

# Ivanka Hergold's *The Knife and the Apple*: Herta Jamnik's Search for the Authenticity of the Self

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V romanu *Nož in jabolko* odraža prehod iz tretje v prvoosebno pripoved čustveni crescendo glavne literarne osebe Herte Jamnik – vsak »jaz« je kljubovalni utrip samopodobe proti praznini izbisa. Ta avtobiografska fikcija razbija identiteto na mitske in modernistične črepinje: nož odtujenosti (hladen, natančen, moško upravljan) se spopade z jabolkom hrepenenja (rajskim, a gnilih zaradi družbene krivde). Hertino nasprotovanje konformizmu ni intelektualno, temveč visceralno; njeni onemogočeni pobegi in surovi čustveni odzivi – bes zaradi konfinacije, žalost zaradi izgubljenih korenin – razkrivajo feministično telo kot bojno polje. Fikcija, pisana v obliki dnevnika, postane taktika preživetja, njegova čustvena intenzivnost pa sredstvo proti ranljivosti. S pomočjo klasičnih mitov (npr. napis na stebrišču Apolonovega templja v Delfih) in modernistične fragmentacije prikaže avtentičnost kot čustveno dejanje: čutiti pomeni obstajati. Natančno branje posameznih prizorov razkriva, kako Hertina telesna govorica (tresenje, molk) kodira potlačena čustva.

avtobiografska fikcija, identiteta, odtujenost, feminizem, mitologija

In the novel *Nož in jabolko* (*The Knife and the Apple*), the shift from third- to first-person narration mirrors the protagonist Herta Jamnik's emotional crescendo, with each "I" a defiant pulse of selfhood against the void of erasure. This autobiographical fiction breaks identity into mythic and modernist shards: the knife of alienation (cold, precise, and male-dominated) clashes with the apple of yearning (Edenic but rotting with social guilt). Herta's resistance to conformity is not intellectual but visceral; her thwarted escapes and raw emotional responses, rage at being confined, and grief for her lost roots expose the feminist body as a battleground. The diary's form itself becomes a tactic of survival, its emotional intensity weaponizing vulnerability. Through classical myths (e.g., the inscription on the pediment in Apollo's temple at Delphi) and modernist fragmentation, the text maps authenticity as an emotional act: to feel is to exist. Close readings of specific scenes reveal how Herta's body language (shaking and silence) encodes suppressed emotion.

autobiographical fiction, identity, alienation, feminism, mythology

## 1 Introduction: the thing called emotion<sup>1</sup>

Over the centuries, emotions have been studied and interpreted by philosophers and scientists, resulting in innumerable definitions.<sup>2</sup> Emotions are the bloodstream of Herta

1 This section's title is borrowed from Aaron Ben-Ze'Ev's essay published in Goldie (2010: 41–62).

2 Restricting ourselves to a few of the most recent examples: According to *The Oxford Book of Philosophy of Emotions* (Goldie 2010: 1), emotions are paradigmatically mental and bodily phe-

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Jamnik's existence, pulsing between thought and action (Scarantino, de Sousa 2021: 1); for her, they become the only proof of her eroding selfhood. In the novel *Nož in jabolko* (The Knife and the Apple), Ivanka Hergold fractures the diary form to mirror Herta Jamnik's emotional emergencies: fear clots her throat, pride flares, and suffocation presses as she navigates the Slovenian community's disdain. The diary's fractured form weaponizes vulnerability, each entry a tactical strike against erasure. This article dissects Herta's hallucinatory day, where time splinters into entries, such as "At Five a.m.," "At Eleven a.m.," "Eleven and a Quarter," "Ten Minutes to Eleven Thirty," "Ten Minutes after Eleven Thirty," "At One," and "At Five p.m.," each a battlefield for her identity. Her body, grotesque in its needs (the masseuse's hands, Konrad's withheld touch), becomes a metaphor for her exiled psyche, screaming: "Can't you see I'm here?" The shift from third- to first-person narration acts as a literary cardiogram, mapping the arrhythmia of selfhood, each palpitation capturing Herta's defiant struggle for visibility.

