



The Spectrum of 'Self': Between Rosa Luxemburg's *Letters* and the Caricatured *Red Rosa*

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Abstract

The genre of life writing encompasses the exercise of rendering a consolidated and organic portrayal of a life of a subject, a history performed through a fictive writing of facts, fiction, politics and the subject as a cultural object. Rosa Luxemburg was a Polish Marxist thinker, a social democrat whose philosophy of revolution was based on the concept of connecting with the masses, the proletariats, to ignite a mass strike. This paper proposes to firstly locate the snippets of an interrogative 'self' in the letters by Rosa Luxemburg, which carry an autobiographical weight of self-analysis, of polarity in identity and a re-assuring dialogue with self. For Evans this plethora of detail in her correspondence became the site for caricaturing Luxemburg, from words to the individuating art and style of graphic narrative. Secondly, the paper aims at highlighting that spectrum of re-definition of 'self', when it is imported from the text (of letters) and performed visually with a likeness of character. The paper focuses on problematizing the following, how the uncertainty of deep truths about biography can be played out visually; caricature as a site of political evocation; the graphic biographical subject as a visually enunciated dance of the 'self'.

Keywords: Caricature, Graphic Narrative, Biography.

It is sometimes very hard for me that I'm completely alone. Sometimes I can scarcely be an adviser or counselor to myself...it's so extraordinarily difficult, even with the closest friends, to understand one another, down to the last, innermost, spiritual wrinkle and to see clearly.

(Luxemburg, *Letters* 84)

Rosa Luxemburg's confession about her state and her state of mind in this letter to her friends Robert and Mathilde Seidel, is only one thread towards the weaving of a complex character; an end result derived from such autobiographical and non-autobiographical notes. Rosa highlights a very significant fact about the process of character writing, she points at the difficulty involved in understanding another being to be able to 'see clearly'. A biographical writing can be seen as one such metaphorical attempt of completing the story of a character by collaging together available pieces of narrations, aiming to incorporate the solidity of incontestable evidence on one hand and on the other, the rainbow like evanescence of human character (Gualtieri 349). Woolf in her approach of defining modern biography attempts to map out the boundaries of 'granite and rainbow', 'fact and fiction', and the tension that is non-assimilating between these elements. Graphic biography can be seen an addition to the 'unresolved dialectical movement' that a modern biography already was; a redefinition of a genre and a craft being practised by many (359). Thus different attempts by artists and writers of re-creating a personality, a portrayal, through a narrative results in a variety, where a biography gets compared to, "a broken bridge, a fishing net, a work of fiction" (Lee, *Biography* 21). *Red Rosa: A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg*, written and illustrated by Kate Evans can be studied as a craft full of biographical illustrations supplemented by the principles of a linguistic biography, the boundaries of the two, blurring and merging at many points.

"She could not — she did not ever want to — hide herself" (Rose 35). The drafting of Rosa's portrayal into an organic biographical whole might have been an interesting undertaking for biographers, given the plurality of material which Rosa left behind her. She emerges as a writer reflecting intellect, detail, and someone who forced the 'unthinkable into the language of politics' and exercised her freedom to 'think the un-thought' (35). Given her insight on the subjects of socialism, democracy, anarchy, politics, and the poetics of revolution, her portrayal does not hold a fixed frame, as her theories percolated

differently to different factions. The name 'Rosa Luxemburg' in the literature of revolutionary events and accidents is perceived synonymous with the phrases such as 'socialist politics that is uncompromising', 'opposition to capitalism', 'Polish German secular Jew', 'a Marxist political economist' and a 'political theorist' (Schulman 1). Rosa and her life became a plethora of adjectives as she struggled out of her petit physicality only to challenge the popular and prevailing political theories of the time. This has been often diagrammed as a vantage point by many academicians, who try to write a definition of her through their respective lenses of being at distance or in close proximity to the subject. Kate Evans in her attempt of visually presenting the subject, reframes Rosa as *Red Rosa* in her graphic biography. She stencils the lettering of the title of the book *Red Rosa* in bold red only to render the rest of the biography in shades of murky grey or solid whites. Bombarding the comical limitations of the comics, Kate Evans in the graphic biography of Rosa Luxemburg stretches her biographical subject from the comical closet of a private life to the sombre battles of her philosophies as a thinker and socialist, through panels and full-page painted sketches. The cover page of the book becomes the highlight of the politics through which Rosa lived through and ultimately became a victim of gruesome assassination.

