

Article

Edith Södergran's Genderqueer Modernism

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Abstract: This essay reads Edith Södergran's poetic subject in *Dikter* (Poems) (1916) as multiple and, in their complex negotiation and revision of the cultural body assigned female at birth, representative of a gender expansiveness that we can identify today as trans and genderqueer. These queer readings of Södergran's poems seek to move away from traditional interpretations of her work while resisting the application of fixed meanings onto them. Locating potential manifestations, opposed to identifications, of trans expression can open up new possibilities for understanding the complexity of Södergran's writing and how contemporary readers can consider their own positionality as they navigate and renegotiate their place in the queer worlds Södergran built. This essay argues that Edith Södergran's avant-gardist world-building of materially and aesthetically genderqueer poetic subjects contributes to her own revolutionary brand of Finland-Swedish modernism.



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“Jag är ingen kvinna. Jag är ett neutrum./Jag är ett barn, en page och ett djärvt beslut/” (“Vierge moderne” 31).

(I am no woman. I am a neuter./I am a child, a page-boy, and a bold decision/).¹

Finland-Swedish modernist poet Edith Södergran's (1892–1923) cross-illustration of the material yet ethereal body and transcendent subjectivity that is multiple, fragmented, and unconstrained by conventional lyrical expression has cemented her status as one of the earliest producers of literary modernism in the Nordic countries. Influenced by German expressionism, French symbolism, and Russian futurism, Södergran's poetry fashioned a universe of fluid subjective and somatic experiences and irreality² via free verse that resisted previous literary trends in Scandinavian literature³. Södergran's writing, which has been translated into several major languages, including multiple English translations, comprises four poetry collections published between 1916 and 1920⁴, a collection of aphorisms, *Brokiga iakttagelser* (Motley Observations) (1919), and the posthumous *Landet som icke är* (The Land that is Not) (1925)⁵. Södergran's bold rejection of traditional lyrical structures and her provocative illustrations of intimate female corporeality, subjectivity, and desire have inspired several illuminating studies that interrogate the author's feminist construction of the modern(ist) subject and her body as woman⁶.

Studies of Södergran's ambivalent portrayal of female subjectivity surely offer a productive vein of feminist critique of her writing, but Södergran's radical portrayal of

¹ Except as indicated, all poems are translated by Stina Katchadourian as they appear in *Love & Solitude: Edith Södergran's Selected Poems 1916–1923*. Seattle: Fjord Press, 1992.

² “The term “irreality” is not (or was not) an English word, but is borrowed from German's “Irrealismus.” The point is to distinguish this from “unreality” (which seems too judgmental) and “surrealism” which is a rather specific form of irreality.” (Brantly 2018, p. 4)

³ Södergran was not the first, however, to write free verse poetry in Swedish, as Vilhelm Ekelund began writing free verse 1902, followed by Ivar Conradson. In Denmark, Johannes V. Jensens Digte (1906) included free verse as well. (Pettersson 2011, p. 21).

⁴ *Dikter* (Poems) (1916), *Septemberlyran* (The September Lyre) (1918), *Rosenaltaret* (The Rose Altar) (1919), *Framtidens skugga* (The Shadow of the Future) (1920).

⁵ Södergran's final collection *Landet som icke är* was published posthumously in 1925 and edited by fellow Finland-Swedish authors Elmer Diktonius and Hagar Olsson.

⁶ See (Witt-Brattström 1997; Evers 1993; Hackman 2000; Rostbøll 2008).

gender transcends self-essentializing interpellations of the autonomous female composing subject commonly read in her work. With the spirit of Södergran's modernist manifesto "Individuell konst" ("Individual Art") (1918) in mind, "Vad som gör många av dessa dikter dyrbara är att de stamma från en individ av en ny art" (qtd. in Tideström: 168) (What makes many of these poems valuable is that they stem from an individual of a new kind)⁷, I reassess Södergran's contribution to the development of literary modernism in Finland by emphasizing the author's avant-gardist⁸ production of plural subjectivities and bodies that critics have commonly interpreted as belonging to the biological author or to a fictive, singular feminine poetic subject. I argue that reading separate poetic subjects and material bodies in Södergran's debut *Dikter* (Poems) (1916)⁹ illuminates Södergran's modernist poetics that charge the destabilized subject position with radical possibilities for nonbinary gender expression and transgender becoming¹⁰.

In "*In a Queer Time and Place*", Jack Halberstam states that "the term transgender can be used as a marker for all kinds of people who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender normativity" (Halberstam 2005, p. 55). This essay posits Södergran's fragmented poetic subject as multiple and, in their complex negotiation and revision of the cultural female body, representative of a transgender expression that we can identify today as *genderqueer*¹¹. Robin Dembroff defines genderqueer as "a category [of a critical gender kind] whose members collectively destabilize the binary axis, or the idea that the only possible genders are the exclusive and exhaustive kinds men and women" (2). Genderqueer is, as Dembroff presents it, "socially located" and can thus be read across geographical and temporal contexts where a binary gender ideology is dominant (19). My reading of Södergran's poetic subjects as genderqueer does not de-feminize or de-sex her writing, nor does it diminish the power of Södergran's female authorship or her production of female subjectivity, as one can identify as both woman and genderqueer¹². This essay instead argues that Edith Södergran's avant-gardist world-building of materially and aesthetically genderqueer poetic subjects contributes to her own revolutionary brand of Finland-Swedish modernism.

