



The Paradoxical Poetics of Edith Södergran

Ursula Lindqvist

In December 1918, Edith Södergran, a 26-year-old poet living in an isolated village on the Finno-Russian border, wrote an open letter to the readers of *Dagens Press*, a Swedish-language newspaper in the capital city of Helsinki.¹ The letter, titled “Individuell Konst” [“Individual Art”], introduced Finland’s readers to Södergran’s second volume of poetry, *Septemberlyran* [*The September Lyre*].² Södergran believed this collection embodied a new creative spirit that would call forth a new kind of individual into being. Because Finland’s readers had had very little exposure to the radical artistic experimentation that had been appearing in Europe’s cultural centers for about a decade, Södergran felt compelled to articulate her vision for this new art in her homeland. She writes in her letter, “Denna bok är icke avsedd för publiken, knappast ens för de högre intellektuella kretsarna, endast för de få individer som stå närmast framtidens gräns” [This book is not intended for an audience, barely even for the higher intellectual circles, only for those few individuals who stand closest to the border of the future].³ Her letter issues a challenge to “those few individuals” to engage in acts of self-creation such as those that resulted in the new poems she was laying out before the public.

Södergran’s open letter was the only European avant-garde manifesto of its time to be written by a woman.⁴ It was also the first manifesto in Swedish that heralded an historic break from lyrical convention and the birth of a new, modern poetry.⁵ However, it has never been recognized as such, probably because it was published in a small-circulation daily in Northern Europe for a limited and culturally conservative audience and signed

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814 by a single author claiming to represent a new kind of individual rather than a movement with a new set of rules. But her letter's loud and ecstatic tone, its highly stylized language, and its polemical function strongly affiliate it with the artistic manifestos of other European avant-garde movements proliferating in European cultural centers during this decade.⁶ In her letter, Södergran claims exceptional status for herself and the chosen few who are called to create the new art. She also titles her open letter in order to distinguish the new art she champions. Finally, the letter's poetic language and lofty tones let it stand alone as a self-contained art work and not merely an introductory remark.⁷ For example, Södergran writes, "Jag offerar själv varje atom av min kraft för mitt höga mål, jag lever helgonets liv, jag fördjupar mig i det högsta människoanden frambragt, jag undviker alla inflytelser av lägre art" [I myself sacrifice every atom of my power for my lofty goal, I live the life of a saint, I steep myself in the highest human spirit created, I shun all influences of a lower species].⁸ The letter's salvationist and purist lexicon links it semantically with the earlier manifestos of the Futurist movements in Russia and Italy (and Södergran was, in fact, living in St. Petersburg at the time those manifestos were published). Finally, true to the spirit of contemporary avant-garde movements, Södergran disparages her poems' aesthetic value, calling them "icke något annat än en intim kladd" [nothing but an intimate scribble]. She writes that her poems' unestimably high value stems instead from their origin; they are "från en individ av en ny art" [from an individual of a new sort]. As manifestos often do, Södergran's letter ends with an invitation to join the author in her noble quest: "Jag hoppas att jag icke blir ensam med det stora jag har att hämta" [I hope I will not be alone with the greatness I have to bring].⁹

Like other European avant-garde poets of this period, Södergran sought to exemplify her vision for a new art in the poetry she published. But while the artistic production of Södergran's contemporaries functioned as a vanguard, blazing a path for new modern art forms and quickly fossilizing into literary artifacts, Södergran's poetry remains a living body of text. Her poems are still in print and are read, admired, and emulated throughout Scandinavia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and much of Eastern Europe.¹⁰ Accordingly, Scandinavian literary history has cast Södergran as a pioneer of Modernism in the Swedish lyric rather than as the polemical avant-gardist she also was during her lifetime. In this paper, I will show how Södergran's particular brand of avant-gardism allowed her poems not only to succeed as an important artistic vanguard in Scandinavia, but also, paradoxically, to ride their own revolutionary wave and enter the canon of modern Scandinavian literature. Södergran's poetry thus exploits the revolutionary philosophy and function of the artistic avant-garde but resists avant-gardism's historical trajectory, challenging prevailing conceptions of the relationship between avant-gardism and Modernism in European literature.¹¹

Swedish was neither a pragmatic nor a self-evident choice of language for Södergran's avant-garde poetry. Södergran, who was born to Finland-Swedish immigrants in St. Petersburg and attended a German preparatory school there, was competent in German, Russian, French, and English, as well as her native Swedish. A more pragmatic choice, and one that certainly would have widened her audience, would have been



Fig. 1. Civil War raged in Finland from 1917 to 1918 following Finland's declaration of independence from Russia, resulting in tighter border controls, and Raivola, where Södergran lived, was a border town. This is the stamped photo from her border pass, issued in 1917. The original is in the archive of the Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland; this reproduction appeared in the photo collection *Som en eld över askan* [Like a fire over the ashes] the Finland-Swedish literature society published in Helsinki in 1993. 17.