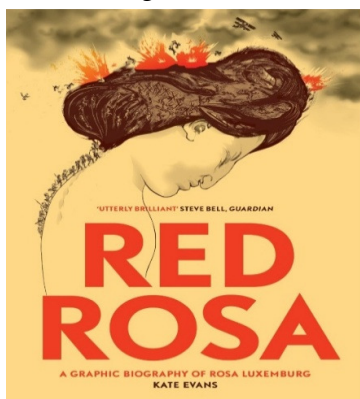


Figure 1.Face of the book

The sepia toned cover page with fiery-red title of *Red Rosa* has Rosa's head in profile, bowed down by the weight of her expansive mesh of hair which seems to have turned into a battleground, the diegetic space extending from the punishment of the body to the chaotic collapse of humanity in First World War, a movement from the corporeal to the poetic, from self to history (Mitchell, A. 258). This image is again seen in the text as a two-page splash panel as a sketch of white and greys (Evans 124). The curls of her hair are sketched like a thicket consisting of barbed wires with the skeletons of soldiers fading in the cross hatching darkness. The top of the head is blasted by aircrafts flying through the smoked dark grey clouds, with blood spurting out instead of smoke. Rosa's eyes are clenched and alongside the rain of horror on her head is a chain of soldiers walking up her naked spine. The splash page dances between the contrasts of blackness of the metamorphosed head and the paleness of Rosa's bodily outline bleached with tension and horror. Her clenched eyes express a muteness but the stormy space of the page depicts her mind as literally a mind on fire. This representation and this choice of the visual as a cover page can be understood to be an element constituting the integrity of the graphic biography, and not merely a marketing afterthought or epiphenomena, as it draws the reader into Luxemburg's world of thought, defiance, courage, sensuality and world-historical despair (Robinson 170). Evans through this figurative trope builds a tangent between Luxemburg's drawn identity and her philosophical extension of involvement in the history of those times. Her words from *The Junius Pamphlet* ring a warning, which is being presented here as a 'site of arrival' of awakening against imperialistic capitalism, "*This world war means a reversion to barbarism*" (Berger 44, Luxemburg, *The Reader* 321). The drawn identity of 'self' in the shape of her body is danced upon by the chaos of militarism, which becomes a visual refrain of philosophy.

Luxemburg's physicality is used in the text as a metaphorical leitmotif; her caged limbs in a plaster at the age of five due to hip dysplasia, her natural nakedness laid bare in

scenes of love making and confessional vulnerability, the neatness of her features exposing her cultural identity as a Jew, the stripped nakedness as a victim under military custody and the enlarged headspace, with spine festooned with soldiers stamping their way up, used on the cover page is meditated again by Evans in black and white on page 124 and 125. These altering recurrences and representations of animating anatomy of the biographical character builds an almost palindromic structure of non-linearity in the narrative, which Groensteen observes as complex threading of allusions and motifs transcending the linear transitions (Miodrag 134). The elephantine illustration of Luxemburg's head in profile (Evans 124) is chipped in between, the incidents of her arrest in July, 1916 and a cut out from the *The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in German Social Democracy* published in 1916, briefing Luxemburg's opening words, on the chaos of the First World War— "Shamed, dishonoured, wading in blood and dripping with filth, thus capitalist society stands...as an orgy of chaos, as a pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity" (127).

Kate Evans institutes a variety of portrayal of Luxemburg in this biography, extending the dramatics of the subject and the theatricality of the illustrations. The palimpsest nature of representations floating out of the stillness of photographs of Luxemburg, is provided with a new dimension of poetic fiction, where the subject's body escapes the dimensionality of past and present.