## **2 Autobiographical fiction: the knife's edge between the self and invention**

Hergold's *sui generis* diary chronicles twenty-four hours of Herta Jamnik's life as a Slovenian teacher in Trieste—a role that becomes her battleground. In the classroom, Herta weaponizes teaching, provoking discussions on love, fascism, and democracy with her students, her subversive curriculum mirroring the diary's emotional insurgency. Even though Hergold denies direct autobiography ("the first-person narrator is not me"; Hergold 2015: 89), the text bleeds lived experience: Herta's surname Jamnik mirrors that of Hergold's mother; Slovenj Gradec's red bricks flash in Herta's memories like unhealed scars. This deliberate ambiguity amplifies the novel's emotional claustrophobia: even as Hergold rationalizes her distance, the diary's hourly entries trap readers in Herta's skin, forcing us to feel her shame, her yearning for the alabaster-box oblivion of "who knows whom" (Hergold 2019: 13).

## **3 Narrative shifts as emotional fault lines: key moments in Herta Jamnik's diary where shifts in narrative voice reveal emotionally charged expressions of her search for selfhood**

The third-person voice cages Herta; the first-person "I" is her jailbreak. Key entries reveal this rupture. In "At Five a.m.," a whisper of self-recognition ("Maybe that's me breathing like this?") marks her liminality, a ghost in her own life. In "At Eleven a.m.," the "I" erupts on the bus ("I have firm thighs [...] I am I"). Here, pride is armor against

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nomena through which what is important in a person's life is revealed. According to Martha Nussbaum (2001: 3), emotions "are not just the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism of a reasoning creature, they are parts, highly complex and messy parts, of this creature's reasoning itself". For Matte Blanco, emotion is the mother of thought, as well as the gateway to the infinite. It contains within itself elements of thought as a compound of perception-feeling and thought (Ginzburg, Lombardi 2007: 300). According to Umberto Galimberti, emotion is an intense affective reaction with an acute onset and short duration, triggered either by an environmental stimulus (e.g., a danger) or a mental one (e.g., a memory) (Galimberti 2024: 21; Nussbaum 2003: 3).

erasure. In “Quarter Past Eleven,” the Ponterosso market’s chatter fades as Herta’s yearning erupts in a poetic *cri de cœur*: “Take me back to the blue veins of origins!” The “I” here is a wound laid bare. In “At Five p.m.,” the dead goldsmith’s apparition triggers a surreal “I” of peace, “like the raspberry bush,” a fleeting truce with alienation. In “At Eight a.m.,” the wound reopens. Konrad—while Herta tries to assert her desire—interrupts her with a “Why didn’t you say right away that you wanted [...],” transforming intimacy into a transaction. Here, Konrad’s voice is the knife—cold, transactional—whereas Herta’s desire becomes the apple, forcibly divided and left to fester. These shifts are not stylistic quirks but emotional lifelines, each “I” a gasp for air in the “suffocating slime” of Herta’s world.

