomes both the voice and mind of the opera (Ayrey 1989, p. 111; Cone 1974, pp. 57-58), as if she herself had conceived the work. In so doing, she presents her art in public not merely as a skilled dancer but also as poet, composer and choreographer.

However, Salome's maturing process into a "musical persona" (Cone 1974, p. 57), had already emerged, in fact, before she confronted Herod. It happened at the very beginning of the opera, when she made her entrance on stage and first heard an unfamiliar voice coming from the cistern. Young, inexperienced, and unaware of the public fear provoked by the figure of Jochanaan, she conveys to the young Syrian, Narraboth, her wish to speak to the man. Terrified by her wish, Narraboth tries to dissuade her from doing it, because Herod does not allow anyone to talk to Jochanaan. Salome, however, succeeds in having Jochanaan brought up from the cistern. Struck by his appearance, she steps back, as she listens to his denunciations ("Where is she who succumbed to the lust of her body, who, when she beheld those painted scenes of naked warriors, sent her messengers into Babylonia"). Once she understands that these words refer to her mother, Salome develops a dialectic approach towards the prophet. On the one hand, she tells him how terrible he is and how frightful and disgusting his eyes are (like "caverns where dragons linger"), but on the other, she is drawn to this male body which seems to her like an ideal classical sculpture. Its ivory complexion, carved lines, cool flesh, the chaste quality captivate her.

Her gaze at the prophet becomes the catalyst for the inversion of gender roles. She becomes the observer (male), while Jochanaan becomes the object (female) of her gaze. Just as she despised Herod for looking at her so intently, she now finds the prophet rejecting her own gaze. Salome's wish to come near him and create some verbal communication with him are answered by his cursing and expressions of

disgust: “Daughter of Sodom”, “daughter of Babylon”, he calls her, accusing her of profaning the temple of God by coming near it (figure 1).

But Salome doesn’t give up. As speaking subject she tries to adopt what Barthes calls ‘an attitude of decoding [the] obscure’ (Barthes 1989, p. 249). She moves into an I-Thou speech, intending to encourage Jochanaan to join the ‘direct discourse’, which convey her awareness of performance and representation. “Sprich mehr, Jochanaan, says Salome, “deine Stimme ist wie Musik in meinen Ohren” (“Speak on, Jochanaan your voice rings like music in my ears”)(figure 2).

Conscious of the music that surrounds her, Salome manifests, once again, her status as the main voice of the opera. As the poetic and musical authority, she understands that in order to create meaning she needs to bring together the image of the body with the quality of sound. Young and inexperienced as she is, she asks the holy man to tell her how to overcome the barrier causing the “disjunction of sound from image, hearing from seeing, voice from body” (Abbate 1993, p. 242). “Sprich mehr, sprich mehr, Jochanaan. Sag’ mir, was ich tun soll” (“Speak on, speak on, Jochanaan, and tell me what to do”).

Yet with her musical motives, almost obsessively pitch specific (Puffet 1989, p. 62), Salome is not able to overcome the barrier of Jochanaan’s acoustic signification consisting mostly of orchestral color of horns, tympani and tam-tam. Jochanaan, who is not aware of the music produced around him, insists on continuing the ‘solipsistic discourse’. As a respond to Salome’s request to be told what to do in order to get into a dialogical relationship, he indulges, once again, in his obsessive cursing which is conducted, musically, by a whole-tone scale in the tympani. : “Tochter Sodoms, komme mir nicht nahe” (Daughter of Sodom, do not come near me)(figure 3).

But Salome doesn't give up. As poet and composer of the work she insists on reaching the highest point of symbolic representation in which words and music, voice and body, sound and image are reconciled. Persisting on maintaining the rules of direct discourse, she concentrates on the prophet's body, trying to unite it with the voice that came from the cistern, which she now identifies. "Jochanaan", she says shamelessly, "I am amorous of thy body". Inspired by the ivory -like quality of his body, and keen to reach a dialogue, she uses B major of his first motive (figure 4). With *his* tonality she hopes to bridge over the artificial split between signified and signifier, person and portrait: His body seems to her in the image of "lilies of the field that the mower hath never mowed". She compares it's ivory quality to "snows that lie on the mountains...and come down into the valley" (Wilde, p. 544). Whiteness of the skin is contradicted by the holly man's black hair, which seems to her like "clusters of grapes that hang from the vine-tree of Edom".