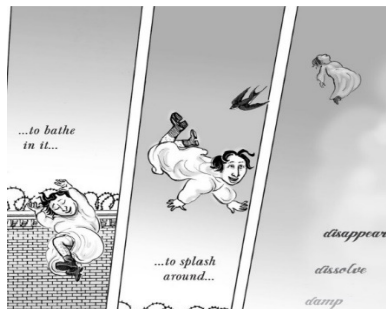


Figure2. Imprisoned

Luxemburg twice faced the walls of prolonged confinement, when the imprisonment lasted for more than a year. And her correspondence with her friends and lovers became the means of spreading herself outside the boundaries. She undertook a writing of variety, her quotidian journal tone, existential interrogations and the literature of the revolution she envisioned. This panel drawn with the walls of Wronke fortress, breaks her physical confinement with the help of segmented longitudinal gutter spaces, her body taking a flight of weightlessness, as she contemplates in one of her letters, “I stood with my little watering can...yearning to dive up into damp shimmering blueness, to bathe in it, to splash around...and disappear” (*Letters* 425), the body is made to meditate in the shape of a baby relishing bliss of insignificance and ignorance, “I am no more important than the ladybug and I am inexpressibly happy with this sense of insignificance” (Luxemburg, *Letters* 393). This style of smoking up words in the sky below Luxemburg’s transcendental flight towards the clouds, providing her body an anti-gravitation vacuum of dissolving into the air, highlights a kind of *graphiation* of a “highly subjective style”, beyond the objectivity of a stillness of a photograph (Baetens and Frey 137). The *graphiation* or the graphical expression, has been explained by Baetens as the subjective styling of the graphical subjects that bring into account the personality of the artist, the personal way of drawing, the enunciative power and the idiosyncratic countenance of the graphic. Evans thus translates many emotions of Luxemburg, a tenderness of femininity against a firmness of thought, “The revolution has begun. What is called for now is not jubilation...but the strictest self-criticism and iron concentration of energy in order to continue work we have begun” (Luxemburg, *The Reader* 343).

The flight is converted into a freefall in the events of depiction of Luxemburg’s murder. The descriptive scene of Berlin’s Landwehr Canal, from where Luxemburg’s dead body was thrown after being murdered at the hands of Freikorps, the right wing private armies, is drawn in the absence of blueness of sky, replaced by the murky grey reflective of the abortive

collapse of the revolution breathing in Luxemburg's eyes. The miniaturising of the body, the dissolving of the corporeal by blurring it into the largeness of panel and to bring to the body an aliveness of function and a quietness of death, is what leads to a contrapuntal tension between an image and image (Mitchell, A. 258).

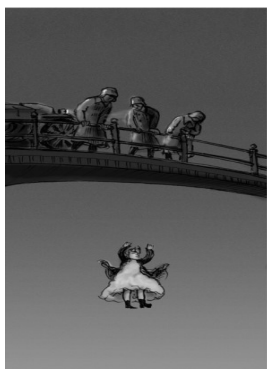


Figure 3. The fall

And just imagine, it was precisely those bruises on my soul that at the next moment gave me the courage for a new life. (Luxemburg, *Letters* 41). The panel, with Luxemburg's body becoming indistinctive of its features and significance, soon about to disintegrate in the waters of German, resound the music of the end of her being as a form. The diegetic space of the text is again punctuated with words from her last writings, "I was, I am, I shall be" (Evans 175).



Figure 4. The Segmented Sky



Figure 5. Portrait of the Triumph

In Figure 4, Rosa's free spiritedness is evident in her posture, her open arms towards the sky, a smiling face and radiant eyes full of glee (Evans 133). The figure is drawn against the backdrop of a bricked wall, the boundary marked by a barbed wire fencing and the bottom of the page inscribed with words borrowed from one of her letters dated July 6, 1917 to Hans Diefenbach, one of her lovers "I want to shout out loud over the walls" (Luxemburg, *Letters* 429). This panoramic splash page is a complete contrast to the Figure 1, where the body language of the character is curbed inwards like a fetal position, the bowed head arrested by agony. Whereas this picturization of Rosa Luxemburg in Wronke prison in Poznań, Poland, portrays her as a heroine of a movement. She was the most prominent leader of the left wing, a member of German Social Democratic Party (SPD), which worked on the belief that the liberation of industrial working class could be a result of revolution only. A Polish German secular Jew, a Marxist with a romantic vision of revolution, a representative of a libertarian socialist tradition situated religiously in the efforts aimed at the ultimate "breakdown" of capitalism; she along with her friends Karl Liebknecht, Clara Zetkin and Franz Mehring, founded the Spartacus League in January 1916, which went against the SPD's decisions for funding the war (Bronner 12). To curb the ambitions of the League of instigating Germany's proletariat towards an anti-war general strike, Luxemburg and Liebknecht were imprisoned in June 1916 for two and a half years.

