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# The Skeffington Affair

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ton, Glassco seriously doubts whether the fact that the manuscript was given to him, an act reflecting “a memory of years lived together and a personal gift” was a demand for publication. The content of the manuscript is the best support for that hypothesis.

Just as Max Brod disobeyed Kafka, John Glassco disobeyed Skeffington. However, perhaps in order to ease his conscience, he effected a rather narrow compromise between the request and his own desire not to carry it out: He did not have Skeffington’s text published. That would have transformed her—setting aside the success or failure of the text—into an author, a condition some of the notes seem to repudiate or, at the least, render conflictive. Nor did he include her in his *Memoirs of Montparnasse*.

However, for a limited edition, he did write biographical portraits of Baroness Elsa von Freytag, Dan Mahoney, and Dolly Skeffington as period pieces, as characters familiar to the most famous people on the rive gauche who left behind nothing more than a fragmentary oeuvre—totally unpublished in the case of Skeffington and only minimally so in the case of Mahoney.

Glassco’s little book, maliciously titled *Those Who Weren’t* doesn’t appear in catalogues, but a Spanish translation exists in the feminist library of Madrid, at 17 Barquillo Street. Aside from the biographies, that particular edition also contains the Baroness’s poems (taken from the *Little Review*), Skeffington’s notes, and Mahoney’s essay “Perfumes,” which had appeared first in *The Ignatian* (vol.6, no.3).

Glassco said the documents he received were pages torn out of notebooks—always the same brand, Continuum, differing only in the color of the marbling on the edges. Consistent with the peculiar meaning Skeffington gave to the term “correction,” some poems are marked with an asterisk, which, according to the writer’s notes, indicates the beginning and end of an idea attained through “autoanalysis.” Nevertheless, despite a certain thematic similarity, the texts seem basically different and not, as Skeffington would have it, the first and last in a

*The following is a translated excerpt from María Moreno’s El affair Skeffington (Buenos Aires: Bajo la Luna, 1992).*

It’s shameless to start out—yet once more!—with a found manuscript. No, this one’s not by John Shade, Emily L., or Gabrielle Sarrera. The author is an unknown: Dolly Skeffington. And yet once more, this is a matter of inventing a female precursor whose work—at best difficult to define—we may read, following the convention of reading, however we please.

The manuscript was given to John Glassco, chronicler of the American expatriates in Paris during the roaring twenties. It consists of 28 poems arranged in three sections: *Exposition*, *Gwendolyn Massachusetts*, and *The Honor of the Ladies*. These are followed by a kind of philosophic diary in the form of notes where a single word (to indicate the theme) may be used as a rubric, as if it were some kind of memory game.

Having been a very close friend of Dolly Skeffing-

chain of successive versions. This may be seen by reading "Repetition" as a correction of "Ashes" and "Bloody Mary" as a version of "Force." The connecting poems are missing, at least in the published version. We may either doubt or verify Skeffington's sincerity about the existence and range of this personal technique by reading the quotations in the notes given to Glassco, which appear in this prologue.

Perhaps it's simply a ritual carried out to avoid bringing the act of writing to closure. It's true that if a text were reworked over a period of time using Skeffington's method, it would end up becoming another whose connection with the first would preclude all investigation. However, despite all that, the manuscript Glassco published proves that she did finish.

The only information we have about the author's life is what her biographer could ascertain in Greenwich Village and later in Paris where they were friends.

The notes at the end of the manuscript are not reliable sources, and it's likely all the reader will have after finishing the book's last page will be doubts. Of course, we do know that some "facts" may be dismissed because of chronological incongruities and because of Skeffington's obsession with underestimating the autobiographical character of any text—even one not intended for publication—as well as her extravagant interpretations of Freud's theory.

Olivia Streethorse (Dolly Skeffington) reached Paris in 1923 in the company of her father, Christopher Streethorse, who founded a newspaper on the prosperous rive droite where 80 per cent of the expatriate community—the rich ones to be precise—lived.

Just as Pauline Tarn used the pseudonym Renée Vivien to celebrate her decision to remain unmarried ("née once and *renée* again"), and just as Judy Gerowitz shed all the names imposed on her by patriarchal domination, freely renaming herself "Judy Chicago," Olivia Streethorse needed "a private self-baptism to take on a new I."<sup>1</sup> She replaced "Olivia" with "Dolly" to honor a dear nanny who accompanied her to Paris who stayed on the other side of the Seine, in the family house, and "Streethorse" with "Skeffington" in memory of the Irish wrestler celebrated by Joyce. With that single weapon, she entered the rive gauche.

