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(DE-)GENDERING AND (DE-)SEXUALIZING FEMALE
SUBJECTIVITIES: WOMAN-HATING AND ITS REVISIONS
IN LITERATURE AND PAINTING

I dedicate this paper to the memory of my former advisor, Professor Péter Egri, who always inspired his students to bring together the vastly dissimilar—past and present, American and European, verbal and visual, prose and poetry—within one comparative, transcultural and transgeneric, framework. Being a literary—and not *art*—historian, my focus will be literature and will follow a seemingly roundabout way: first I will discuss American and English male misogynist and American female non-misogynist writers, identifying in both cases forms of misogyny that are either present or apparently *absent*. This absence is so conspicuous and striking in the women’s work, that its dismissal can be interpreted as a demonstrative act of destroying icons and attitudes that our culture seems to take for granted. As such, it is exactly this absence of misogyny—and the resulting radical act, constructing a respect for women and a love for one’s self—that I would name as the staple features of some American women writers—Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Djuna Barnes, and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)—, as well as the contemporary Hungarian born visual artist, Orshi Drozdik.

In the first part of my paper I would like to discuss some classical and familiar forms of misogyny. Misogyny, I propose, is one of the most common, subtle, and covert manifestations of hate crime. In our culture it is a most naturalized sentiment, unnoticed like the air we breath in, yet framing our discussions of personal relationships, sexuality, family dynamics, health and biology, social equality or

inequality, religion, economics, philosophy, journalism—to name only a few fields where the dismissal of the role of women goes quite far.

1. Woman in the texts of male misogyny

Probably the most famous example of male modernist misogyny is T. S. Eliot. The women in his texts have become staple figures of modernity, whose alienation and ennui are only strengthened by the fact that they are affected by this alienation and ennui indirectly, through the men that define them. At best, Eliot's woman character is a lifeless, ghostlike figure, one of those who "come and go / Talking of Michelangelo" ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"), or spends her life "serving tea to friends," mourning her lost youth, neurotically twisting lilacs "in her fingers while she talks" ("Portrait of a Lady"). At worst, as throughout *The Waste Land*, she is female hysteria personified, famous for her bad nerves; or she is thirty-one year old yet "antique" looking Lil, whose abortion pills made her lose her teeth but who now will disappoint "poor Albert" for not being able to look good and give him "a good time"; or she is the bored typist making monotonous love with the repulsive "young man carbuncular." The desperate scene of her life includes her stale things left from the morning and the previous day: her kitchen stuff and her feminine "notions":

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, light
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.

The last line seems to give away the misogynist: the items that touch the body he is repulsed by, "[s]tockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays," become repulsive themselves. These are items that supposedly participate in the material construction of femininity, that is, they make the person wearing an underbodice, a corset, stockings, and slippers clearly desirable and desiring in the heterosexual context. Therefore, portraying these feminine notions as graceless and unbecoming parts of a repulsive love scene will evoke disgust not just in their love-making, but the womanliness of this woman too.

Heterosexual hegemony denies the woman a self outside the heterosexual context (“Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass”), yet the self constructed within this context is clearly hideous and ugly. Her place inside the male script is confining and repelling, yet she has no place outside.

Eliot is not without predecessors in the literature of misogyny. The American tradition goes back as far as John Winthrop’s portraying Anne Hutchinson’s “woman-child” as the devil itself, with “a face, but no head,” “over the eyes four horns, hard and sharp,” “the nose hooked upward; over the breast and back full of sharp pricks and scales” (Winthrop 262). Or, one could cite Washington Irving and Mark Twain, whose agents of civilization, Dame Van Winkle and the Widow Douglas, so desperately try to curb Rip’s and Huck’s free-soaring manly spirit that their only ways out become a 20-year sleep or a “lighting out for the territories.” English literature is also rich in misogynistic texts, with Jonathan Swift giving one of the more elaborate images of a constructed womanhood. In Swift’s case this constructedness carries blatantly negative connotations, and is synonymous with being fake, masked, dishonest, and without substance. The poem I have in mind is “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” (1734), which describes the undressing ceremony of Corinna, “a batter’d, strolling Toast”:

Then, seated on a three-legg’d Chair,
Takes off her artificial Hair:
Now, picking out a Crystal Eye,
She wipes it clean, and lays it by.
Her Eye-Brows from a Mouse’s Hyde,
Stuck on with Art on either Side,
Pulls off with Care, and first displays ‘em,
Then in a Play-Book smoothly lays ‘em.
Now dexterously her Plumpers draws,
That serve to fill her hollow Jaws.
Untwists a Wire: and from her Gums
A Set of Teeth completely comes.
Pulls out the Rags contriv’d to prop
Her flabby Dugs and down they drop.
Proceeding on, the lovely Goddess
Unlaces next her Steel-Rib’d Bodice;
Which by the Operator’s Skill,
Press down the Lumps, the Hollows fill,

Up goes her hand, and off she slips
The Bolsters that supply her Hips.
With gentlest Touch, she next explores
Her Shankers, Issues, running Sores,
Effects of many a sad Disaster;
And then to each applies a Plaster.
But must, before she goes to Bed,
Rub off the Dawbs of White and Red;
And smooth the Furrows in her Front,
With greasy Paper stuck upon't.
[...]

The Nymph, tho' in this mangled Plight,
Must ev'ry Morn her Limbs unite.
But how shall I describe her Arts
To recollect the scatter'd Parts?
Or shew the Anguish, Toil, and Pain,
Of gath'ring up herself again?
The bashful Muse will never bear
In such a Scene to interfere.
Corinna in the Morning dizen'd,
Who sees, will spew; who smells, be poison'd.

When the text is controlled by a misogynist, the woman becomes a monster. She is without substance; her gendered self is that which is being constructed again and again through the ritual of assembling of its rather vulgar artificial parts. The reader gets a full view of the underside of what Judith Butler calls the “theatricality of gender” (232): the woman wears a wig, her eyes are removable, her eyebrows are mouse hair, her round cheeks are stuffed, her teeth are false, her breasts are raised by rags, her figure is the work of a corset, her skin is smoothed by grease—her whole feminine body is created daily by much “Anguish, Toil, and Pain.” Femininity is here portrayed as the result of an elaborate performance, albeit in its negative aspect: through the performance when femininity is being de-created into its supposedly real substance: absence, void, nothingness. Indeed, that there is nothing beneath the de-created image but repulsive vulgarity is what Swift’s distancing and alienating irony suggests (and didactically explicates in the last line).

The misogyny conveyed in these texts seems to be part and parcel of sexism, while sexism has proved to be the direct product of heterocentric gender culture, the rigid institutionalized heterosexual

norms of patriarchy, or, in Adrienne Rich's well-known words, "compulsory heterosexuality." As long as women are portrayed as fulfilling heterosexual plots controlled by men, the constructions of womanhood, idolized or debased, are easily subordinated to male interests. As long as women are portrayed as objects of male desire, as passive extras in male quest plots, or simply as occupying the social places left vacant by men, these women have a very good chance of being obliterated from the text, erased and effaced, or relegated into mere decoration at best, or into objects evoking male repulsion at worst.¹ As long as women are denied their stories and appear only as characters in male texts, the perpetuation of heterosexism is unavoidable. "In a sexist culture," Judith Fetterley argues, "the interests of men and women are antithetical, and, thus, the stories each has to tell are not simply alternative versions of reality, they are, rather, radically incompatible" (159–160). Therefore, the misogynist portrayal of women seems to be a predictable and even necessary consequence of heterocentrist gender culture that makes antagonists out of women and men.