German, which Södergran called her best language and the language of her intellect. Södergran wrote all of her early poems—about 200 of them—in German, although these poems could not be called avant-garde; they feature perfectly metered verse and end rhymes.¹² Södergran's decision to switch to Swedish for her pioneering poetry likewise has limited her work's circulation among academic and popular audiences in the United States.¹³ But switching to Swedish was a distinctly avant-gardist decision consistent with Södergran's vision for her art. She sought to liberate the Swedish soul from the decadence of previous generations and infuse it with a new revolutionary spirit. In a 1920 letter to friend and fellow poet Hagar Olsson, who worked as a critic at *Dagens Press*, Södergran writes, "Önskar att du riktigt skulle utösa modärn lyrik över Pressens spalter och detta dumma land" [I wish you really would let loose modern lyrical poetry on the columns of [*Dagens*] *Press* and this stupid country].¹⁴ Södergran believed that modern lyrical poetry in Swedish was needed in order to give rise to the

816 creative individuals of the future in her native land, to which she returned when she began publishing her poetry in Swedish in 1916.

What makes art avant-garde, according to Richard Kostelanetz, is that it challenges established artists' and critics' fundamental understanding of what art is. In his essay "What is Avant-Garde?" Kostelanetz writes:

Avant-garde art usually offends people, especially serious artists, before it persuades. More precisely, it offends not in terms of subject but as art; most of its audience cannot believe that art is made in this way or are reluctant to accept that perhaps it can be. It strikes most of us as 'wrong' before a few acknowledge it as possibly 'right'; it 'fails' but still *works*.¹⁵

Södergran's poem "Jag" [I], which appeared in her debut collection of poetry, *Dikter* [*Poems*, 1916], demonstrates that she accepted the avant-gardist's role. In this poem, Södergran anticipates literary society's rejection of the particular creative power she brought to bear. In Swedish lyrical tradition, the first-person pronoun "jag" refers to a poem's speaker, as in "diktens jag" [the poem's speaker]. This poem thus highlights not only the poet-speaker's sense of imprisonment and isolation in her geographical location but also her creative isolation and oppression in a cultural milieu that is hostile to her creative process.

The poem begins:

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.

[I am foreign in this land,
which lies deep under the oppressive sea,
the sun peeps in with winding rays
and the air floats between my hands.
I was told that I was born imprisoned—
here, there is no face that would be known to me.]¹⁶

The speaker is trapped in a land so remote and closed off from the rest of the world that it lies under an "oppressive" sea. Even though it is the land of her birth, the speaker does not belong here. She is "foreign" and "born imprisoned" in a hostile environment. The sun "peeps in" at the speaker "in winding rays," evoking the idea of prison bars as well as the long distance the sun has to travel to get to the speaker. The air "float[ing] between [the speaker's] hands" indicates the futility of the speaker's attempts to connect with her environment. Yet the most important figure in this poem is the speaking subject, the poem's "I," to whom all of the other figures refer. For example, when the speaker is notified of her lifelong imprisonment—"I was told that I was born imprisoned"—the passive grammar of the line erases the agency of the one doing the telling and redirects

this agency to the speaker, who is experiencing the telling. Likewise, the syntax of the following line, “there is no face that would be known to me,” implies that it does not matter if faces exist that would be familiar to others; it is the speaker’s isolation that is important. Thus the poem recuperates a central position for the creative individual, the “I,” despite the speaker’s rejection and isolation in the world around her.

The poem takes a rhetorical turn in its middle two lines: “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 one has thrown here to the bottom? / Was I a fruit that was too heavy for its branch?] The speaker is unsure of the exact form she embodied at her birth—stone or fruit—but one thing is certain: she is now at “the bottom,” where she doesn’t belong. The progression of a similar question over two lines—“Was I a stone” and “Was I a fruit”—suggests that both could be the reason for the speaker’s low position. She is thrown to the bottom by those who cast her out, and she also ends up there because the environment in which she lives is not adequate to support the weight of her presence. This imagery contrasts starkly with the lofty and hopeful language of her “Individual Art” manifesto and of many of her subsequent poems. In the poem’s final lines, the speaker is still on the ground looking up, unable to resurrect herself physically, but her imagination, embodied in her poetry, takes her aloft to a place where she can search for a home she has never known:

Här ligger jag på lur vid det susande trädets fot,
hur skall jag komma upp för de hala stammarna?
Däruppe mötas de raglande kronorna,
där vill jag sitta och speja ut
efter röken ur mitt hemlands skorstenar . . .