### Sandor

In May 1932, according to his diary, Sandor Ferenczi received in his Budapest study a lady he immediately defined as "homosexual," a condition in which he initially refused to intervene since, according to his own

ideas, an analysis cannot begin with a prohibition:

*The patient's family is extremely deteriorated—the mother is in an insane asylum. It was established that when she was only about a year and a half old and was alone with her demented mother for days at a time, the mother would use horrible methods—the nature of which are not known—to protect the child from onanism. It was discovered that for 150 years there have been many insane people in the mother's family. The grandmother, the great-grandmother, etc.—all the women went mad after having a child. A brother of the mother, an American millionaire, lived with them. The patient lived with a hyper-anxious German governess in a distant part of the castle, carefully guarded.*

Was this woman, whose identity was disguised with the initials O. S., Olivia Streethorse? What reasons would Glassco have to believe it? No plausible argument except the fact that Skeffington told him on one occasion that she'd been in analysis with Ferenczi for a few months during her stay in Budapest. But we already know what Skeffington thinks about the sincerity of psychoanalytic theory, and there is no evidence to prove she wasn't lying outside of her session (of autoanalysis).

In the notes of June 26, 1932, under the title "Apropos of the compulsion to give help in order to promote the talents of others," Ferenczi writes:

*The patient O.S. presents herself as a quite ill young lady dressed in the height of fashion and poised to seduce. She'd brought a female friend with her to Budapest because she wanted to live quietly with her, free of her jealous husband. She also wanted to help develop the writing talent of her friend. Nevertheless, she does not come to analysis alone but with her friend, two monkeys, three dogs, and several cats.*

Was this female friend Elsa von Freytag? Impossible: she was dead. Was she "The Black Woman Riding a Stick" to whom she gave the name Gwendolyn Massachusetts in her poems? But she, even if she were "autoanalyzed," was not an autobiographical author. And it is to be supposed that

if her entourage had included a black woman, Ferenczi would not have neglected to add her to the list of monkeys, dogs, and cats. Or was it Miss Barney? Could she perhaps have needed maturing as a writer? It's not credible. Perhaps it was one of her protégées. But where did this business about *one* husband come from?

Take the statement "O.S. clearly identifies with abandoned talents she feels she must help." Does it coincide with Skeffington's defense of writers suffering agraphia or of art that goes from no one to no one? Was her interest in the origin of the work of art a neurosis? Was it compensation or sublimation? "Sublimation for the sake of restitution," Skeffington might have said.

It seems appropriate to recall Freud's warning about the way Ferenczi gathered analytic material—by accepting all testimonies as "true," for which reason he usually presented cases that other analysts didn't have. Which sanctions the following hypothesis: O.S. was Dolly Skeffington, but this time she wasn't repeating "a slang expression or a drama" but a gothic novel. But there's something here that doesn't fit: We learn that Skeffington declares having some interest in Freud's writing in a letter from H.D., who was undergoing analysis in Vienna with Freud. Her decision to go through autoanalysis had been reinforced by her reading of *Terminable and Interminable Analysis*, which appeared in 1937. But the sessions H.D. had with Freud took place in 1933.

And the note in which Skeffington describes her first approaches to psychoanalysis mentions as background the noise of the pump that worked above the toilets, whose contents were picked up by a horse-drawn wagon—a sanitary system used in Paris during the twenties. Does she say she read *Terminable and Interminable Analysis* before because she wanted to lend support to a practice (autoanalysis) that had been rejected by Freud himself, except in a few, quite ambiguous paragraphs in that article? Following her train of thought, can we imagine that the Hungarian who had been tempted to mention during the *mutual analysis* he practiced with his patients his theory of perfume, of which we can get an idea by reading a communication of April 24, 1932, entitled *Paranoia and the Olfactory*:

*Whatever the details may be, it seems established that those attacked by paranoia can, like some animals, dogs particularly, smell hidden or repressed feelings in people. One step further [our emphasis] would lead us to an extraordinarily refined and nuanced sensibility, both in*

*quality and quantity, which would permit one person to smell in another the slightest pulsations and even the psychic pulsations of desire, that is, representations.*

*A great part of what has until now been considered as occult or as metaphysical intuition would thus receive a psychophysical explanation. A supplementary and even more daring step [also our emphasis] would lead to the performances carried out by mediums, who can feel the global emanations of people that continue vibrating in some part of space even after infinite periods of time (a bit in the way a dog can follow the footprints of its dead master).*

*The mediums would then reconstruct, with the use of their sense of smell, a human being's past.*

These declarations should, of course, be located in a context where spiritism aspired to pass from a religious to a scientific status. Psychology had not cut its ties with physiology, and the anthropomorphism of Maurice Maeterlink—even if he described the process of perfume manufacture as a torture in which "avid and cunning grease is saturated with abandonments and preserved confidences until it leaves the poor flowers in a condition in which they no longer have anything to lose"—did not arouse laughter.

