



THE LIKENESS

SEMBLANCE AND SELF IN SLOVENE SOCIETY

GRETCHEN BAKKE

Time and again for more than two millennia the people we call "Western" have been haunted by the specter of their own inner being: an apparition of human nature so avaricious and contentious that, unless it is somehow governed it will reduce society to anarchy.

Marshall Sahlins, 2008

Couples are wholes and not wholes, what agrees disagrees,
the concordant is discordant

Heraclitus, -535 (give or take)

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Preface

Andandpersand

There is a fictive marker of punctuation called the *andorpersand*. It's a joke, a sort of swirly doubled ampersand in which one bit stands upright in the normal way (&) and the other is caught lying down (⌘). It is described as “one simple symbol for ‘and/or’” and included on a short list of punctuation marks that should exist but do not. This list also includes the *Morgan Freemark*—a kind of quotation mark that intimates one should read what is written in the voice of Morgan Freeman—and the *sinceroid*, which lets the reader know that what comes next no matter how sarcastic-seeming should in fact be taken as truth (its opposite, the *sarcas-tises*, also makes the list—all from themuse.com). Graphically, the andorpersand has a pivot point, such that one could build a mandala of them—or a compass rose—an ampersand for each of the cardinal directions (four, eight, sixteen), one layered upon the next until it looks like a crappy picture of a flower.¹ 🌸 Still a punctuation mark, this odd floret—now an *andandpersand*—would be used to signal moments of “aesthetic thickening” (Lewis 2019). When adding the flower to the soup, one gets not a deeper or more flavorful outcome, but a denser, more complex one,

1. Andandpersand design by Stinson Lenz.

marked by layers of meaning and interpretation (four, eight, sixteen) that are also relatively easy to overlook.

This is after all part of the fun, not seeing the trees for the forest they constitute, yet nevertheless feeling them there (oak *and* oak *and* pine *and* linden *and* ferns *and* badgers *and* blackflies *and* a wind that blows through it all). One can call it by the name *forest* but in so doing the nuance is lost—the infinite *and and and* of interrelated constituents that makes a forest what it is. The *andandpersand* does not name every element that could possibly constitute a thing—this would be dizzying—rather it points only to those that can be simultaneously perceived just by stopping, taking a breath, pivoting, and noticing. In this, it is the anthropologist's punctuation mark; a method in ink. The *andandpersand* is minimally artful—which will matter to this story—and it is surprisingly uneasy, because it marks a sentence, an utterance, a claim with an emphatic partiality. “The whole,” to quote Adorno, “is the untrue” (1978, 50). “Indicating,” Slovene curator and theorist Igor Zabel continues, “that the effect of completeness and wholeness is essentially ideological. If this is so, then that which is incomplete, unordered, and heterogeneous might, in fact, point a way to the true” (Zabel, n.d.).

All that is a long way from here. It comes into full flower around page 105; this is only the second page, incomplete and heterogeneous by its nature (slightly unordered by my own). Let us begin, rather, in a proper and scholarly way with a parable and a trap.

The philosopher Mladen Dolar in a short book published in English with MIT Press in 2006 presents on page 77 the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, two Roman painters engaged in a not entirely friendly competition. Dolar attributes his version of this story to Lacan, who told the tale in his eleventh seminar, published first in 1964, and later included in the 1979 Penguin volume entitled *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* edited by J.-A. Miller. Lacan, for his part states that he borrowed the story (via what intermediary I do not know) from Pliny the Elder who recounted it in his *Naturalis Historia*, written some time around the year 78 AD. Where Pliny got it from is unclear, but by the time he put it to paper the story had been around at least five hundred years (rumor has it that Aristotle really did loathe Zeuxis back in the fourth century BC). The point of relaying this flow of attribution is that, as I

string this parable (which is also a trap), it would be wise to consider yourself warned that borrowings, in this book as a whole, will be rampant. The origin stories of likenesses, which fall everywhere and all about with a gentle patter like rain, can be traced, as I have done here, but this is often the least interesting thing one can do with them.²

The story Dolar (and all the rest) tells goes like this: Zeuxis and Parrhasius were both remarkable painters, the best of their generation. Their brilliance at their art, however, did not translate into friendly relations, as both wanted the matter of who was the best painter definitively settled. They decided to enter into a competition in which each would attempt to out-paint the other. Their theme was deception.