[Here I lie in wait by the foot of the whistling tree,
how will I come up the slippery trunks?
Up there the reeling crowns meet,
there I want to sit and keep a lookout
for the smoke from my homeland’s chimneys . . .]

The final image of the speaker “want[ing] to keep a lookout” positions her stuck in her low, underwater prison but imagining and longing for a high place, gazing out upon the world. By creating this poem, the speaker can imagine rising above the present land in which she is a stranger and looking to the land of the future, where she belongs.

The creative individuals with whom Södergran did feel an affinity were recent and contemporary poets and philosophers from Germany, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As a schoolgirl poet in St. Petersburg, her influences included the poetry of German Romanticists Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Heinrich Heine; the Russian Symbolists Konstantin Balmont and Aleksandr Blok; French Symbolist Arthur Rimbaud; and contemporary German poets Alfred Mombert and Max Dauthendey. After her father died of tuberculosis and Södergran became ill with the disease at age 16, she underwent extended treatment at a sanatorium in Davos,

818 Switzerland, where Nietzsche had earlier penned a substantial portion of *Also sprach Zarathustra* [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*]. This work had an immeasurable influence on Södergran's artistic philosophy and her functional poetics.¹⁷ The sanatorium's library was well stocked with classics of Western literature, and here Södergran was exposed to the literary works of William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, as well as the philosophies of Nietzsche, Kantian disciple Arthur Schopenhauer, and Austrian theosophist Rudolph Steiner. Following her treatment in Davos, Södergran returned with her mother in 1916 to their summer villa in Raivola, on the Karelian isthmus joining Finland and Russia. When the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution toppled the czar, Södergran and her mother were cut off permanently from their financial resources in St. Petersburg. Finland simultaneously declared its independence from Russia, a move Russia actively resisted for the next two decades. Södergran and her mother found themselves trapped and isolated in a volatile and geographically disputed region, hungry and penniless, until the poet's death in 1923 at the age of 31. Yet despite her geographical isolation from Europe's artistic and intellectual centers, Södergran had, throughout her youth, read many of the same writers and thinkers as her avant-gardist peers living in those centers. Philosophically and artistically, she and they worked from similar points of reference.

But Södergran's functional poetics depart significantly from certain features common to European avant-garde poetry from the early twentieth century and demonstrate once again her determination to reconceptualize the function of Swedish lyric for a new age. Features common to much of the avant-garde poetry of Continental Europe during this time were an aggressive and usually masculine poet-speaker; denigrations of literary form, conventions, and the work of predecessors; and the use of neologisms and enigmatic lexicons. While Södergran employs similar avant-gardist features in her work, she recasts them to serve her individual philosophical agenda. Accordingly, Södergran's poet-speaker is either feminine or gender-neutral. The speaker's aggression emanates from within rather than strikes out at external targets; it is communicated through the speaker's own intense sexual pleasure and acute physical pain. Södergran's poetics enjoin destruction and creation in a singular and cyclical process, linking tropes of sexual reproduction with acts of artistic creation. She does not pronounce the death of literary forms but rather seeks to liberate the new poetry from its "mother cell" where it has been gestating. In her "Individual Art" manifesto, she writes, "Jag betraktar det gamla samhället som modercellen, som bör stödjas till dess individerna resa den nya världen" [I regard the old society as a mother cell that should be sustained until the individuals erect the new world].¹⁸

Finally, and perhaps most significantly for her enduring influence, is her remarkably simple poetic lexicon, which seduces readers to engage with a poetics that turns out to be neither simple nor natural by conventional definitions. Södergran's favored lexicons involve the primordial elements of nature, such as primary colors (especially red, blue, and white), fire, wind, water, sun, stars, and the physical features of the female body, from which all other elements emanate. The female body, then, serves as site and source of creation for the new poetry Södergran champions.



Fig. 2. Russians, Finns and Finland-Swedes lived in close proximity in Raivola. Here Södergran's mother and her dog are featured in silhouette against a frozen lake, ringed by birch trees, with the local church in the background and the family villa right next door. The original is in the archive of the Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland; this reproduction appeared in the photo collection *Som en eld över askan* [Like a fire over the ash] the Finland-Swedish literature society published in Helsinki in 1993. 97.

