

Pierrot Assassin

I.

These parts are interchangeable, though she stands alone, oh yes, she does.

In the photograph I have, she stares straight ahead to the camera and to the photographer behind, Nadar, otherwise known as Gaspard-Félix Tournachon. Slippery slithery, already the names begin to shift and multiply, metonymical identities.

Sarah Bernhardt in 'Pierrot Assassin', 1883

16.5 x 11cm

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On the image, bottom-middle, just slightly right-of-centre, over Bernhardt's left trouser leg: a tiny red "BN" in a tiny red circle. For Bibliothèque Nationale, I assume. I also assume, though it is not mentioned, that the photograph is a silver gelatin print, and possibly mounted as a cabinet card, since a similar object was sold by Christie's at its London 19 November 1997 Sale 7799 Photographs, for GBP 345 (hammer price plus buyer's premium, net of any applicable fees). It might also have *Nadar* stamped in gilt on the mount. It might be titled in pencil and with photographer's printed credit on verso, where *Médaille d'Or Exposition 1878* is also stamped in gilt. But I speculate: the auction house provides no image, so there's really no way to compare the two.

In the photograph I have, Ms. Bernhardt, The Divine Sarah, born Henriette-Rosine Bernard, is Pierrot Assassin, garbed in a flurry of white. White coat open at the front, with big white satin buttons, round orbs studded in rosettes of white tulle, down one side; the waist fastened with a white belt, silver buckle, loose around the hips. Long, baggy white sleeves hide hands shoved deep in loose white trouser pockets, ruffs at the wrists to match an intricately folded chiffon collar at the neck, frill down loose white shirtfront. What a face, with its perfectly heart-shaped mouth, pursed like a rosebud; with its cat-eye tails and its dark eyebrows, drawn high on the forehead and upturned at the inner edges so that they are knitted in perpetual worry, or maybe anticipation: the weight of the world rests upon poor Pierrot. On her head, a tight black skull cap, no hair visible, and on top, to cap it off, a white hat with a thick white brim, loosely folded up at an irregular angle so that it appears — off-kilter, floppy, haphazard, a question mark, like the pale, white-powdered face below. Her figure takes up $\frac{3}{4}$ of the image, with the body

placed centrally, cut just below the knees; and in the background, a swath of fabric that bleeds light to dark from top to bottom.

In the photograph I have, the blacks and whites are warm, sepia-tinted, and she faces us head on, Sarah Bernhardt, Pierrot Assassin, but there are variants. One is darker, with cooler blacks and whites, and she looks to my left, her right, a twitch of a smile just visible: a grainy print, not as fine, some might say, flecked with white here and there, but the cooler shades amplify the fabric folds of her jacket, which now appear angular, with dark grooves and shadows, downright Flemish quattrocento. Another photograph, same ice cool whites and pitch-black darks, but in higher resolution and zoomed in closer, and she is impassive as in the first image, the one I think of as *l'original*, but looking just slightly to her left, my right, into the distance. Yet another, from this same angle but further back, so she is smaller, and closer to the bottom-right of the image, as if about to steal away, out of the frame. This image is damaged, or printed poorly, so that the background is mottled, particularly at the corners, with a bold splash of dark along bottom-right edge, and the bottom-left corner appears folded or cracked, almost like a pane of glass. And then the final image, in which Pierrot is not alone, but serenades her timeless lover, Columbine. Pierrot rests her foot on a small shiny prop, turns to her left, my right, and strums her lute, eyes squinted with pleasure and exertion. Columbine looks on, regards Pierrot with blank amusement.

2.

I wanted to see if she was ungovernable like us, and wayward, as I suspected.

Poor Pierrot, Pierrot's Big Head, Pierrot's Tongue, Pierrot Drinker, Pierrot Lunaire, Pierrot-Narcissus, Macabre Pierrot, Pierrot the Prodigal, The Death of Pierrot.

You're starting to get the idea. He's ill-fated, Pierrot, the clown, the mime. In France, when the pantos came back into fashion in the late 1800s, the argument was about realism versus naturalism. How far could Pierrot go with gesture alone? Concerns, also, about the louche nature of things: did he always have to murder? It was macabre! But then again, so was Pierrot, with his pinched face and his unbridled desires. It was his nature, some argued, however unrealistically. Pierrot is a trope, of the capacious but frequently tragic variety. Pierrot, poète maudit.

Pierrot Loves Roses, Pierrot in Love, Pierrot's Heart, A Pierrot's Romance, The Disillusionment of Pierrot, So Cries Pierrot, The Black Lottery Ticket, or Pierrot's Last Night On The Town.

Bernhardt was the first female Pierrot (though not the only: Felicia Mallet later toured the Continent, ultimately reaching the Royal Opera House in London), but not the first Assassin. The primogeniture in this grim vein was Paul Margueritte's *Pierrot Assassin de sa femme*, that's right, murderer of his wife, Columbine. Death by tickling, it's no joke. Oh, she laughed, how she laughed, until she cried — but then, what? She died? She did, I'm afraid, Columbine. A year later, Jean Richepin adapted the play, in which Bernhardt — his paramour at the time — agreed to star, allegedly to help boost his fortunes. In this version, drop the *de sa femme*, the plot involves theft, murder of a wealthy dowager, drunkenness, insanity, murder again, this time of the dowager's ghost (!), capture, more insanity, betrayal, and — ultimately — Pierrot's freedom from delusion about women and love, leading to a permanent curing of his (potentially preternatural) madness.