Salome's center of attraction is the prophet's mouth she longs to kiss. From a male dominated point of view, which perceives Salome as a destructive femme fatale, the wish to kiss Jochanaan's mouth reveals the princess's vampirism. As we all know, the kiss of the mouth, will eventually turn out to be the kiss of death. But, let us remember that we are interpreting Salome from a stand point of a woman reader who reconstructs the double identity, of the reader as subject, and the read as object. In this form of reading Salome reaches here the highest point of symbolic representation, which manifests a new sort of Otherness, and constitutes dialogical relation between the context of writing and the context of reception and reading.

The dialectic of the mouth, thus, is inevitable though; on the one hand, it unites two human bodies by the physical act of kissing, and, on the other, it is the source of sound that produces music and text, thus reflecting the human spirit. As poet

of the work Salome is inspired by the prophet's mouth. She compares it to the red of a "pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory", and to "a branch of coral that fishers have found in the twilight of the sea".

As poet and composer Salome uses coloristic symbolism here in order to reach the highest point of symbolic representation. She connects her coloristic images to Jochanaan's musical signification, which consists of orchestral color (horns, tam-tam), as she reaches the highest point of poetic metaphor in which image and sound are reconciled. Your mouth, she says to the prophet, is as red as the "red blasts of trumpet". To kiss this mouth, thus, means to reach the highest point of signification which will unite the abstract image with the physical body; the mortal with the eternal, the signified with the signifier, the object with the subject and the person with the portrait. But how is she going to achieve this with both 'deaf' protagonists?

When she realizes that nothing would change the prophet's mind, Salome decides to use her power as poet, composer and performer and announces that she will dance for Herod. Yet, she makes sure time and again, that he, Herod, understands that in return for her performance she will be granted with whatever her heart desires. And the price the princess demands is nothing less than the head of Jochanaan on a silver charger.

Once Salome finishes her dance, there is nothing on earth that can convince her to change her mind. "Ich fordre den Kopf des Jochanaan" (I ask for the head of Jochanaan), she keeps repeating her peculiar request, ignoring Herod's wish to persuade her otherwise (figure 5). Realizing that he has not actually been listening, Herod suddenly progresses into direct speech, trying to adjust himself to the direct discourse created by the princess. "Du hörst nicht zu. Lass mich zu dir reden,

Salome”, he begs her (But you are not listening. But you are not listening. Allow me to speak to you, Salome!).

But it is too late now. Salome *chooses not* to listen to him anymore. While Herod and Jochanaan were engaged in solipsistic discourse she, Salome, managed to establish her new status as the authorial voice of the opera. In her new operatic position, she is not going to settle for Herod taking over the script again. Now, as the dance is accomplished, she does not wish to be troubled with what he, Herod, thinks she desires, or what *he* would like to think that her heart wants. Hence, she consciously disregards the display of coloristic effects, which are transformed into a 'catalogue' of all of Herod's precious kingdom objects, that he is willing to offer her. And Herod surrenders to the new rules of the text.

As he surrenders to her request, he mimics the second version of Salome's "Jochanaan head motif" (figure 6) : "Let her be given what she asks!" he cries out to his guards as he uses the second form of her Jochanaan motive. And, indeed, Salome is given what she asks for. It is not the physical head of the prophet, as the masculine reading suggests, but the metaphorical completion of her work of art which is signified, in her last monologue by the reconciliation of masculine and feminine, femme fatale and the "musical persona", object and subject. As the all the leitmotifs, and symbolic keys of the opera, are reconciled in her last monologue Salome's intellectual and personal quest is accomplished.

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