This strong association of the creative poet-speaker with the physical functions of the female body has particular import for lyrical poetry given its conventional elegiac uses, particularly by a male speaker longing for a lost female beloved. As Teresa Brennan (1993) argues, the symbolic order in which language operates, which makes cognition, articulation, and judgment possible, has been predicated on a “psychical fantasy of woman.” Brennan writes: “The idealized woman is the anchor of man’s identity and the guarantee of his ‘Truth,’ the point from which and for which he can reason.”¹⁹ Cynthia Hogue (1995) demonstrates how this historically has operated in the genre of lyrical poetry:

The ideology of gender is inscribed in poetry through such hierarchized images as dominating male/dominated female figures. A solitary woman is represented as violable; that is, she is intolerable when she remains independent of the man. He must make his presence *felt* . . . The poem must replace her, because the poet must prove the durability, the potency, of his word: gender violation slips handily into a trope for the creation of poetry itself.²⁰

820 In other words, the patriarchal symbolic structures that have for so long framed the cognitive faculties that make poetry possible, simultaneously deny the possibility of a female poet-speaker. Södergran's call for a new art, then, goes far beyond either form or content. Her poetry calls into question the historical motivations for poetry itself and insists that the truest poetry is individual in the purest sense, i.e., not dependent on exploitative psychical fantasies and structures.

Södergran's location of creative power in the female body is consistent with a central idea of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which arguably had a deeper impact on Södergran's artistic philosophy and her functional poetics than any other work. Because it is a work of fiction, it is often not as popular among philosophers as others of Nietzsche's writings. But many early twentieth-century avant-gardists, including Södergran, found Nietzsche's method of using a protagonist-prophet, Zarathustra, to *show* his ideas through parables and metaphors far more compelling than his other more expository philosophical works. As Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins write in their critical summary of this text, one important lesson Zarathustra imparts is the value of anchoring human creative power in the body:

Zarathustra urges that human beings reassess the value of their own bodies, indeed their embodiment. For too long, dreaming of the afterlife, Western humanity has treated the body as a source of sin and error. Zarathustra, in contrast, insists that the body is the ground of all meaning and knowledge, and that health and strength should be recognized and sought as virtues.²¹

Alongside this recuperation of the body, Zarathustra also introduces the idea of the *Übermensch*, or ultra human being, who rejects complacency and comfort in order to sacrifice all for humanity's advancement. These ideas are central to Södergran's apprehension of her own role as a creative artist and to the metaphorical content and formal organization of her poems.

A good example is Södergran's poem "Instinkt" ["Intinct"], which appears in her fourth and final volume prior to her death, *Framtidens skugga* [*The Shadow of the Future*]. Similarly to "Jag," "Instinkt" is a 13-line, unrhymed, lyrical poem that features a speaker who declares her power to save the world even as her body is decaying and dying:

Min kropp är ett mysterium.
Så länge detta bräckliga ting lever
skolen I känna dess makt.
Jag skall frälsa världen.
[My body is a mystery.
As long as this brittle thing is alive
you will feel its power.
I will save the world.]²²

Here the speaker opens with a paradox: her body is in decay, yet it harbors the power to save humanity. Södergran, who lived in conditions of tremendous chaos, believed



▲
 Fig. 3. Södergran, who was a skilled amateur photographer in addition to a poet, took many photos of her cats, who also served as tropes for primal instincts and sensuality in many of her poems. The original is in the archive of the Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland; this reproduction appeared in the photo collection *Som en eld över askan* [Like a fire over the ash] the Finland-Swedish literature society published in Helsinki in 1993. 18.

that such external circumstances are never what defines and delimits a person's creative potential; rather, inner self-doubts do, stemming from our decadent concept of sin. Södergran thus believed that an individual's primal instinct, located in the body and connected to the earth's origins, is where the power to overcome these limitations lies.²³ "I let my instincts build while my intellect watches," Södergran wrote in an introductory remark to her second collection, *Septemberlyran*. "My self-confidence comes from the fact that I have discovered my dimensions. It does not behoove me to make myself smaller than I am."²⁴

In the poem's middle lines, the speaker demonstrates that her confidence stems from an ancient and powerful life force, that of the sexual body:

Därför ilar Eros blod i mina läppar
 och Eros guld i mina trötta lockar.
 Jag behöver blott skåda,
 trött eller olustig: jorden är min.
 Då jag ligger trött på mitt läger,
 vet jag: i denna tröttnande hand är världens öde.