The adjacency of figure 4 and 5, depicts a jump from the whites of the open sky to the dark grey waters of decay. Evans executes her creative analysis of the character by playing out figure 1 and 3 as 'hermeneutic images', which are the author's vision about the narration rather than being any essential part of the diegesis (Duncan 45). Figure 3 drawn by Evans on page 173 is a portraiture of Rosa with a mummified contouring of facial expressions, a stark glare in eyes that seems to look deep in the abyss of the waters she was thrown into after her murder in January 1919. Rosa's silhouette balloons out like a floating corpse in the water, yet the vigour of her thoughts is

metamorphosed from words to visual through the depiction of her blooming face, as if lit with a stage light, calm and composed for a monologue of her silencing into death. This is a close up of the third panel from the previous page, where Rosa's dead body is flung into Berlin's Landwehr Canal, moon of the sky floating under her feet as she takes a freefall (Evans 172). The motion of the freefall is kicked into action in the third latitudinal panel from a stasis of holding the body over the railing of the bridge in the first panel. The kineticism of drowning on page 172 is converted into a stillness of portrait on page 173, the stasis working against the gravity of sequentiality but towards the equilibrium of a visual play. This tension between sequence and stasis does not seem to be fracturing the narration or its meaning rather is a pre-requisite in the play of visual sequencing, because of the dynamism of iconostasis; which is defined by Andrei Molotiu as the non-urgency of reading sequentially arranged icons in a sequence (Bukatman 116). Evans in this hermeneutic image extends the physical and mental reality of the biographical character beyond the rhythm of the ongoing narration and situates it in a space of visual sensation and equilibrium of her own imaginative visual ode, by synchronizing few lines from one of Rosa's letters. The portrait develops a stillness of dark tones and a stasis of lighter tones alike halo, the darkness evoking a conclusion of the unsaid and the uncalled. The white lettering typed under her portrait seems to gravitate her physicality into the poetry of her thoughts. The words seem to correspond to the silence of the picture and somehow they seem to turn into a vocal speech from the dead:

I believe that the secret is nothing other than life itself; the deep darkness of night is so beautiful and as soft as velvet...beneath the slow, heavy steps of the sentries a beautiful small song of life is being sung. (Luxemburg, *Letters* 455)

The excerpts from Luxemburg's letters form a significant part of narration in this graphic biography. The letters hold an autobiographical weight, composed of a tension of the various facets of Luxemburg's personality, "the refined sensibility of an

artist” in contrast to a “refractory quality expressive of her political and cultural ambitions” (Laschitzka xvii). Through the letters she extended her intelligence and warmth to her comrades, and during her prison time, writing emerged as a tool of fetching that seemingly irrevocable freedom. The association and intimate friendship with her women friends Luise Kautsky, Henriette Roland Holst, Mathilde Jacob, Mathilde Wurm and Sophie Liebknecht, stayed strong with the exchange of letters. In one of the smuggled letters written in 1917 to Sophie Liebknecht, Rosa tries to ease her friend out of pain by drawing an interesting detail of micro existence situated against a macro suffering, “with every little fly that one carelessly swats and crushes, the entire world comes to an end” (Evans 61). This note is carried into the graphic by picturing Rosa at her desk with Leo Jogisches, where she is trying to help a wasp escape the confinement of her room. The implantations of such excerpts from the letters into the graphic, not only build the narration but are enriching performative knots binding the autobiographical text and fictive visualisation of characters for multiple interpretations. In one of the correspondences with her lover Leo Jogiches, dated 19th April 1899, Rosa’s revolutionary fire flowers into poetical images, where she first acknowledges her iron steadfastness about her historical vision but then ironically tunes it down with humour and pathos, rendering these letters as a testimony of the charm and fascination of her invincible personality (Löwy 457, 459). “I want to affect people like a clap of thunder, to inflame their minds not by speechifying but with the breadth of my vision, with the strength of my conviction, and the power of my expression.”, echoes Rosa’s poster portrait on page 51 in the graphic biography as she is pictured next, addressing Catholic mine workers about socialism (Luxemburg, *The Reader* 382).