It is not strange then that Dolly Skeffington felt tempted to compose a theory of perfume out of Ferenczi's hypotheses, the essay of her teacher Mahoney, passing through Fliess's<sup>2</sup> nose, and her own plastic surgery.

There can be no doubt that the note entitled *Museum* "smells" of Ferenczi:

*Beyond bodies, we recognize the people we love by their smell—like blood and fingerprints, no two are exactly alike—and this chemistry cannot be only physical but porous as much to sentiments as to exterior space, where different substances hang suspended. This faculty we can exercise on other people, if we are linked by an interest as intense as that provoked by those people we love. It is nothing more than the imperfect return of a faculty we had when first born, which enabled us to recognize our biological mothers among other beings*

*equally present and equally affectionate. And although I have no idea what procedures would have to be employed to extract these perfumes—perhaps as a first step a film of cold grease might be put under the bottom sheets in beds—it would be possible to possess an olfactory museum of ancient loves in delightful, faceted flasks which, when opened, would give us a more intense impression than the contemplation of a photograph, although with the identical quality of surviving separation and death.*

Doesn't this demonstrate Skeffington's capacity for taking, exactly like the Hungarian, that "extra step" and "that supplementary and even more daring step," especially when it's a matter of—without taking into account the previous example—of transference?

Dolly Skeffington declared (isn't it true?) she'd begun her autoanalysis after reading this sentence in *Terminable and Interminable Analysis*: "A man who had auto-analyzed himself with great success reached the conclusion that his relationships with men and women—with men who were his competitors and with women he loved—were not free of neurotic alterations and, as a result, he entered into psychoanalysis with another person he considered superior to himself."

Did she know Freud was referring to Ferenczi and to himself as the man considered superior? If that were so, if she not only did not consider herself inferior to Freud but said she'd beaten him ("If the professor uses art to justify his theories and I use his theories to justify my art, is it not the case that I've beaten him?"), are we to infer that given the bitter finale of the relationship between Freud and Ferenczi, she, like a paranoid Antigone in "beating" the disqualified master, was vindicating her analyst, with whom in any case she identified?

### *Weill*

The art dealer Berthe Weill often showed the work of female artists like Hermine David, Alice Halicka, or Valentine Prax. In 1935, Dolly Skeffington had a show there called *Prenome*. Glassco thinks she chose that format to avoid being controlled for long by the critics, that it would have been more difficult for her to publish a book. The show included a series of "exquisite cadavers" achieved through a system of punched cards that assigned grammatical figures and were handed out at the entrance to the Cirque D'Hiver, where there were huge lines to get

in to see twenty-round fights. "The longest sentence in the world" was something of a fraud since it was based on the facile trick of enumerations and adjectives. It contained an excessive quantity of "roses," "I'll never forget you's," "wounded hearts," and other expressions that gave an idea of what the lower classes thought worthy of writing down. It was on view all around the perimeter of the salon, and the title *The Longest Sentence in the World* was composed of letters that stretched until they were the same length as the sentence.

The "exquisite cadavers" were arranged on a cardboard spiral about nine feet tall. The contestants had to walk through the spiral as if it were a labyrinth: As one reached the center, the space between the walls got narrower, and people had to make a huge effort to turn around and retrace their steps. Then came the pieces that were characteristically Skeffington. The first was called *Joylises* and consisted of feminine names arranged on an enormous blue surface—the blue of the Greek flag Sylvia Beach had such a hard time copying for the cover of *Ulysses*. The names included Harriet Weaver, Joyce's English-language editor, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap<sup>3</sup>, who published a part of Joyce's novel in the *Little Review*, Myrsine Moschos, a girl who worked at *Shakespeare and Company*, and various stenographers, among them Raymonde Linoissier and Cyprian, Sylvia Beach's sister.

The plan included notes taken from the diaries about the processes that went into the work, the fines imposed on the publishers, and a copy of the contract signed by Joyce and Sylvia Beach, in which it was established that she would have exclusive rights about the size of the edition and sales, but with a clause which said that the publisher would have to give up her rights if such were deemed proper by the author and the publisher, *according to the interests of the author* (Skeffington's emphasis). The figure \$45,000—is what Random House sent to Joyce as an advance for the rights—was accompanied by an arrow that pointed to the word "Joyce" placed on the upper part of the document. Another arrow pointed toward the word "Beach," immersed in the mass of feminine names. But the arrow that reached "Joyce" was covered with seals with dollar signs on them, while the one leading to "Beach" was traced on the columns of a book-keeper's ledger: On the debit side, there were myriad numbers; on the credit side, there was a question mark.