[That is why Eros' blood is coursing through my lips
 and Eros' gold runs through my tired curls.
 I need only to look,
 weary or in pain: the earth is mine.
 When I lie exhausted on my bed
 I know: in this weakened hand lies the fate of the earth.]²⁵

822 The speaker's hand is a metaphor for her ability to write poetry, which Södergran believed was the antidote to modern humanity's spiritual desolation. But ironically, the speaker's physical weakness increases her creative power; she is able to reconnect with her primal instinct through the bodily experience of acute and prolonged pain. While the poem's English translation makes it appear to retain the classic lyrical "I-You" form of address, the language of the Swedish original demonstrates that the pronouns are not personal but universal. The poem's "I" represents all individuals who use their intellect to serve their creative instincts, embodied in the figure of the dying poet. The poem's "you," however, is plural, a detail sometimes lost in translation. (English, for example, uses the same pronoun for both the second-person singular and the second-person plural, while in Swedish there are two distinct sets of pronouns.) Thus the poem's "you" whom the speaker will save are the human masses who lack the poet's creative power. 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. The poem concludes: "It is the power that trembles in my shoe, / it is the power that moves in the folds of my dress, / and it is the power, fearing no abyss, that stands before you." Thus while the poet-speaker's physical body lies weakly on the bed, her instincts stand erect and fearless, creating a powerful poem.

In anchoring her subjectivity in a sexual body, Södergran's language is quite similar to that of a contemporary German expressionist Else Lasker-Schüler, whose poetry Södergran read and admired.²⁶ Literary scholars have noted the imprint of Lasker-Schüler's poem "Eros" on one of Södergran's best-known erotic poems, "Dagen Svalnar" [The Day Cools].²⁷ But one important difference is the role of the object of the female subject's address. In "Eros," the speaker talks *about* her former lover, not to him:

O, ich liebte ihn endlos!
 Lag vor seinen Knie'n
 Und klagte Eros
 Meine Sehnsucht.
 O, ich liebte ihn fassunglos.
 Wie eine Sommernacht
 Sank mein Kopf
 Blutschwarz auf seinen Schoss
 Und meine Arme umloderten ihn.
 Nie schürte sich so mein Blut zu Bränden,
 Gab mein Leben hin seine Händen,
 Und er hob mich aus schwerem Dämmerweh.
 Und alle Sonnen sangen Feuerlieder
 Und meine Glieder
 Glichen
 Irrgewordenen Lilien.

[Oh, I loved him endlessly!
 Laid before his knees
 And complained to Eros

Of my longing,
 Oh, I loved him crazedly.
 Like a summer night
 My head sank
 Blood black onto his lap
 And my arms burned onto him.
 Never was my blood so stirred to firebrand,
 I surrendered my life to his hands,
 And he raised me out of heavy twilight pain.
 And all suns sang songs of fire
 And my limbs
 Were like
 Bent lilies.]²⁸

Lasker-Schüler's speaker anchors her subjectivity in the elegiac form, specifically in the female speaker's ability to feel intense arousal and deprivation simply by conjuring the poetic memory of her lover, who has no materiality in this poem. In so doing, she turns the "psychical fantasy of woman" into a psychical fantasy of man performed by a female poet-speaker.

In her poem "Dagen Svalnar," Södergran reconfigures the elegiac form to an even greater extent than Lasker-Schüler. Södergran divides her poem into four numbered parts and renegotiates the identity of the male beloved in each part, opening up the possibility that the female speaker may have more than one lover. The materiality of the male beloved(s) ebbs constantly within each part and over the course of the poem: now you see him, now you don't. In the poem's first part, the female speaker establishes her lover's presence, as well as her own dominant subject position, by addressing him in the imperative:

I.
 Dagen svalnar mot kvällen . . .
 Drick värmen ur min hand,
 min hand har samma blod som våren.
 Tag min hand, tag min vita arm,
 tag mina smala axlars längtan . . .

[The day cools toward evening . . .
 Drink the warmth from my hand,
 it throbs with spring's own blood.
 Take my hand, take my white arm,
 take the longing of my slender shoulders . . .]²⁹

But in the last three lines of this first stanza, the speaker shifts to the subjunctive tense³⁰, indicating that her male beloved is present only in her erotic fantasy:

Det vore underligt att känna,
 en enda natt, en natt som denna,
 ditt tunga huvud mott mitt bröst.

[It would be wondrous to feel,
a single night, a night like this,
your heavy head against my breast.]³¹

In the poem's second stanza, the female speaker seems to establish her lover's presence in the poem by addressing him directly, using the intimate, familiar personal pronoun *Du*.³²

II.
Du kastade din kärleks röda ros
i mitt vita sköte—
jag håller fast i mina heta händer
din kärleks röda ros som vissnar snart . . .
O du härskare med kalla ögon,
jag tar emot den krona du räcker mig,
som böjer mitt huvud mot mitt hjärta.