“A drawing or painting forces us to stop and enter its time. A photograph is static because it has stopped time” (Berger 43). In the translation of an image from a photograph to a graphic, two basic functions are performed, first the import of the particularities of the features which render a likeness, making

the image recognizable and second the import of artist's signature quality of drawing style, making the graphic a visual syllable in the diegetic space (Baetens and Frey 138).



Figure 6. Portrait

Luxemburg's puffed hairstyle, the bridge of her Roman nose, and the mirage in the eyeballs is duplicated in the drawing of the portrait here. The portrait is tagged with Luxemburg's words resounding her vigour and clarity of ambition of extending her idea to the masses, "I want to affect people like a clap of thunder" (Evans 51). Nettl defines this ideological matrix of her conviction to be situated in the idea of 'participation' and not democracy, individual freedom or spontaneity of events. The participation of masses motivated by maturity of class-consciousness and revolutionary energy was Luxemburg's controlling doctrine, which defines the breadth of her vision beyond Marxism (Nettl, 1:13). This passport portrait is inflated and deflated in the subsequent pages of the graphic biography, extending the body language of the subject into an animated puppetry of action and emotion.

The portraits provided by Evans vary in sizes, from a passport size photo to splash pages covering the whole of page and they in a way break the narrative urge of rushing into the sequence of historical events. The portraits as pauses encourage to locate the '*dettaglio*' in the pictures, which has been defined by Daniel Arasse as the detail of a smaller fragment in a panel carrying a significance of certain kind (Groensteen 125).

“To haggle for my little portion of happiness with the foolish obstinacy of a pigeon...I am actually beginning to understand that life can grab hold of a person and not let go”, Adrienne Rich celebrates this oscillation of the informalities of the private and the public thoughts of Luxemburg, “woman’s central relationship can be her work, even as lovers come and go” (Rose 54). The profound intermeshing of Luxemburg’s private and public lives, her private world seemingly emerging as the backdrop of her politics and the interrogations of the inner self as a political tool of radicalism, are some of the characteristics that Evans has anatomised in her graphic biography as *Red Rosa* (31).

This graphic biography flouts the sacrosanctity of not only the textual biographies as seemingly the fixed established fictional truths about the biographical subjects, but it also extends the ‘regenerative operation’ of the caricature and goes beyond the function of simply condensing the likeness of features through repeated sketching of the subject (Boime 258). The graphics highlight how the primary function of caricature of disfiguration, of using the prominent features, coarse outlines, with bare minimum of details, is differently used by Evans to not just provide informative narrative but allows a sarcastically evocative reading (256-7). In other words, Spiegelman claims these drawings as ‘lines on paper’ fraught with a ‘horrible kind of power’, when the disfiguration is given a kind of convulsiveness by usually ‘dehumanizing’ it, which empowers the altered figure with a dangerous meaning sometimes (Mitchell and Spiegelman 29).

Besides depicting the facts about Luxemburg’s murder, Evans seems to have provided a slapstick visual of the act of murder, to mock at the cold-bloodedness and to highlight the convenient vengefulness of it. The panel is drawn with a vaudevillian touch, where General Ludendorff is off his feet, in mid-air, mad with a murderous frenzy of snubbing the ‘Socialist mire’ in its bud, as Noske and Lieutenant Groener look upon (Evans 154).