It is quite remarkable that Finland-Swedish authors were at the forefront of Scandinavian modernism since "the number of Swedish-speaking residents in Finland amounted to only 10%, about 300,000, of the country's population" (Hertzberg et al. 2012, p. 445).

⁷ Except as indicated, all translations excluding Södergran's poems are by the author.

⁸ In "The Paradoxical Poetics of Edith Södergran", Ursula Lindqvist argues that Södergran's poetry has been too easily situated in Scandinavian literary history as a breakthrough in Finland's literary modernism; instead, she argues that Södergran's work is avant-garde.

⁹ The author focuses on *Dikter* as a case study, in part, because of its significant impact on Finland's literary scene. The author contends that genderqueer expression is manifest across the oeuvre and is especially prominent in the following post-*Dikter* poems: from *Septemberlyran*: "Triumf att finnas till ..."; "Grimace d'artiste"; "Orfeus"; "Är jag en lögnare"; "Vad är imorgon?"; "Framtidens tåg"; "O mina solbrandsfärgade toppar ..."; "Apokalypsens genius"; "Villkoret"; "Världen badar i blod"; "Gudarnas lyra"; "Vanvettets virvel"; from *Rosenaltaret*: "Till fots fick jag gå genom solsystemen"; "Till de starka"; "Besvärjelsen"; "Först vill jag bestiga Chimborazzo ..."; "Lidandets kalk"; "Stormen"; "Verktygets klagan"; from *Framtidens Skugga*: "Makt"; "Eros hemlighet"; "Materialism"; "Den starkes kropp"; from *Landet som icke är*: "Fångenskap."

¹⁰ The author uses the terms *transgender* and *genderqueer*, umbrella terms for nonbinary gender kinds, to describe poetic voices that significantly predate the terms. Using contemporary vocabulary to describe the past is a queer act that is aware of its own failure, as the act of queering is to claim that the object viewed "queerly" is already an object, action, or affect that has failed to reproduce norms. Additionally, in "Queering History", Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon "venture that queering requires what we might term "unhistoricism." Far from being ahistorical—or somehow outside history—unhistoricism would acknowledge that history as it is hegemonically understood today is inadequate to housing the project of queering. In opposition to a history based on hetero difference, ... homohistory ... [is] invested in suspending determinate sexual and chronological differences while expanding the possibilities of the nonhetero, with all its connotations of sameness, similarity, proximity, and anachronism" (Goldberg and Menon 2005, p. 1609).

¹¹ The term "genderqueer" was first used by trans activist Riki Wilchins in the 1990s. The term, now mostly an umbrella term for nonbinary gender identities, aimed to describe "those who were both queer with respect to their sexuality and 'the kind of gendertrash society rejected' with respect to their gender intelligibility in public spaces" (Dembroff 13). Genderqueer is a category under the umbrella term *transgender* (or *trans*).

¹² Genderqueer individuals may destabilize binary gender ideologies, but that does not mean that they cannot additionally identify with/as a gender belonging to the binary (man, woman) or find gender norms relevant in various contexts. See (Dembroff 2020, p. 10).

Finland's insular character and pre-war national turmoil¹³ might account, in part, for what Clas Zilliacus calls the country's "unsolicited" modernist literature¹⁴. Scholars additionally point to the multi-lingual background of the Finland-Swedes: "as bilingual/multilingual and 'doubly peripheral' (both in relation to Finnish and to mainland Swedish) the Finland-Swedish poets achieved a kind of foreignness within the Swedish language" (Hertzberg et al. 2012, p. 446)¹⁵. Södergran's intentional use of *findlandssvenska*, a variety of Swedish spoken in Finland, made her poetry stylistically and syntactically unique¹⁶. These linguistic nuances, "an awkwardly literary Swedish out of touch with contemporary spoken language" (450), coupled with the author's concern with cultural identity, gender, and philosophy, richly complemented her novel style and controversial avant-gardist intentions¹⁷.