[You cast your love's red rose
into my white womb—
and in my burning hands I hold
your love's red rose that soon will wilt . . .
Oh master with your cold eyes,
I do accept the crown you give me,
which bends my head toward my heart.]³³

The intimate “you” and deferential “master” of the speaker's address at first seem to indicate not only her lover's material presence, but also her submission to his will, which would be consistent with the symbolic roles afforded male and female figures in conventional poetic fantasies. But it quickly becomes apparent that this lover does not have material form either. He is spatially distant and/or absent; he “cast[s]” his red rose rather than hands it to the speaker in a romantic gesture. The female speaker's “white womb” is her pure, reproductive core; it is where her poetry originates, and once it takes material form—as the rose in her burning hands—it begins to die. Even as the speaker addresses her “master,” his “cold eyes” suggest that he, too, is dead, and is present only in spirit to bequeath a crown to his mistress. As the speaker “bends my head toward my heart,” she subjugates her intellect, and her language, to the insights of her soul, a poetic manifestation of the process she describes in her introductory remarks to *Septemberlyran*.

A different kind of “master” confronts the speaker in the poem's third part. This master is materially present; he is able to physically touch the female speaker. In stark contrast to the ecstatic tone with which the speaker addresses her lover and her master in the poem's first two parts, here the speaker's tone is filled with dread as she beholds her master. She does not address him directly this time, but rather narrates a traumatic real-time meeting for any witnesses who may be present:

III.

Jag såg min herre för första gången idag,
 darrande kände jag genast igen honom.
 Nu känner jag ren hans tunga hand på min lätta arm . . .
 Var är mitt klingande jungfruskraft,
 min kvimofrihet med högburet huvud?
 Nu känner jag ren hans fasta grepp om min skälvande kropp,
 nu hör jag verklighetens hårda klang
 mot mina sköra, sköra drömmar.

[I saw my master for the first time today,
 shivering, I recognized him at once.
 Now already I feel his heavy hand on my light arm . . .
 Where is my ringing maidenly laughter,
 my womanly freedom with head carried high?
 Now already I feel his tight grip on my quaking body,
 now I hear the harsh clang of reality
 against my sheer, sheer dreams.]³⁴

The speaker immediately recognizes her master despite the fact that she has never actually seen him before. Prior to the physical contact that takes place in this stanza, the master has served primarily as a specter haunting the speaker. He is the spectre of death who always has been a familiar possibility but has not made himself felt to this extent previously. He asserts himself aggressively here, grabbing and constricting the speaker's arm that in the previous stanza had held a more benevolent master's rose. Her question, "Where is my ringing maidenly laughter, my womanly freedom with head carried high?" demonstrates that the master's brutal and physical intrusion here threatens to silence the poet-speaker permanently. The speaker's mournful elegy for a parted beloved, then, is for herself: the creative artist.

In the poem's final part, the speaker once again addresses her beloved with the intimate *Du* pronoun, repeating it incrementally to contrast her lover's expectations with his eventual discoveries:

Du sökte en blomma
 och fann en frukt.
 Du sökte en källa
 och fann ett hav.
 Du sökte en kvinna
 och fann en själ—
 du är besviken.

[You sought a flower
 and found a fruit.
 You sought a well
 and found a sea.
 You sought a woman
 and found a soul—
 you are disappointed.]³⁵

826 The poem concludes, however, not with the speaker's death but with her beloved's misapprehension and rejection of the poet's creative power. The repeated phrase "You sought" evokes the figure of the heroic male explorer in search of the new world—the new world being, in this case, the elusive ideal woman. The explorer's expectations of what this ideal woman will be like are anchored in a symbolic logic that traces back to Petrarch's longing for his Laura: a woman can never be a poet because she must *be* the poetry.³⁶ The explorer seeks an aestheticized object, not a powerful and creative speaking subject. The "flower" thus represents all conventional poetic figures of the female form. A flower, like the idealized woman, is valued for its fragrant beauty when in full bloom, but then it fades and dies. The poet-speaker revises this tired metaphor, appearing to her lover as a fruit (recalling the fruit that was too heavy for its branch in her poem "Jag"). A fruit functions primarily for nourishment, not beauty, and a fruit in the form of a woman evokes the Genesis myth in which the forbidden fruit is a figure for divine omniscience. The explorer thus encounters far more than he bargained for in this female subject, and continues his search.