Zeuxis painted some lovely grapes hanging heavy upon the vine and Parrhasius set himself to the decoration of a wall. Here is Dolar quoting Lacan, himself paraphrasing Pliny the Elder:

In the classical tale . . . Zeuxis has the advantage of having made grapes that attracted the birds. The stress is not placed on the fact that these grapes were in any way perfect grapes, but on the fact that even the eye of the birds was taken in by them . . . his friend Parrhasius [however] triumphs over him for having painted on the wall a veil, a veil so lifelike that Zeuxis, turning toward him said, Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it. (Lacan 1979: 103). (Dolar 2006, 77)

Dolar, without Lacan, continues:

There are two opposed strategies of deception: the birds are duped by looks, the animals are deceived by the appearance of reality; while the humans are deceived by the veil which does not merely imitate reality but conceals it. The properly human way of deception is the lure: the deception lies in the fact that the gaze has been enticed to penetrate behind the veil of

2. Of the similar tendency of Kuna grammar to “not readily make a distinction between direct and indirect quotations,” Michael Taussig (1993) writes (quoting Sherzer 1983), “it becomes very difficult at each moment in the narration to decode exactly who is speaking.’ This difficulty holds for outside analysts (such as himself [Sherzer]) as well as for native members of the community. He [Sherzer] quotes a chant in which the chanter is quoting his teacher who is quoting a mythical hero who is quoting a Chocó Indian, who is quoting a chief in the spirit world who is quoting God (and I [Taussig] am quoting him [Sherzer] quoting this chanter who . . .).” Such that “what one is listening to at a given moment is always a retelling, a rehearsing, a reviewing, or a reinterpretation of something said before” (109–10).

appearance, [yet] there is nothing behind the curtain except the subject himself who has been lured behind. The gaze has already pierced the veil and entered what cannot be seen; it was duped into taking a step behind the appearance . . . (Dolar 2006, 77)

The trap is sprung. The human animal with its proclivities has been duped as surely as the birds. Each painter knows his audience; each has devised a temptation suited to his prey. As every trap maker knows, the psychology of the animal one seeks to catch must be reflected in the structure of the trap. If you want to catch a chimpanzee, you build a trap that appeals to his curiosity.³ If you want to catch an eel you make a long dark tube within which she might comfortably secret herself. If you want to catch a mouse, cheese—like grapes to the birds—has long been acknowledged a formidable bait. Of this proclivity of effective trap makers—a category within which both Zeuxis and Parrhasius should be included—anthropologist Alfred Gell says, “It is not really the case that the trap is clever or deceitful, it is rather [that the hunter] knows his victim’s habitual responses and is able to subvert them” (1999, 201).

Parrhasius is not, thus, the better painter because he “caught” Zeuxis in his artful trap while all Zeuxis caught was birds. Nobody in fact wins (despite Dolar’s claims to the contrary): both have proven themselves equal in their skill and equal in their knowledge of what might snare their intended prey. But Parrhasius gets a point, and has lived long in history, for having caught a more interesting quarry. Gell’s point is that, in revealing both something of its maker and something of its victim in its very form, a trap is much like an artwork, so much so in fact that we’d be right to put more of them in museums (203).

Dolar, following Lacan, is interested instead in the difference between what traps a bird and what traps a human. The bird is confused by appear-

3. “[The Pygmies] have a special trap for chimpanzees, because chimpanzees are like human beings: when they have a problem, they stop and think about what to do, instead of just running off and crying out. You cannot catch a chimpanzee in a snare because he does not run away. So the Pygmies have devised a special trap with a thread, which catches on the arm of the chimpanzee. The thread is very thin and the chimpanzee thinks he can get away. Instead of breaking the thread he pulls on it very gently to see what will happen then. At that moment a bundle with the poisoned arrow falls on it, because it has not run away like a stupid animal, like an antelope would” (Boyer 1988, 55–56, quoted in and translated by Gell 1999, 198).

ances (it pecks at painted grapes) while the human is trapped by the impression that appearances conceal something else and thus attempts to brush aside a painted curtain. But, there of course is no “behind” to step into, just as there is no veil to be pushed to the side; it is just a colorful bit of wall. The birds’ beaks were thus bent; the humans’ pride wounded. Though there is no “behind” to the veil, there is the assumption on Parrhasius’s part of a rapacious human curiosity and the desire to uncover, reveal, discover, and divine what might be hidden behind or within what is given. The trap for the humans, Dolar says, is their own proclivity to search even when everything they need is already available to them on the surface of things.