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Such major American women modernists as Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Djuna Barnes, and H. D. provide alternative scripts to woman hating. As they subvert traditional patriarchal depictions of women by de-gendering and de-sexualizing female subjectivities, these writers ultimately revise and transcend male misogynist representations of femininity. These authors propose loving alternatives: the women portrayed here manage to escape heterosexist hatred, manifest erasure,

¹ The contemporary Hungarian poet Imre Oravecz seems to provide a wealth of examples for this latter case of blatant textual misogyny, especially his 1988 book entitled *September 1972* [1972. szeptember]. Here young women are almost always portrayed as having repulsive bodies and genitals, posing an atavistic threat to the man victimized by their mere presence or intimidated into impotence (see the poem "Several times before" [„Előtte többször is"']). Elsewhere women appear as whores and predators, as selfish women with an insatiable sexual desire that, for the man, seems to conflict with what appears as their mask of autonomy, intelligence, and feminism (see the poem "You were not quite" [„Nem voltál egészen"']). In these misogynist texts women become representations of "perversity" by even providing the mental and physical image which helps turn him on and start masturbation (see poem "Now about" [„Most arról"']).

exile, and irony exactly by leaving the heterosexist matrix and entering a world where gender is not produced by heterosexuality. Often it will happen that de-heterosexualization occurs at the price of de-gendering; the product here is an androgynous self or several androgynous selves capable—as they are in Drozdik’s case—of self-loving.

2. Texts of women modernists: woman as text

2.1. Gertrude Stein: the figure of the woman quester

In 1909 Stein privately published *Three Lives*, thereby taking, as she herself put it, “the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth in literature” (*Autobiography* 66). Indeed, the book precedes by several years such landmark works of modernism as *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913), *Dubliners* (1914), *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *The Waste Land* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920).

All chapters of *Three Lives* are unusual in the sense that they do not portray women as participants in institutionalized heterosexuality, in love-and-marriage plots naturalized by romantic and realist fiction. Although the characters have various relationships, the three servant girls—the German Anna, the black Melanctha, and the German Lena—are autonomous beings, who do not need men to give meanings to their lives. Their stories are not heterosexual love stories, but are about the women themselves, their thoughts and desires. Especially Melanctha emerges as a quester (the text uses the word “seeker”), a role in literature previously reserved for men only. Melanctha is, then, the heroine of a female *Bildung*, and has a character as complex and changing as her male predecessors, among them Werther, Julien Sorel, or Raskolnikov.

“Melanctha Herbert was a graceful, pale yellow, intelligent, attractive negress” (82), Stein writes early on, contrasting Melanctha to her more “feminine” friend, Rose, whose laughter “was just ordinary, any sort of woman laughter” (82), and who “had lately married Sam Johnson a decent honest kindly fellow” (82). The life of the autonomous quester is by definition more difficult and complicated than that of a more traditionally “feminine” woman.

Melantha Herbert had not made her life all simple like Rose Johnson. Melantha had not found it easy with herself to make her wants and what she had, agree.

Melantha Herbert was always losing what she had in wanting all the things she saw. Melantha was always being left when she was not leaving others.

Melantha Herbert always loved too hard and much too often. She was always full with mystery and subtle movements and denials and vague distrusts and complicated disillusionments.

Then Melantha would be sudden and impulsive and unbounded in some faith, and then she would suffer and be strong in her repression. (86)

The reader knows next to nothing about Melantha's physical appearance; her identity is in no sense determined by the preparation of her body for heterosexual romance. Stein describes her in a way in which mostly only men are described: as a wanderer and as a person having desires and pursuits. I would like to suggest this: had we not been informed of Melantha's gender, we would probably assume that a man is being portrayed here. The less important but more obvious reason for this probable misperception is that her character traits are such as are traditionally used to represent some male "essence": that she is bold and intelligent, "complex" and "desiring" (83), that she "had not loved herself in childhood" (87), that she "had always had a break neck courage" (87), that "it was only men that for Melantha held anything there was of knowledge and power" (93), or that she would "do [...] things that had much danger" (99). More significantly, our assumption about the person here described being a man would be based on our reading experience gained in a patriarchal, heterocentrist, and often misogynist culture: it is this experience—prompting the knowledge that such characteristics are emphasized in connection with men only—that creates our expectation about the character as gendered male in this text. Stein deflates our expectations by denaturalizing the social constructions of male and female identity, by taking away its "naturalness" as produced in patriarchy. The result is a person whose autonomy and questing selfhood provoke love and respect defying all misogynist expectations.