Edith Södergran's modernist manifesto "Individuell konst" was especially groundbreaking. Published in the Swedish-language newspaper *Dagens Press* upon the release of her second collection *Septemberlyran* (The September Lyre) in 1918¹⁸, Södergran's letter called for a transfiguration of literature that would usher in a new wave of art created by the *individual*: "Jag uppmanar individerna att arbeta endast för odödligheten (ett falskt uttryck), att göra det högsta möjliga utav sig själva—att ställa sig i framtidens tjänst [...]" (qtd. in Tideström: 169) (I urge individuals to work only for immortality (a false expression), to develop themselves to the highest degree—to put themselves in the service of the future . . .). "Individuell konst" was the first European avant-garde manifesto written by a woman, making Södergran's effort all the more unique to the literary landscapes of early twentieth century Europe (Lindqvist 813)¹⁹. Södergran's unconventional style and adjacent manifesto were relentlessly attacked by contemporary critics, and she was even publicly psychoanalyzed by male reviewers at the height of the so-called "Fejden kring Septemberlyran" (The September Lyre Feud)²⁰. Regrettably, early Södergran scholarship by mostly male critics focused on her biography, unapologetically reducing Södergran the visionary author to Södergran the woman they believed her to be, including unfounded speculation about her romantic relationships (or lack thereof) and her battle with tuberculosis²¹. Fortunately, a new wave of Södergran scholarship introduced more nuanced interpretations of the poet's subject position²², her modernist and avant-gardist poetics²³, and her reception of Nietzsche's philosophy²⁴.

¹³ Finland's internal division began in the early twelfth century when the kingdom of Sweden colonized Finland and caused a new cultural identity to emerge: the Finland-Swedes, a Swedish-speaking minority that struggled, and still struggles, to maintain a Finnish and Swedish identity—yet paradoxically *neither* a Finnish or Swedish identity. The problem of national identity persisted when Sweden lost control over Finland and the latter became a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire in 1809. By the time Södergran's writing debuted, Finland's civil war was on the horizon as the Social Democrats, commonly called the "Reds", and the non-socialist conservative "Whites" battled over leadership of Finland after it acquired sovereignty in the wake of the Russian Empire's collapse.

¹⁴ Clas Zilliacus refers to the emergence of Finland-Swedish modernism as unsolicited in "Den modernistiska dikten" (Zilliacus 2000, p. 80).

¹⁵ See also (Kleberg 2003, p. 86).

¹⁶ Södergran considered German to be her best language, but she ultimately chose to write her published poetry in Swedish, which she spoke at home.

¹⁷ In "The Concept of Modernism in Scandinavia", P.M. Mitchell notes that two standard histories on Swedish literature, Alf Henriques *Svensk litteratur* (1944) and Alrik Gustafson's *History of Swedish Literature* (1961), fail to discuss Finland-Swedish poets at all. Mitchell points to the political and social unrest of isolated Finland as the possible reason for not including the Finland-Swedish poets, especially Södergran. (Mitchell 1985, p. 244)

¹⁸ "Individuell konst" was originally published in *Dagens Press* 31 December 1918. It has been reprinted in Tideström and Evers, *Hettan*.

¹⁹ Lindqvist notes American manifestos by female writers: Mina Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" (1914) and Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation" (1926). Lindqvist uses Susan Suleiman's 1990 reading of Hélène Cixous' "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975) to define manifestos, which includes writing with an "I" who represents a group. I do not suggest that Södergran's collective "I" speaks exclusively for women. See (Lindqvist 2006, p. 830).

²⁰ See (Tideström 1949), ch. "Fejden kring Septemberlyran" for more on the backlash Södergran received after the publication of her manifesto and *Septemberlyran*.

²¹ Witt-Brattström begins *Ediths jag* by criticizing the "grand old men" (9) of Södergran research, such as George C. Schoolfield (1984) and Gunnar Tideström (1949).

²² See (Borsgård 2016; Evers 1993; Haake 2016; Hackman 2000; Hästbacka 2016; Lindhé 2016).

²³ See (Lindqvist 2006; Rahikainen 2014; Witt-Brattström 1997).

²⁴ See (Mier-Cruz 2013).

1. Genderqueering Södergran's Women

Södergran's production of autonomous female subjectivity has inspired powerful readings of gender in her writing. Ebba Witt-Brattström argues that "[e]n god del av sin styrka hämtar Ediths jag från överskridandet av kulturella tabun kring kvinnan som kropp" (313) (Edith's "I" acquires a great deal of strength from the excess of cultural taboos surrounding woman as body). Unlike my interpretation of Södergran's poetic subject(s), Witt-Brattström considers Södergran's lyrical "I" (jag) as essentially female and her femininity as her most consistent quality: "Det enda jaget håller fast vid är sina 'kvinnliga' markörer. Ända från författarskapets början satsar Edith Södergran på att profilera sig som en kvinna som talar i framtidens tjänst [...]" (313) (The "I's" only constant is its "womanly" markers. From the beginning of Södergran's authorship, she invests in profiling herself as a woman who speaks on behalf of the future ...). For Ursula Lindqvist, Södergran's speaker is mostly female: "As in most of Södergran's work, the speaker is female, reflecting Södergran's consistent ideological and figurative conflation of the reproductive capacity of the female sex and the creative power of the female poet" (822). Lindqvist adds, however, that Södergran's avant-gardist qualities are similar to the "masculine poet-speaker [...] yet [Södergran] recasts them to serve her individual philosophical agenda. Accordingly, Södergran's poet-speaker is either feminine or gender-neutral" (818). Hertzberg, Haapala, and Kantola note the plurality of poetic voices in *Dikter*: "Each poem has a distinctive voice and ideological message presenting a certain erotic and social attitude. This polyphonic strategy constitutes a basic structuring principle of the collection" (450). They too, however, regard Södergran's poetic voices as exclusively female: "Taken as whole, this multitude of voices expresses a modern condition of womanhood, including both pitfalls and alternative routes to freedom" (450).