Figure 7. The Cartooned

Ludendorff is drawn with a rifle in his hands, piercing the bayonet right through the chest of the dummy he is jumping over. The dummy is outlined in a shape familiar to a female physique, is bald, without limbs and lifeless and yet is adorned with a smirk that seems to bring it to life. The dummy is not decorated with any name and the likeness of it is evidently subtle but so tidy in its contour, that it can be clearly read as being the victimised Luxemburg, bearing a smirk of the socialist awakening she had brought about. This imposition of a familiarity of identity on the dummy, without any linguistic reference is not an abstract derivation of meaning in the visual. It is the result of the evolutionary development and schematization of an 'image's iconic resemblance' in the text, where the caricature as a sign accumulates some degree of conventional meaning in the process of the fabrication of the graphic narrative (Miodrag 169). The flexibility of visual forms, their openness to transformations of meaning in contrast to the preordained significance of words, makes them a medium for potential play of unorthodoxy of context and meaning (183). Evans does concretise a context in the narrative, she develops a lexicon of 'graphic' Luxemburg in the narrative, from her birth to her murder and in between she becomes a ventriloquist of the graphics and this dummy (fig. 7), furnishing a sum of visual significations dependent on context but capable of deductive interpretations (185). Thus the panel here becomes a clear portrayal of the horror inflicted on Luxemburg and the insensitive rage imposed on her, only to suppress her freedom as

a dynamo challenging the exploitative oligarchy. The stab in the chest is also a reminder of Luxemburg being conscious of the danger to her life, and rhetorically mentioned it to her friends at times, “I assure that I would never flee even if the gallows threatened” (Nettle, 2: 759). The complacency of the dummy and the indifference of the assault being committed on it, seems to point at the willingness of Luxemburg as a leader, to accept the sacrifice of her liberty and life and to invoke the same in the masses for a distant but an inevitable victory (2:734).



Figure 8. The Eye of the Portait

This sketch of Rosa is photographed from the eye of a lens placed in the closure of the prison walls, the mirage in her eyes highlighted in the portrait to depict the platonic flights of freedom she was hypnotised with (Evans 130). This portrait like a cinematic shot provides an interesting detail of the character's inquisitiveness, her eyes towards the sky, her upright posture and alertness seeking a flight without wings and a body language performing an illusion of her being off the ground. The portrait becomes a sight of the existence of a non-vectorized construction of meanings about the biographical subject, as the portrait seems to converge in itself all the facts preceding this panel, or following this panel (Groensteen 110). The unidirectional vectorization of reading seems to function along the construction of meaning as a network in a graphic biography, as the textual content connects and re-connects itself to various visuals across different panels. This portrait, likewise embodies the facets of Luxemburg's personality fabricated from her letters, penned down by her from the prison cell and which

she proclaimed became the route of her mental escape. Hudis in introduction to her *Letters*, writes about her political vision, “Luxemburg’s life and work spoke not only of the need for a critique of capitalism but most of all to search for an inevitable *alternative* to it” (*Letters*, vii). He describes her as a woman who cracked a conventional bracket for a leadership of the largest socialist organization in the world at a time when left-wing organizations welcomed or encouraged women to assume leading roles as theoreticians or political orators (ix). The letters describe her struggle as a woman reclaiming ground long reserved for males and exposes her understanding of political development and orientation. Laschitzka observes that “the letters show clearly that political engagement, a fighting spirit, and revolutionary fire, as well as profound humanity, talent as a writer and painter, feminine yearnings, and a bond with nature, all combined to create the charm and fascination of her personality” (xiv). The letters become a source to understand how Luxemburg lived and worked over the course of nearly three decades as she creatively and critically contributed in her combative way to the history of Marxist theory. And it is from these letters that Evans borrows the text and inserts in the panels to expand the visual into the contextual linguistic propositions.

The medium of graphics in the production of a biography has expanded the field to multiple performativity, for the subject and the author. The biographical subject seems to rise like a phoenix out of its ashes, when visually played with its dimensions, on paper, in sketch, beyond the firmness of photograph and the homogeneity of language. The caricatured portraits of Luxemburg speak for themselves and about the politics of the ‘self’. Evans has provided a plethora of graphic play with the biographical subject and has inserted her creative ‘self’ into the drawing of the ‘other’. The oscillation between the two, makes the text palimpsest in nature, the visual being directed by the text, and the text under the gaze of the visual.

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