2.2. Willa Cather: the bare material of androgyny

Willa Cather provides a different example for constructing a non-misogynist text. Almost all of her novels are unusual with respect to the absence of the heterosexual love plot (the only exception being the little known first novel *Alexander's Bridge*). In two of the novels especially Cather has provided clear alternatives to the familiar drama of heterosexual love, *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Ántonia* (1918). In the first Cather's job was easier: the genre of the *Künstlerroman* needed to be re-gendered for Thea Kronborg, the passionate and determined opera singer, and have her subordinate her heterosexual desire to music.

No such obvious replacements would have been sufficient in *My Ántonia*. Here the male narrator and the female protagonist are representatives of some shared androgynous ideal. Jim and Ántonia are childhood friends on the Nebraska frontier; here, away from a society that constructs gender, they can afford to be neither “masculine” nor “feminine,” but have an androgynous self that precedes this gendering. The frontier provided the setting for Cather's “*démeublé*” ideal, to use her word from her 1936 essay, “The Novel *Démeublé*,” in which she discusses leaving “the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little” (287). This is the “underfurnished” world *par excellence*, where “[t]here was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (7). Unlike in traditional texts relating the myth of origin of the frontier, here the prairie obliterates the men: Ántonia's father commits suicide, while Jim first feels “erased, blotted out” (8), “dissolved into something complete and great” (14), and then leaves for the city. Although it is Jim's text, Ántonia does not get to be erased, but rather, against this background of bare material substance she is given elemental presence. It is the woman who gets to be inscribed upon the blank page of the frontier. Her work, her passion for wide spaces, her tirelessness in “serving generous emotions” (227), and her commitment to survival: these are the components of her androgynous identity that make her one with the land—help her feel at home as well as leave her mark here.

Always remaining outside the heterosexual love plot, Cather manages to celebrate the deep attachment of Jim and Ántonia, “the

precious, the incommunicable past” (238), without nostalgia and sentimentalism because this Eden has not been lost, but rather inscribed upon the land *as* Ántonia: she appears for Jim as text leaving images in the mind and firing the imagination.

2.3. Djuna Barnes: transgressions of gender and sexuality

Djuna Barnes still remains one of the most enigmatic figures of female modernism. Her most important novel is *Nightwood* (1936), with a mesmerizing mystery for its protagonist, Robin Vote. A “tall girl with the body of a boy” (46), she is one of the most memorable androgynes in modernist fiction: both quester and desired other, autonomous yet produced in sexual relationships, she always transgresses whatever boundaries she encounters. As woman quester, seeker, and wanderer, she is after selfhood and knowledge that lie beyond the bounds of patriarchy; as the desired other, however, she fulfills the role cast for women in patriarchy.

The reader’s first encounter with Robin happens during a doctor’s visit: “in white flannel trousers” and “in a moment of threatened consciousness [...] lay the young woman, heavy and disheveled” (34).

The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire.

Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous, and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. About her head there was an effluence as of phosphorous glowing about the circumference of a body of water—as if her life lay through her in ungainly luminous deteriorations—the troubling structure of the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado. (34–5)

She is indeed an unusual being: neither human nor beast really, she exhibits a plant-like existence and occupies a very peculiar dimension of consciousness. Being and not being at the same time, conscious and unconscious, in the elements of light, water, and earth, in the room as well as the jungle, predator as well as victim, Robin appears in all her contradictions. Not one cell of her body can be labeled as “feminine,” yet Felix, who accompanies the doctor, immediately falls in love with

her because he recognizes her as a complete and sovereign being. Although Robin's gender identity is incidental—or, one could say, hers in an androgyny that just *happens to be* gendered feminine—the desire of Felix is heterosexualized in such a way that its object is but a part of plant, animal, and androgynous-human nature and not a person with a socially produced gender.