Södergran's poetic subjects often exaggerate hegemonic femininity's romanticized oppression of, to use contemporary vocabulary, the female-assigned body: "jag tar emot den krona du räcker mig,/som böjer ned mitt huvud mot mitt hjärta..." ("Dagen svalnar" 26) (I will accept the crown you give me,/which bends my head toward my heart ...) ("The Day Cools"). Södergran's poems thus repeat processes of binary sexual difference in order to paradoxically, in Nietzschean fashion, undo them. More than a masquerade, Södergran's repeated performances of femininity as romantic oppressor of the female sexed body is successful in its subversion because it draws on, and gains irony from, "the force of authority [accumulated] through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices" (Butler "Critically" (Butler 2013, p. 20)). I demonstrate below that each of Södergran's poems occupies its own fraught subject position and that these genderqueer poetic subjects, who radically destabilize the gender binary axis, are central to the beginnings of Finland-Swedish avant-gardist poetics and modernist subject formation.

What happens and what is at stake if today's (gender)queer reader glimpses among Södergran's sundry subject positions a transgender life? With Sara Ahmed's discussions of queer feelings and queer failings²⁵ in mind, I read Södergran's poem "Jag" [I] from her debut *Dikter* (Poems) (1916) as a haunting illustration of material out-of-placeness that begins at birth. The poem's ambiguity accommodates a myriad of interpretations, to be sure, and one instructive approach to understanding the speaker's disorienting subject position may lie in the recognition of a transgender life weighed down by their own body:

Jag är främmande i detta land,
som ligger djupt under det tryckande havet,
solen blickar in med ringlande strålar
och luften flyter mellan mina händer.
Man sade mig att jag är född i fångenskap -
här är intet ansikte som vore mig bekant.
Var jag en sten, den man kastat hit på botten?

²⁵ See Ahmed (2015, 2006).

Var jag en frukt, som var för tung för sin gren?
 Här ligger jag på lur vid det susande trädets fot,
 hur skall jag komma upp för de hala stammarna? [. . .] (Södergran 29)
 I am a stranger in this land,
 which lies deep beneath the pressing sea,
 the sun looks in with swirling beams
 and the air flows between my hands.
 They told me that I was born in imprisonment-
 there is no face that would be known to me.
 Was I a stone that they cast to the bottom here?
 Was I a fruit, too heavy for its branch?
 I lie in wait here at the sougning tree's foot,
 how can I climb up the slippery trunks?
 [. . .]

In "Jag", the subject is a speaking body that bears no hegemonic markers of masculinity or femininity; yet this shape, viewed through a queer lens, is oppressed and compressed by their own corporeality and by the objects that exist beyond it, beyond their skin. If objects, as Ahmed suggests, "extend the body by extending what it can reach [then] [r]eachability is . . . an effect of the habitual, in the sense that what is reachable depends on what bodies 'take in' as objects that extend their bodily motility, becoming like a second skin" (Ahmed, "Queer Phenomenology" 107). Drowning and shrinking beneath the sea of gender, then, the out-of-place subject is out of nourishment's reach and unable to reach for nourishment: "Man sade mig att jag är född i fångenskap" (They told me that I was born in imprisonment). The trans, or genderqueer, subject is thus one whose skin is a prison shaped by the impressions left on it: "Queer subjects, when faced by the 'comforts' of heterosexuality may feel uncomfortable (the body does not 'sink into' a space that has already taken its shape). Discomfort is a feeling of disorientation: one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled" (Ahmed 148). The speaker's material body has congealed with gender and forgets the difference but, in still *being* different, is unable to extend their body in the world: "there is no face that would be known to me." The potentially trans speaker asks: "Var jag en sten, den man kastat hit på botten?/Var jag en frukt, som var för tung för sin gren?" (Was I a stone that they cast to the bottom here?/Was I a fruit, too heavy for its branch?) Either ossified mineral or overripe fruit, amassed excess materiality pushes the genderqueer body down, effectively marooning them at the poem's close. Yet to climb the slippery branches, they are left to dream of extending their reach, acquiring a new slant that might reveal new livable spaces. Whether the poetic speaker of this poem is a sexed body (any sex) or no body at all, they are isolated in their position, wherever that may be, along a rigid binary axis that is sustained in the poem and perhaps in any possible interpretation of it.