Au Pays de Pierrot, Pierrot Tendresse, Pierrot Chanteur, Où est-il l'ami Pierrot, Le Fantôme de Pierrot, Dis Pierrot, Pierrot Le Sait, Pierrot the Photographer.

This last one is strange. What would Pierrot the photographer do? Crime scenes, like Alphonse Bertillon's famously uncanny bird-eye records? Would he drag his photographer's cloak like a shadow, crawl up buildings towards the moon, *Pierrot Lunaire* — Moonstruck Pierrot, Pierrot in the Moonlight — “this wine that we drink with our eyes,” as Albert Giraud, *Pierrot Lunaire's* originator, described the pale beams, intoxicating from above. Would he mistake the moon for a pinhole in the sky and try to push his head through, like Elizabeth Bishop's nocturnal “Man-Moth,” and be forced “as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light”? Like Pierrot possessed, Bernhardt was rapacious and unruly, though you cannot tell this in the many photographs of her — her small, wiry frame; her wide face and her calm, expressive eyes; her extravagant, poised gestures as Joan of Arc, Cordelia, Zaire, Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Pierrot Assassin.

Pierrot Sceptique, Pierrot Fumiste.

Pierrot skeptic, Pierrot humbug. In the former, he murders his tailor, as well as a mannikin he has lured to the tailor's chambers, which he then sets on fire. Are we in over our heads? Have we lost them entirely? Bernhardt allegedly kept a menagerie of wild animals, including a cheetah, a wolfdog, an alligator, and a boa constrictor. She slept with all of her leading men, almost immediately, and often in the theatre dressing room. She was known for her extravagant hats, one of which was crowned with a large stuffed bat. One of her best-known skills was to simulate blindness by rolling her eyes up into her head, showing only their whites, for up to half an hour.

By Moonlight, or the Unfortunate Pierrot.

Giraud's moonlit Pierrot makes his face up with moonlight and then spends the entire evening trying to brush a spot of it from his black jacket.

Pierrot Assassin.

Of Bernhardt in the titular role, Jean Lorrain, the Symbolist poet and novelist, born Paul Alexandre Martin Duval, described her performance as “angular and spectral, and enshrouded, as it were, in the folds of the great white blouse.” It disturbed profoundly, he said, “the nervous system of her public.”

3.

Ceci n'est pas une femme. Une femme est une femme. A woman is a woman, sure, but what does that mean, really? Whatever you want it to? Ceci n'est pas un whatever. Tuck your face into the deep folds of that thick white neck ruff, cast your eyes down bashfully and wait until their glances skip over you to focus on some more central figure.

They say she's a silent witness, but don't believe everything you hear.

I think in different languages, words mix up, mix words up. I hear a Québécois couple speaking on the tube, recognise them by their round, bevelled accents, which warm my heart—*cher* is *shay-rub* rather than *sbehr*, or *share*, remember to roll your rrrrrrrs, if you can. *Sigh* *trou shay-rub*, it's too expensive. Yes, there is always a cost.

Giraud, in one passage of *Pierrot Lunaire*, breaks the fourth wall of the poem and begins to imagine himself not as Pierrot, but as Harlequin, a parallel, doubled figure. He remembers a childhood dream of “a multicoloured alphabet / In which each letter was a mask.” In this vision, language obscures itself, or perhaps hides its meaning(s) in fear: translates and transubstantiates, becomes numerous, a chorus that leaps off the page in chaotic choreography.

How many things can an image be if you ask it? If you fill it, if you wish hard enough, stare and glare — if you grab it with your grubby hands, wait until it's clammy and hot and it starts to warp and twist and you go with it. A foolish word, *wish*, but in pantomime, sentiment reigns: gestures must be legible.

So she could be anyone. Anyone at all, and why not.

SHE COULD BE SYLVIA PLATH: “I know pretty much what I like and dislike; but please, don’t ask me what I am. ‘A passionate, fragmentary girl,’ maybe?”

SHE COULD BE LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN: “A colour ‘shines’ in its surroundings. (Just as eyes only smile in a face.) And ‘blackish’ colour — e.g. grey — doesn’t ‘shine’.”

SHE COULD BE EDIE SEDGWICK: “It’s sort of like a mockery, in a way, of reality, because they think everything is smiles and sweetness and flowers, when there is something bitter to taste. The ones that walk around and know, at the same time, and yet wear flowers — they deserve to wear flowers. And they’ve earned their smile. You can tell by people’s eyes.”

SHE COULD BE EVA HESSE: “When I think of everything — it is overwhelming — individual things — and it becomes trivial & meaningless, and bearable.”

SHE COULD BE ANNE CARSON: “You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quick enough.”

SHE COULD BE JOY HARJO: “She had some horses she loved. / She had some horses she hated. // These were the same horses.”

But pardon me
I’m not a poet not really
I’m sure you can tell
I wouldn’t know where
To break a line if it
Hit me upside the
Head and shouted
Puce deep purple bloody
Murder right in my face.

When I think about praxis and tactics — how to do something differently, how to steal away, out of the frame — I think of *Pierrot Assassin* and The Divine Sarah, who frayed “the nervous system of the public,” who looked heavenward and bared the whites of her eyes. I think of a woman smuggled into a man, smuggled into a murderer, smuggled into a clown, smuggled into insanity and heartbreak and poetry, an end that reconciles folly with lonely but self-defined truth, and I think, oh yes, that’s just exactly what it must feel like to go forth and prosper. The original and the multiple, all at once.

— Emily LaBarge



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