The explorer then broadens his concept of the idealized woman to a well. In Swedish, "källa" is a natural underground water source that often is a trope for creativity. This seems a far less restrictive metaphor than the flower. But the speaker again revises this metaphor; she is not merely the source, or the muse, of creative power but rather its boundless essence. She presents herself as a sea: a seemingly boundless mass of water upon which the explorer could sail for all his life without grasping the entirety of its geography. This, too, is too much for the explorer and he continues his search—this time for "a woman." But the figure of a "woman" is too bound up in decadent ideals of beauty and serenity. This figure is equally unacceptable to the speaker, who chooses the most abstract of synecdoches to represent herself: "a soul." Tragically, such a figure is too vast and enigmatic for the explorer to fathom. The speaker's position in this final stanza is important; she is observing her beloved as he conducts his search—the female subject tracking the male explorer. It is she who is narrating his search for the ideal figure. Thus ironically, the poem's final line, "You are disappointed," does not express the explorer's disappointment, but the speaker's. She is the one making this statement, and her tone conveys sorrow at his failure to appreciate her vastness and complexity. This is her elegy and the loss is her loss.

Alongside Södergran's radical acts of creation exists a more typically avant-gardist act of destruction in her poetics: that of the traditional figure of a woman. In one of Södergran's most well-known poems, "Vierge Moderne," the speaker destroys the traditional, "virginal," objectified figure of woman and erects a radical, "modern," genderless yet highly sexual figure in its place. The speaker systematically deconstructs the psychological fantasy of woman by declaring the "modern virgin" to be paradoxical:

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 sprang 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 vilkor . . .

[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 a body of water, deep yet bold only to the knees,
 I am fire and water, honestly combined, on free terms . . .]³⁷

Ebba Witt-Brattström, a Swedish scholar who published the first book-length feminist analysis of Södergran's work in 1997, reads this poem as evidence that Södergran was actively seeking to destroy the traditional woman figure of the collective bourgeois imagination—woman as mother, ingénue, or virgin—and erect a figure of a New Woman in its place. This project of reinventing Woman, Witt-Brattström argues, was one Södergran shared with other women writers and theorists of the time, including Ellen Key, Lou Salomé, Anna Akhmatova, and Else Lasker-Schüler. Noting Södergran's frequent use of terms of negation, such as “no woman” in the opening line of this poem, Witt-Brattström writes, “The fact that the New Woman can only be defined in opposition to the old is the explanation for Södergran's predilection for negations.”³⁸ But the negation in the poem's opening declaration opposes the speaker's gendered identity with that of a non-gendered one rather than associating the speaker with a new brand of woman. The affirmed noun, *neutrum* [neuter], does embody a certain exclusivity, as this word refers to the grammatical gender assigned to a class of nouns comprising roughly twenty-five percent of all Swedish nouns (indicated by the indefinite article *ett*). *Neutrum* both is and represents an exclusive and non-gendered gender, figuring this poem's subject as paradoxical and defying categorization. The dismissed noun, *kvinn*a [woman], on the other hand, belongs to a class of nouns assigned the *utrum* [non-neuter] gender, which comprise roughly 75 percent of all Swedish nouns.³⁹ In the poem's opening line, then, the speaker casts off the common gender noun—*kvinn*a—and steps into a neuter noun—*neutrum*—whose gender is rare and oppositional to the normative gender. Consistent with Nietzschean philosophy, Södergran's poet-subject is destroying herself and recreating herself simultaneously as a rare, oppositional, and paradoxical being.

828 The other problem with assigning to Södergran the project of creating a New Woman is that, while she 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. Södergran’s move to protect her subject position by resisting codification is a recognition of the fact that a binary opposition to masculinity locks one into the status quo. Instead, Luce Irigaray describes the resistance to being the binary Other through slippery, constant renegotiation in *This Sex Which Is Not One*:

‘She’ is definitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious . . . not to mention her language, in which ‘she’ sets off in all directions leaving ‘him’ unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand . . . It is useless, then, to trap women in the exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat (themselves) so that it will be clear; they are already elsewhere in that discursive machinery where you expected to surprise them.⁴⁰

Södergran’s choice and arrangement of descriptive symbols in this poem accentuate the fluidity of the figure of the “modern virgin.” The speaker introduces each line with the words “I am,” which evokes the voice of Exodus’ God, who identifies himself to a terrified and awestruck Moses in a manner that defies qualification.⁴¹ Likewise Södergran’s symbols describe the unfathomable: “a child,” which is so vague as to defy a specific image; “a page-boy,” a figure that appears totally out of context in this poem; and “a bold decision,” which has no material form. The speaker is both boundary and boundless, a “net” as well as a “laughing streak.” The next-to-final line is longer than those preceding it and slows the poem’s flow with a caesura and choppy, alliterated speech: “jag är ett vatten, djupt men dristigt upp till knäna,” [I am a body of water, deep yet bold only to the knees]. This odd image contrasts the strength and power of the drilled “I am” with a qualification: the body of water embodied in the speaker is deep as a figure of nature but limited when it takes a human form. The poem’s final line is the only one lacking a gendered article after the “I am”: “jag är eld och vatten i ärligt sammanhang på fria villkor . . .” [I am fire and water, honestly combined, on free terms . . .]. In this final line, the speaker brings together within herself two primal elements that are usually oppositional and combines them in a spirit of respect and mutuality. *Eld* (fire) is a non-neuter noun, and *vatten* (water) is a neuter noun, but the fact that they signify non-quantifiable elements in this context eliminates the need for quantifying, gendered articles. This represents for Södergran an ideal state of being: no Man, no Woman—only free, borderless, primal existence as a creating human subject in the Nietzschean sense.