Sara Ahmed writes, "Queer lives remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce [heteronormativity]. To turn this around, queer lives shape what gets reproduced: in the very failure to reproduce the norms through how they inhabit them, queer lives produce different effects" (152). Södergran's poetic voices effect genderqueer subjects who are radical, conventional, avant-gardist, emancipated, and oppressed. As much as they transcend various binary axes, they sometimes subscribe to them, ironically or not. To assert that Södergran's poetic voices are all and always genderqueer would be to inadvertently imagine a singular, no matter how numerous they may seem, poetic subject experiencing and voicing each poem. Imposing an idealistic vision of genderqueer subjectivity can, furthermore, potentially contribute to a history of thinkers, mostly male, who have romanticized the androgynous figure²⁶. In my readings below, I do not suggest

²⁶ Rado explains: "Many modernist writers of both sexes became increasingly attracted to a culturally specific notion of a third-sexed, or androgyne, imagination—and here I use the term 'androgyne' instead of androgynous to indicate the almost hermaphroditic nature of the concept of androgyny in the modernist age—that reflected and capitalized upon the changes in the modern sexual landscape" (Rado 2000, p. 12).

Södergran's writing, however avant-gardist her work is, was unrestricted or entirely successful in its failure to reproduce binary norms. Overlooking or underestimating the failure to fail can reinforce the harmful position that queer lives are inherently fluid and free of norms, as not everyone can (because of race, class, sex, gender and gender expression) move with such ease. Ahmed explains: "Indeed, the idealization of movement depends on a prior model of what counts as a queer life, which may exclude others, those who have attachments that are not readable as queer, or indeed those who may lack the (cultural as well as economic) capital to support the 'risk' of maintaining antinormativity as a permanent orientation" ("Cultural" 152).

Södergran's poetic speakers sometimes call attention to the readers' own compulsion to impose gender onto the body, which is evident whenever critics refer exclusively (and perhaps unwittingly) to Södergran's poetic speaker(s) as "she" or "her". We can see Södergran's own concern with intrusive pronouns in the poem "Konungens sorg" (The King's Sorrow): "Ordet 'sorg' lät konungen förbjuda vid hovet,/'olycka', 'kärlek' och 'lycka' som alla gjorde ont,/men 'hon' och 'hennes' funnos ännu kvar" (52) (The word "sorrow" was banned from the King's court/"unhappiness," "love" and "happiness" all caused pain/but "she" and "her" remained)²⁷. The female pronouns are a weighty burden in this poem. Standing in for sorrow, love, and happiness, "she" and "her" eerily become metonymic for the king. He cannot resist them, and Woman cannot escape them. The poem powerfully illustrates how Western affects that arise from happiness and sorrow hold less authority over the subject assigned female at birth than the feminine markers that constitute her cultural identity. For Woman to come into existence, to feel pain or sorrow or to be able to arouse these emotions in others, the king must first bestow cultural intelligibility on her via the regulation of her pronouns. Even when the king orders the young women's concealment and displacement "Ingen ung kvinna med blonda lockar/fick längre visa sig ute med obetäckt huvud,/och de små danserskorna i korta kjolar voro alla bannlysta från hovet" (No young woman with blonde tresses/could again appear with hair uncovered,/and all the little dance girls in short skirts were banned from the royal court) (52), her pronouns "funnos ännu kvar" (remained). The poem shows that we, too, might regard pronouns and their cultural attachments to be so natural that the threat of relinquishing them produces a *sorg* (sorrow) so disorientating that we demand submission or expulsion. In her ironic reproduction of the processes by which language and discursive hegemonic femininity shape the body, Södergran effects a method for queer "unfailure" to reproduce norms ostensibly intact.

Södergran's construction of Woman in *Dikter* is often the deconstruction of her cultural body. In the "Kärlek" (Love), Woman falls apart:

Min själ var en ljusblå dräkt av himlens färg; jag lämnade den på en klippa vid havet
och naken kom jag till dig och liknade en kvinna.
Och som en kvinna satt jag vid ditt bord
och drack en skål med vin och andades in doften av några rosor.
Du fann att jag var vacker och liknade något du sett i drömmen,
jag glömde allt, jag glömde min barndom och mitt hemland,
jag visste endast att dina smekningar höll mig fången.
Och du tog leende en spegel och bad mig se mig själv.
Jag såg att mina skuldror voro gjorda av stoft och smulade sig sönder,
jag såg att min skönhet var sjuk och hade ingen vilja än - försvinna.
O, håll mig sluten i dina armar så fast att jag ingenting behöver. (48)
My soul was a light blue dress the color of the sky;
I left it on a rock by the sea
and naked I came to you, looking like a woman.
And like a woman I sat at your table
and drank a toast in wine, inhaling the scent of some roses.

²⁷ Translated by the author.