The second document, entitled *Motherism*, consisted of a map of Paris with the female symbol indicating places where the expatriate women lived. The list was thick and detailed: Isadora Duncan (5, rue Danton),

Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier (18, rue de l'Odéon), Nancy Cunard (15, rue Guénégaud), etc. The inclusion of husbands involved asterisks, which were explained at the bottom of the page. From McAlmon, for example, an arrow led to a fragment from a document signed by Bryher and her parents where it was established that she could only take possession of her inheritance if she married. *Motherism* also contained the addresses of bordellos like La Belle Poule on Rue Blondel or restaurants run by women like Chez Rosalie.

Another work was a photograph of Mahoney above which was suspended a great mass of text made up of what Héctor Libertella has described in the work of Mirtha Dermisache as "asemantic graphisms." "Isn't a graphism a cliché waiting for all the impressions that will be imposed on it a posteriori by culture or society?," Libertella wrote in *Essays, or Stunts on a Hermetic Net*. Skeffington would have adored Libertella's statement.

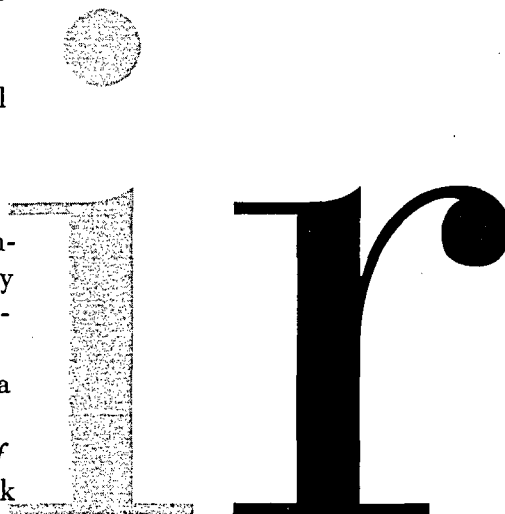
In a corner of the gallery, there were several examples of Surrealist games: a montage made from a poem by Valéry on some aphorisms by Miss Barney about indiscretion, texts by Freud and Lou Andreas-Salome on anal eroticism, and Pound's Vorticist manifesto together with a poem by H.D.

Under the title *Beginning with Chance, a Work of Sublimation*, were included Baudelaire's poem "The Black Venus," Shakespeare's sonnet number 127, and versions of a poem by Skeffington that would culminate in "Gwendolyn Massachusetts." The sequence opened with a photo taken on the *terrasses*, where Dolly appears next to Aisha, a Black artist's model who was fashionable during those years. Aisha, who was narcissistic but not at all stupid, looked at the work, read each text, and said: "I've never spoken to her, but after this, even if she wasn't before, she's in love with me now."

Nevertheless, Skeffington wanted her message to be clear: literature could only come from literature; she had a fleeting romance with Aisha, who was not mistaken when she supposed that the effects of a fiction so carefully staged could not be innocent for the "real" people to whom it alluded, despite the disdain *Beginning with chance* evinces for real-world referents. Why not think that the work (if that's what it is) itself was an attempt to seduce, which seems to have achieved its goal? Perhaps as a sacrifice for the sake of art and even though the show was announced as anonymous, for reasons of security, Skeffington kept her romance with Aisha secret and, insofar as she could, broke it into tiny pieces (the story comes from Glassco).

The description of the show was possible because

of some notes in which Skeffington mentions the technical difficulties involved in the composition and painting of the posters. *Prenome* had absolutely no repercussions, although some of the regulars at outlying bars got up the nerve to enter Berthe Weill's space just to be on record for having participated in the "longest sentence in the world" and the "exquisite cadavers" aside from getting a drink at the expense of the democratic spirit of the lady who owned the house.



#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the subject of names, see: *Feminine Autobiography*, "Ceremonies of the Alphabet: Feminine Grandmotherologies and Women's Autographology," by Sandra Caruso Mortola Gilbert and Susan Dreyfuss David Gubar.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Freud's first interlocutor. An ear, nose, and throat specialist, he asserted, among other things, that the nose is the dominant organ in human life and sicknesses and that it is in the nose that genital places gather, causing decisive influences on menstruation and giving birth. A numerologist and theoretician of biorhythms, he soon began to irritate Freud who finally took a dislike to him, as he did to that other bizarre figure Ferenczi.

<sup>3</sup> These women were editors of the *Little Review*, responsible for having published *Ulysses* in serial form. In 1921, they were brought to court, accused of obscenity. The court decided in favor of the *Society for the Suppression of Vice*, and the ladies had to pay a fine of \$100. On the other hand, their modest accomplishment of being the first publishers of the Surrealist poets in the U.S. was not recognized in the slightest.