If the andorpersand exists to signal that two things may, or may not, be true—one can be taken in by the curtain and/or see that it is just a pretty bit of wall—then the trick of the andandpersand is, in contrast, to hold both realities present in mind simultaneously: it is a curtain (*and* one can be taken in by it) *and* it is just a pretty bit of wall. The trap is to believe that only one reality or one facet of the story is the case. Gell’s unlucky eel, for example, chooses to secret itself in the trap because it lives in a world governed by the *or*; when the choice is safety in a dark tight space *or* exposure in a wide open ocean, the path to continued well-being seems clear. It also makes a dinner of that eel.

Zeuxis is equally trapped, not simply for believing that a painted curtain is a real curtain, nor because he attempts to seek the truth behind the veil of the given, but because he fails the test of the andandpersand; he is snared as easily as any beast for he cannot see that the wall *and* the painting *and* the curtain *and* the trap all hang there together. Much as the andandpersand brings unrelated things into weird graphical interrelation, the wall, painting, curtain, seeking, and trap gain their substance and effect by virtue of being intertangled. Untangling them, much like tracing the historical providence of a two-thousand-year-old story, may yield a string of datums but it misses the point. It is the simultaneity of the incongruous, of history, of verbs and nouns, of interwoven references (some explicit, others left unremarked upon) that give this story (like any story) both its ferocity and its efficacy.⁴

4. “The word in language is half someone else’s” (Bakhtin 1981, 293). This is as true of my words here as of Dolar’s or Pliny’s or Gell’s or Taussig’s or the Kunas’ or what is in the newspaper or on the Internet. The likenesses are always there in the way words are interwoven

Parrhasius made all that needed knowing—the deception and the substance necessary to overcome the deception—complexly and intimately available to the eye. It was all there. One can be taken in by the painting *and* be attentive to the wall—Parrhasius's likeness marks out both paths. The beauty Dolar holds, and I with him, is seeing the folly of Zeuxis's single mindedness. One might learn, rather, to walk both paths simultaneously, to live in the andandpersand, such that one might come to see the demand for the inner as both trick and truth, so that one might see a stone surface as both an expressive surface and a barrier, both an utterance and a quote, both an anticipated response and a quilting of historical references (Bakhtin 1986).

This simultaneity of doubleness is what gives this book, *The Likeness*, its form and its purpose. It also motivates the Slovene artists and philosophers whose work sits central herein, pulling the jokes and practices and scalpel slices of subjectivity into consonant knots. The search for what lies beneath what is given, this parable and trap intimates, might be a human proclivity, a cross-cultural constant as predictable as the eel's search for safety in the narrow and the dark. But, if true, thwarting this inclination, as the andandpersand reminds us, is an equally viable pastime, one that can be turned for personal profit and political efficacy and philosophical ferocity and simple play.

with contexts, the ways in which they are fit together into what is told and said. They are like puzzle pieces assembled with nary a boxtop image for guidance. As such every story is a poetic sort of guess, a work of small art, forged from one's own expropriations and manipulations of language as "a living, socio-ideological concrete thing." For it is language that "lies on the borderline between oneself and the other . . . [it] becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. And not all words . . . submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them" (293–94; see also de Certeau 1995). This too is the story of *The Likeness*, this wresting of references, these difficult appropriations that are made over into new stories, stories half one's own and half belonging to the worlds from which they've come.

In *The Likeness* surfaces are accorded their power, traps are strung and sprung, and the fight is on. The fight, not so much to fool the birds, though this can be a happy side effect, but to claim provenance over the proclivities of the human.