You found me beautiful, like something you saw in a dream,
 I forgot everything, I forgot my childhood and my homeland,
 I only knew that your caresses held me captive.
 And smiling you held up a mirror and asked me to look.
 I saw that my shoulders were made of dust and crumbled away,
 I saw that my beauty was sick and wished only to—disappear.
 Oh, hold me tight in your arms so close that I need nothing.

The poem's subject "liknade en kvinna" (resembled a woman). Considering the possibilities of trans becoming in Södergran's writing, the implication may be that the speaker was indeed, to use present vocabulary, assigned female at birth; yet hegemonic norms, including the anticipated appearance of the female-presenting body, that interpellate Woman as a culturally intelligible subject are detrimental to the nonconforming body. Drinking and sitting "som en kvinna" (like a woman) acknowledges the repeated stylized gestures the body unconsciously enacts to its advantage. "The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler "Performative" (Butler 1988, p. 523)). "Looking like a woman" and therefore perceived as having successfully performed female gestures, the poetic subject is no longer naked, but clothed in cultural intelligibility in the guise of femininity. "Bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force... norms surface as the surfaces of bodies; norms are a matter of impressions, of how bodies are 'impressed upon' by the world, as a world made up of others" (Ahmed "Cultural" 145). The effect of the body working and being worked upon is revealed when the poetic speaker uses man's mirror to see themselves: dust. All the wine, roses, and caresses have shaped the surface of the body into a decadently decaying sculpture. Whereas the cisgender subject is often so comfortable in their own skin "that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins" (Ahmed 148), the genderqueer poetic subject's discomfort renders their overworked body decadently perceptible. Within the narrative world of "Kärlek", the feminine-presenting body is revered, unveiled, wined, and perfumed. The glorified aesthetic descriptions of them come from man's point of view; yet throughout the poem, the body is falling apart. Beyond the narrative world, the poetic subject surprises the reader twice: first by invoking the image of the beautiful crumbling woman and then by revealing her desire to decompose.

2. Södergran's Genderqueer Modern Virgin

In my reading of potential transgender subjectivity in Södergran's poetics, I have shown that some of her poetic speakers in *Dikter* expose the concealed labor of reproducing the hegemonic femininity demanded of the body that we can today view as being assigned female at birth. As subjects who repeatedly destabilize the gender binary axis, I have also argued that some of her poetic speakers are genderqueer. Particularly vital to my study of Södergran's genderqueer poetry is one of her most well-known poems, "Vierge Moderne" (Modern Virgin):

Jag är ingen kvinna. Jag är ett neutrum.
 Jag är ett barn, en page och ett djärvt beslut,
 jag är en skrattande strimma av en scharlakanssol . . .
 Jag är ett nät för alla glupska fiskar,
 jag är en skål för alla kvinnors ära,
 jag är ett steg mot slumpen och fördärvet,
 jag är ett språng i friheten och självet . . .
 Jag är blodets viskning i mannens öra,
 jag är en själens frossa, köttets längtan och förvägran,
 jag är en ingångsskylt till nya paradiser.
 Jag är en flamma, sökande och käck,
 jag är ett vatten, djupt men dristigt upp till knäna,
 jag är eld och vatten i ärligt sammanhang på fria villkor ... (31–32)

I am no woman. I am a neuter.
 I am a child, a page-boy, and a bold decision,
 I am a laughing streak of a scarlet sun . . .
 I am a net for all voracious fish,
 I am a toast to every woman's honor,
 I am a step toward luck and toward ruin,
 I am a leap in freedom and the self . . .
 I am the whisper of desire in a man's ear,
 I am the soul's shivering, the flesh's longing and denial,
 I am an entry sign to new paradises.
 I am a flame, searching and brave,
 I am water, deep but bold only to the knees,
 I am fire and water, honestly combined, on free terms . . .

Much has been written about the subject position of "Vierge moderne". The opening line "I am no woman" and the claim "I am a neuter" are especially captivating. Several critics interpret the *neuter* to be Södergran's, or the poetic subject's, vision of the new modern woman. Boel Hackman states that, "'Vierge moderne' suggererar fram den moderna unga kvinnas många egenskaper och visar därmed på den nuvarande, gängse uppfattningens ytlighet och begränsning" (139) ("Vierge Moderne" suggests the modern young woman's many qualities and thus points to the superficiality and limitation of existing common perceptions). Ebba Witt-Brattström reads the *neutrum* as *den Nya kvinnan* (The New Woman). She suggests that Södergran's negation and use of the term neuter implies, "jag är ingen (vanlig) kvinna, jag är en Ny kvinna (neutrum)" (210) (I am no (ordinary) woman, I am a New Woman (neuter)). In contrast, Holger Lillqvist reads against viewing Södergran's poetic subject as the new modern woman concerned with effecting social change. He argues that the *Vierge moderne* "präglas av euforisk bejakelse av den transcendent positionen" (Lillqvist 2001, 72) (is marked by euphoric affirmation of the transcendent position). In his detailed line-for-line reading of the poem, Lillqvist claims that binary contradictions between body and spirit become an illusion, which "om något innebär självtillräcklighet, frihet från relationer till någonting utanför jaget. Den moderna jungfrun förmår genom sitt androgyna väsen omfatta det manliga såväl som det kvinnliga, det själsliga såväl som det kroppsliga. Därmed har de heterosexuella polerna 'man' och 'kvinna' helt åsidosatts, till förmån för den estetiska idealismens omnipotens och autonomi" (Lillqvist 2001, 75) (if anything means self-sufficiency, freedom from relationships to something outside the self. Through its androgynous essence, the modern virgin is able to embrace the masculine as well as the feminine, the spiritual as well as the material. Thus, the heterosexual poles 'man' and 'woman' have been completely neglected, in favor of the omnipotence and autonomy of aesthetic idealism).