She closed her eyes, and Felix, who had been looking into them intently because of their mysterious and shocking blue, found himself seeing them still faintly clear and timeless behind the lids—the long unqualified range in the iris of the wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye.

The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a “picture” forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger. Sometimes one meets a woman who is a beast turning human. Such a person’s every moment will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory [...] (37)

Robin Vote's subjectivity is not only *not* constructed by a heterosexual romance plot (as female subjectivities are in patriarchal texts), but, being the person desired by just about all characters in the novel, actually transcends all binarisms of gender and sexuality. What Barnes seems to suggest is that gender identity has nothing to do with desire or eroticism. This thesis is supported by several stories of the doctor, among them the one about the sailor falling in love with the French girl without legs—only because of the way the sun was shining over her back.

[...] which reminds me of Mademoiselle Basquette, who was damned from the waist down, a girl without legs, built like a medieval abuse. She used to wheel herself through the Pyrenees on a board. What there was of her was beautiful in a cheap traditional sort of way, the face that one sees on people who come to a racial, not a personal, amazement. [...] a sailor saw her one day and fell in love with her. She was going uphill and the sun was shining all over her back; it made a saddle across her bent neck and flickered along the curls of her head, gorgeous and bereft as the figurehead of a Norse vessel that the ship has abandoned. So he snatched her up, board and all, and took her away and had his will [...] (26)

In the memorable final scene of the novel Robin, “in her boy’s trousers” (169), tames Nora’s dog by going down “on all fours,

dragging her knees” and starting to bark. She appears again as the ultimate transgressor, who cuts through genders and even species, deconstructing a whole epistemology based on the rigid binarisms of human/animal, presence/absence, day/night, or life/death.

2.4. H. D.: undifferentiated self

H. D.’s *HERmione*, written in 1927 but not published until 1981, is a most intriguing novel, where the author probably went furthest of all women experimentalist—the “sapphic expatriate set” (Jay 76)—in portraying a woman’s selfhood outside the bounds of both the heterosexual and the homosexual matrix. The story is highly autobiographical, depicting the two failed relationships of the very young Hermione Gart of Pennsylvania: both the romance with bohemian poet George Lowndes and the “sister-love” between Her and Fayne Rabb end in betrayals. However, the open-ended narrative allows for the continuation of the love between the two women. By the end, Her will find her autonomous self independent of either of these two relationships, and her selfhood will become scripted on the virginal snow.

Her “failure to conform” and to be regular is played out in the pun H. D. exploits all through, but especially in the first half of the novel. As homonym of a subject’s proper name (HERmione) and the accusative/dative declension form of the third person personal pronoun, “Her” is at once grammatical subject and object, folding, as it were, in itself selfhood as both subject and object. However, with the pronoun constantly distanced and alienated into proper name, the identity of the accusative/dative and subjective forms defamiliarizes reference. Hermione experiences herself, as Shari Benstock puts it, as a “grammatical error,” recognizing in herself “a multiplicity of selves that language cannot simultaneously name” (337).

Neither of Hermione’s selves seem ever to conform to the norms of gender. She is never really “feminine” for George: “You never manage to look decently like other people [...] [y]ou look like a Greek goddess or a coal scuttle,” he tells her (64). Her selfhood is fluid enough to include identification with the trees of her home state, Pennsylvania, and its whole landscape. But this identification is based primarily on her self-perception as trace, map, or script—as readable as the landscape.

The woods parted to show a space of lawn, running level with branches that, in early summer, were white with flower. Dogwood blossom. Pennsylvania. Names are in people, people are in names. Sylvania. I was born here. People ought to think before they call a place Sylvania.