#### **4 The authenticity of the self: a rebellion against institutional erasure**

The shifts from third to first person in Herta’s diary are more than stylistic choices; they are acts of survival, a linguistic rebellion against the suffocating expectations of her world. Like Carla Lonzi (2024: 917), who listened to the “agonizing stranger within” to grasp a truth she suddenly realized she lacked, Hergold excavates the raw core of selfhood buried under social performativity. This authenticity is not a static ideal but a vulnerable, throbbing presence, or “something precious, defenseless,” demanding protection (Hergold 2019: 53). The 1970s libertarian movements, particularly feminist critiques of institutional power, reverberate in Hergold’s work. Lonzi’s manifesto, *La critica è potere* (1970: 5), against Argan’s (1963: 26) establishment criticism finds its echo in Hergold’s disdain for Slovenian literary gatekeeping: “In Slovenia, literary criticism created a climate of how you have to write to succeed” (Hergold 2015: 90). Here, conformity is violence, and creativity is colonized by critique. If Herta’s “I” is a visceral revolt, Lonzi’s “agonizing stranger” theorizes it as feminist praxis. This tension erupts allegorically in the thief scene (in “One Thirty p.m.”): the intruder that slips into the kitchen through the window robs the paralyzed Herta, powerless to resist, violates her space, and abuses her, mirroring the predatory nature of conformist society. His invasion embodies how institutions, such as the “system of icons” in Herta’s world, exploit vulnerability, erasing difference to maintain hegemony. The thief does not just steal money, he robs Herta of her agency. Herta’s powerlessness is not passivity but a silent scream against a culture that demands self-betrayal as the price for belonging. This systemic violence manifests through recurring symbols: the knife and apple, first appearing in the entry “At Seven a.m.” (“give me the knife and let’s eat this apple [...] one for you, one for me”; Hergold 2019: 21), become leitmotifs of oppression. In their domestic debut, the knife divides the apple; a deceptively innocent act that prefigures their symbolic roles: the knife as violent critique (sharp and institutional) and the apple as forbidden knowledge (yearning and doomed to rot). By the entry “At Eight a.m.” (Hergold 2019: 27), these symbols evolve: Konrad weaponizes intimacy, reducing Herta’s desire to an itemized debt; the knife now his transactional voice, the apple her fragmented autonomy. In the thief scene, the duality resurfaces: the intruder’s violation mirrors how institutions slash at authenticity while exploiting unrealized potential.

### 5 Mythology as subversion: the archetypal prison of womanhood

Hergold's classical erudition—teaching *Daphnis and Chloe* before *Tristan and Isolde*—frames Herta's plight as mythic inevitability. Nonetheless, her classroom becomes a site of haunted pedagogy: even though she dares discuss love, fascism, and democracy with her students, a narrow-minded, malignant neighbor that envies Herta's intellectual freedom, the housewife Pamela Palestra, a domestic icon of everything Herta fears becoming, laughs with the bitter delight of those that chain others to their own limitations, mocking her in “Quarter Past Eleven”: “Well, well . . . you're afraid, aren't you?” Palestra's petit-bourgeois cruelty mirrors Herta's dread of institutional judgment, of becoming jobless, unable to earn her own bread in a system demanding ideological conformity.

Her lessons, like her diary, are acts of frail courage. Even as she provokes critical thought, she smells the “raw blood” of her own vulnerability, her body sweating through the “damp, uninhabited house” of her professional identity. The diary's twenty-four entries mirror *The Iliad*'s twenty-four books, echoing Walter Siti's observation about Western literature originating in gendered violence (Siti 2021: 3). When Tanja describes “women locked in boxes” (Hergold 2019: 106), she recasts Herta's trapped existence as a historical constant—from antiquity's enslaved women to modern hausfraus. The school hallway, where “pot-bellied censors” (male colleagues wielding institutional power) brandish their “winnowing forks” of judgment, becomes an Iliadic battlefield. Here, Herta stands as both Cassandra and a captive, her knowledge rendered “currency without exchange rate” in an economy of intellectual conformity. This systemic suffocation manifests in her hallucinatory train station—visibly close yet perpetually unreachable or without trains. The thief's taunt (“Only twenty minutes away!”) after violating her space embodies the cruel paradox of her struggle: myth elevates her suffering to archetype only to condemn her to its inevitability. Windows yawn open, but Herta's prison has been internalized; Konrad's brutality (“A fuck is a fuck”) reduces her to a phantom even when physically present (“I was standing there”). Her Delphic quest for self-knowledge becomes pathological in this climate. The more she searches for footprints of her authentic self (“At Nine a.m.”), the more she becomes a spectator in her own life. In a world that demands compliance, authenticity is diagnosed as maladjustment—her trembling hands during lessons and disembodied sexual encounters are proof of her failed adaptation. Each fractured moment of being—whether Pamela's mockery or the classroom's intellectual battleground, the violated home or the elusive station—becomes a cipher in Herta's emotional lexicon: Herta's emotional epistemology. When the diary's “I” erupts through its third-person cage (“I have firm thighs . . . I am I”), it does more than assert existence: it transforms raw feeling into evidence against erasure. The knife and apple, now heavy with accumulated meaning, prepare their final reckoning. If myth condemns Herta to archetypal suffering (Section 5), her emotional responses become both rebellion and revelation—a duality explored in Section 6.