Ursula Lindqvist also points out the limitation of viewing the *Vierge Moderne* as the new woman:

While [Södergran] is clearly deconstructing the figure of "woman" in this poem, she offers no single alternative vision of what a New Woman would look like. Instead, her ecstatic descriptions mutate rapidly and unpredictably, like the colors and shapes in a kaleidoscope, propelled forward by the momentum of the repeated "I am." By declining to erect a single woman figure to replace the one she destroys in the poem's opening line, Södergran once again stands fast in her subject position by making it impossible to demarcate a representative figure to cast in an object position—not even a revised, woman-friendly, politically updated object position. (828)

Lindqvist's claim that Södergran does not offer a replacement for the "woman" she deconstructs, or any figure at all, resonates with Elisabeth Hästbacka's position that "... 'jag' just är ett pronomen och därmed också en grammatisk funktion, en position i en struktur, och i den meningen inte kan referera exklusivt till ett specifikt subjekt" (15) ("I" is

precisely a pronoun and thus also a grammatical function, a position in a structure, and in that sense cannot refer exclusively to a specific subject). Hästbacka's fascinating suggestion reads against locating, at least in some poems, a biographical subject, the New Woman, or several individual voices in Södergran's writing. By reading the subject as a pronoun and grammatical function that does not refer exclusively to a specific subject, Hästbacka opens up more positions for the reader to take on when they confront the "I" in Södergran's work: "Har man väl sett 'jag' på detta 'metatextuella' sätt inbjuds mottagaren dels att inta 'jags' position, uppleva den erfarenhet den talande i ögonblicket aktualiserar och se världen och sig själv ur det nya perspektiv som den positionen erbjuder, dels att ta ytterligare ett steg" (16) (Once you have seen 'I' in this "metatextual" context, the recipient is invited to take on the 'I' position, live through the experience the speaker is currently actualizing and see the world and themselves from the new perspective this position offers, and to take one step further). Anna Lindhé adds that, "Istället för att rikta kritik mot dikten eller mot Södergran bör vi kanske se vår egen roll i aktiveringen av ett sådant jag genom vår läsning. Vi producerar och upprepar det som vi kritiserar" (29) (Instead of directing criticism at [the poem] or at Södergran, we should perhaps see our own role in the activation of such an "I" through our reading. We produce and repeat that which what we criticize).

I support such claims that each reader can take on the subject position in Södergran's poems and see the world from this new slant. That I see multiple iterations of genderqueer identities in her writing might not fall purely in line with reading Södergran's *Jag* [I] as an empty pronoun ready to be filled with the reader's experience; however, a queer reading might not ever fall in line at all. My queer reading of genderqueer manifestation in Södergran's writing argues, perhaps "out of line", that some of Södergran's speakers embody genderqueerness and thereby create new worlds and experiences of nonbinary subjectivities. And if I am reproducing what I am critiquing, a kind of queer resistance to gender and temporal normativity, I do so with the hope that more readers will step out of line and read against the binary axis.

The complexity of "Vierge moderne" surely lends itself to multiple interpretations. My particular reading of "Vierge moderne" in this essay considers how the poem's language and imagery paradoxically uphold and shatter gender norm relevancy for the subject. The two sentences of the first line are simple statements, yet they are undeniably intricate. The first sentence "Jag är ingen kvinna" (I am no woman) is a locutionary act that is made of oppositions. "Jag är" [I am] is a positive statement, whereas "ingen kvinna" (no woman) is a negation with lasting implications. Stating that they are no woman, the poetic subject indicates that they were once woman (i.e., socially assigned female at birth, to use contemporary terms) or have, incorrectly, been perceived physically or culturally as woman. This is unfortunately unavoidable as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, "if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: 'I am a woman'; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man" (de Beauvoir 1993, p. xvii). Södergran's speaker shows that despite identifying as "neuter", or as a nonbinary subject, they must first dissociate themselves from the category "woman", a disavowal that paradoxically ruptures and reinforces the relationship. Ragnar Haake suggests that because "woman" is the first and only thing the poetic speaker disavows, the poem's play with identity risks that the reader will focus on precisely this object: "det enda vi till slut kan finna riktigt trovärdigt om diktjaget är att det är just en kvinna" (40) (in the end, the only thing we can find truly credible about the poetic subject is that it is indeed a woman). This may be so and understandably unavoidable for readers conditioned to see the feminine, in whatever capacity, as "woman"; but it also brings to light the fraught position genderqueer and transgender individuals occupy when their gender identity and expression are rejected or called into question. From being misgendered to being deadnamed²⁸ or being killed entirely, the violence and trauma inflicted on trans and gender-nonconforming individuals