Pennsylvania. I am part of Sylvania. Trees. Trees. Dogwood, liliodendron with its green-yellow tulip blossoms. Trees are in people. People are in trees. Pennsylvania. (5)

George does not prove to be the right man for a tree-woman. He “would never make a pear tree burst into blossom” (171), since he only desires a selfless Hermione, a kind of a generically gendered “Her” rather than this particular person: “He wanted Her, but he wanted a Her that he called decorative” (172). In this relationship conforming to the norms of “romantic thralldom” (see DuPlessis), the man fails to see the multiplicity and fluidity of Hermione’s selfhood, or understand that the indeterminacy and instability of her gendering does in no way go counter to her own desire to assert her selfhood.

However appealing at first, the “concentric intimacy” (164) of Her Gart and Fayne Rabb also proves to be a threat to Her’s selfhood. At the end she frees herself from this bond too, only to find that she can now start to write her own text: “Her feet were pencils tracing a path through a forest” (223). Folding now, both in language and also in the woods, subject and object in an act of creativity, she starts to write her own text: “Now the creator was Her’s feet, narrow black crayon across the winter whiteness” (223). Ungendered and sexually undifferentiated, she becomes text.

This is the context where I would place Orshi Drozdik: among women artists who revised notions of the female subjectivity in ways unimaginable by their male contemporaries. They not only portrayed gender as constructed or performed, tying existing gender formations to heterosexual hegemony, but also pursued transgressions of categories of both gender and sexuality. They located realms of androgynous subjectivities that were undifferentiated both in terms of gender and sexuality. For if binary gender categories entail heterocentrism, which in turn is the locus of misogyny, then androgyny means the loving abandonment of both gender and sexual differentiation—bringing about, instead, multiple, transgressive, fluid, and unstable subjectivities in interaction. Ownership of the text is

intimately tied to the construction of the woman outside the heterosexual matrix: when a non-gendered and non-sexualized matrix is created for the selves to come out and interact with each other to become text.

3. Drozdik: self love, love of the female selves

The processes captured in Droznik's pieces seem all too familiar culturally. Here too, the heterosexual matrix is excluded—or, more precisely, only evoked satirically, as in her various *Love Letters*. The one written *To a Leyden Jar*, for example, ironically signifies upon heterosexual romance, with all its paraphernalia. The elements of this satirical signifying include the male heterosexual ideal (the jar has “handsome body,” “well-set shoulders,” with “elegant, sinuous forms”; has “the power of electricity” stored in his body), the genre of yearning love letters, the tradition—defined by the separation of subject and object, loving and loved—of “romantic thralldom” (“I have given everything I had to give,” she writes) as well as the erotic perception of the desired object (the woman having her “hand slipping up and down your shining surface”). A later work also falls into this category: *Young and Beautiful* is an ironic representation of gender-performance.

Instead of the heterosexual context, we seem to have an ideal of internal double: hermaphroditism is elevated to the status of “perfection” only found in nature, formerly known as the site and embodiment of the heterosexualized feminine ideal (as in *Natural Philosophy, Fragmenta Natural, Taxonomy, The Sexual System of Plants, after Linnaeus*, 1990). On many pieces, the *autosexual* is performed. The female is duplicated, most often it is the female self who enters into playful interaction with herself (as in *Individual Mythology*, 1976–77, or the late-70s video *Double*). The dancers of *Individual Mythology* are superimposed upon one another, to create a tumultuous world of fleeting woman selves: they seem to enjoy the company of each other, have a very good time there, desiring and satisfying desire at the same time. I hear the prominent African American modernist writer, Zora Neale Hurston, echoed in these pieces: “I love myself when I am laughing.”

The female experimental artist has primarily her own body to work with; this body is Drozdik’s primary material too, capable of

performing all kinds of roles and constructing all kinds of subjectivities. *Manufacturing the Self*, the series title insists: these are my favorite pieces, where the “body self” is being created at the crossroads of the anatomical atlas and adolescent curiosity, of science and erotics. Knowledge and desire compete here for the construction of the body—which ultimately can be possessed by no one else but the woman herself. The best part of Droznik—as well as of the female writers I discussed previously—is their playfulness, irony, satirical celebration—the way utter seriousness is generated by self-duplication, self-abandon, self-pleasure, self-love—coupled with the willingness and courage not to take oneself seriously.

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