## 6 *The Knife and the Apple* revisited: emotion as epistemology and ontology

### 6.1 The ontological claim

For Herta, emotions constitute ontology. Her “I feel, therefore I am”<sup>3</sup> asserts emotions as existential proof. Her trembling hands and stifled breath are the only evidence of her eroding selfhood. This is ontology: emotion as being, the irreducible fact of her existence.

### 6.2 The epistemological function: decoding systems through feelings

Emotions also serve as hermeneutic tools. When the diary’s “I” erupts (“I am I”), it decodes systems of oppression: fear maps domestic brutality (Konrad’s “Eat or I’ll shove it into your mouth”) and pride exposes the cost of resistance (the bus monologue’s defiant performativity). The “sticky handle” of the mountain refuge door, a literal door grip in “By Night,” becomes a visceral metaphor for institutional suffocation. This dual function—emotion as both being and knowing—explains why Herta’s authenticity is pathologized: to feel is to simultaneously exist and expose. Zupan Sosič’s (2024: 53) “aesthetic filigree” makes it possible to trace Herta’s emotional alchemy—how marginalization fuels her creativity. The knife/apple duality resolves ambiguously: the knife (violence, critique) carves space for her voice. The apple (yearning, knowledge) rots into humus for rebirth. Yet Herta’s fleeting reconciliation—the final, hard-won smile (Benussi 2024: 229), the animal moving through trees in her slumber, a recurring dream of constrained freedom, no longer stirs her concern (“At One in the Morning”; Hergold 2019: 126)—betrays not transcendence but a fragile détente with captivity; like the train station without trains, her liberation remains perpetually deferred, a mythic promise rotting alongside the apple. Tracing how emotions structure Herta’s existence and critique power (Section 6), her diary can be seen as ultimate testimony: not just survival, but a reckoning—an archaeology of the self, a counter-archive of resistance.

## 7 Conclusion: the emotional alchemy of resistance

By aligning with Herta’s moral horizon,<sup>4</sup> her struggle is not only dissected but also metabolized, transforming her defiance into a mirror for readers’ own complicity in systems of erasure. Exercising their logical and critical reasoning and problem-solving abilities, they engage with the complexities that arise from Herta’s exposure to luck—factors beyond her control.<sup>5</sup> Herta’s emotional responses to the challenges that threaten her intimate world and singularity can be monitored thanks to a narrative style characterized by “an orientation toward the authenticity of being and saying, subversive engagements with symbols and images of nonsense, melodiousness of mediated speech and an aesthetic filigree of descriptions” (Zupan Sosič 2024: 53). Herta Jamnik’s diary is not

3 “je sens donc je suis” (Chaudier 2014: 280).

4 The term *moral horizon* is taken from Taylor (1991: 37–38).

5 The terms *luck* and *moral luck* are taken from Nussbaum (2001, xiv, endnote 5): “Here, as in the text, I use the term ‘luck’ to designate what the Greeks designated by *tuchē*, namely, events over which human agents lack control; it does not connote randomness, or indeed any particular view about causality.” See also Baldini (2015: 122, note 5).

merely a record of days but a testimony of feeling as revolt. The relentless pressure to conform, to dull the sharp edges of her originality in the Slovenian community in Trieste, fuels her emotional eruptions, transforming the diary into a sanctuary of authenticity. Each shift from third- to first-person narration is a defiant pulse of selfhood, a refusal to be erased by the normal codes of her environment. Even Herta's classroom—where she dissects love and fascism with her students—becomes a site of quiet insurrection, proving that her authenticity thrives not in escape but in the daily act of unmasking the systems that confine her. Jamnik's diary transforms daily torment into testament: feeling becomes revolt, and the personal becomes political.

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