²⁸ To deadname a person is to refer to a transgender or nonbinary person by the name they were given at birth and no longer use.

occurs daily. Their “being” in heteronormative culture is possible only in their non-being: “Given that queer becomes read as a form of ‘non-life’—with the death implied by being seen as non-reproductive—then queers are perhaps even already dead and cannot die” (Ahmed “Cultural” 156). The compulsion to read the *Vierge moderne* as a woman does not necessarily entail hetero- and cisnormativity, however, on account of the intricacy of the poem and the complexity of genderqueer as a critical gender kind. Haake insightfully adds, “Diktens jag är en kvinna som bortser från att hon är subjektiverad som kvinna och som därmed fränsäger sig sin subjektivitet, sin möjlighet att tala tillbaka, vilket slutligen leder till att hon reduceras till ett tystat objekt” (42) (The poem’s subject is a woman who ignores the fact that she is subjectified as a woman and who thus renounces her subjectivity, her ability to speak back, which ultimately leads to her being reduced to a silenced object). Despite this compelling position, we ought to question why we must read the speaker along the binary axis at all.

The *Vierge Moderne* is subject, body, and action fluidly reproducing gestures understood as masculine and feminine in a way that destabilizes the binary separating them. In becoming objects and actions, the speaker’s body signals a merging of materiality and movement that produces a body at ease that, like the cisgender subject, falls out of view because its comfort, to refer to Sara Ahmed again, makes it “hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view” (“Cultural” 148). The position of the *Vierge moderne*’s body out of view, however, is precarious. Gustav Borsgård remarks that the “emancipatoriska elementet i ‘Vierge moderne’ [ligger] i den glömska som är samtidig med påminnelsen om kroppen som jaget trängde bort för att få tala” (63–64) (the emancipatory element of “Vierge moderne” [lies] in the forgetting that occurs at the same time as the reminder of the body that the subject has pushed away in order to speak). If the residue of the body (socially and culturally assigned female at birth) haunts the poem, if we or the poetic subject themselves intentionally, or not, position that body back into view, then the genderqueer subject might not necessarily face violence so long as we do not register their body as exclusively cisgender. Robin Dembroff describes the “dual identities of some genderqueer persons . . . who do not exclusively identify as a man or as a woman, but who claim both a genderqueer as well as male and/or female identity” (9). This multi-identification is a result of the inescapable binary norms imposed by the state that “impact one’s ability to move through the world” (Dembroff 9)²⁹ and works against essentialist conceptions of the autonomous gendered subject. Additionally, if we consider Susan Stryker’s definition of trans (another umbrella term for nonbinary genders) as “the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition” (Stryker 2008, p. 1), we can better see that Södergran’s speaker is both corporeal and corporeally expansive, and thus resistant to any classifications of an essentialist autonomous material subject. Acknowledging their unchosen starting place, “Jag är ingen kvinna” (I am no woman), Södergran’s genderqueer speaker extends their body in the world on their own free terms.

3. Conclusions

This essay introduces a queer slant on Edith Södergran’s modernist poetics in which Södergran’s genderqueer poetic subjects present readers, across generations, with a vivid sense of moving in a world that fails to impose on them gender normative assumptions about the subject and body. My queer readings of her poems seek to move away from traditional interpretations of her work while refusing the application of fixed meanings onto them. Locating potential manifestations, opposed to identifications, of trans expression can open up new possibilities for understanding the complexity of Södergran’s writing,

²⁹ Dembroff elaborates: “there is no possibility of never taking gender norms to be relevant to oneself. Public spaces, such as toilets and locker rooms, legal institutions, social clubs, language, and marketing, to name but a few places, are heavily gendered, and gendered not only according to the binary, but in a way that leaves someone attempting to navigate these structures no choice but to pick a side” (9).

her influence on Scandinavian modernism, and how contemporary readers can consider their own positionality as they navigate and renegotiate their place in the queer worlds Södergran built. Edith Södergran's artistic play with the fluidity of aesthetic forms, cultural identity, and gender expression extends the reach of her poetry beyond the borders of Finland to the body of every reader. Appropriately, Södergran writes: "Min självsäkerhet beror på att jag har upptäckt mina dimensioner. Det anstår mig icke att göra mig mindre än jag är" (Södergran 1992, p. 65) (My self-confidence stems from the fact that I have discovered my dimensions. It does not suit me to make myself less than I am).

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