Södergran's poet-speaker clearly was too "great" for contemporary readers in provincial Finland. Hagar Olsson, initially the sole writer and critic to give Södergran's second poetry collection *Septemberlyran* a favorable review, wrote decades later about the public response to Södergran's "Individual Art" manifesto:

Something like this had never been heard before. It was the modern person's awareness which with explosive suddenness manifested itself in our provincial cultural environment where, despite the World War and Civil War [in Finland] was totally anchored in the past and believed itself to be sitting in an unaltered state.

The publication of Södergran's manifesto in *Dagens Press* provoked scorn from high-profile cultural journalists and literary critics in Finland's capital who could not stand such lofty, self-important tones emanating from a little-known female poet. For example, a well-known columnist for *Hufvudstadsbladet*, the leading Swedish-language daily, published a column the day after Södergran's open letter in which he "confesses his sincere loathing for 'Nietzsche-crazed womenfolk' but would nonetheless arm himself with 'his strongest spiritual binoculars' in order to see a glimmer of the poetess' glory."⁴² Other columnists quickly followed suit, and soon readers chimed in, one even placing an advertisement to sell his copy of *Septemberlyran* at a discount. Even fellow poets who wrote in to the newspapers to defend Södergran against such assault acknowledged in apologist tones that Södergran's actions reflected a certain "naiveté"—a patriarchal term that evoked her youth and gender in order to compensate for her audaciousness. The Finnish public believed they knew what real Swedish lyric was: it was the work of Finland's "national" poet, the nineteenth-century Finland-Swede J. L. Runeberg. His Romantic verse had won international acclaim, earned comparisons with Shelley and Keats, and fueled the cause of Finnish nationalism. Runeberg's poetry was particularly effective in expressing the Finnish soul through images of its natural landscape. Another world-class Finland-Swedish artist from the nineteenth century, the composer Jean Sibelius, set much of Runeberg's poetry to music, increasing its appeal and solidifying its claim as Finland's "true" lyrical poetry against which all else must be measured.

Södergran recast such natural imagery in a linguistically simple yet philosophically complex poetics that celebrated individual creative power rather than collective national identity, engendering outrage among the cultural establishment. During her lifetime, her defenders consisted primarily of two people: the writer and critic Hagar Olsson and the bilingual Finland-Swedish avant-garde poet Elmer Diktonius, who was younger than Södergran and inspired by her work⁴³. It was not until two decades after her death, following the Second World War, that Scandinavian critics and scholars began to recognize her indelible impact on the lyrical poetry of subsequent generations of world-class Swedish-language poets, including the Swedish surrealist Gunnar Ekelöf, the Nobel Prize-winning poet Harry Martinson, and multiple Nobel nominee Tomas Tranströmer, who also is the only Swedish poet consistently taught in American creative writing programs. Feminist scholars who have entered the Scandinavian Academe since the 1960s have demanded a critical reassessment of her work, resulting in a number of book-length scholarly treatments of Södergran's work, mostly in Swedish, over the

830 past three decades.⁴⁴ This paper is a step toward bringing this important poet, whose work functionally and philosophically spans our conventional categories of Modernism and avant-garde, into the American Academe. If the true nature of art is defined and contested by its margins, then it is important to consider the work of avant-gardists from so-called “minor” literatures in order to reach a greater understanding of avant-gardism’s role in literary and cultural production.

Notes

1. In 1916, Swedish was still the dominant language of education, literature, and culture in Finland, even though native Swedish speakers comprised only 13 percent of Finland’s population. The linguistic dominance of Swedish was the result of Finland’s 700-year colonial history with the Kingdom of Sweden, which ended in 1809 when Finland became a Grand Duchy of Tzarist Russia. Accordingly, all educated Finns were accustomed to reading their national literature in Swedish despite the fact that Swedish is a Scandinavian and Indo-European language and Finnish, in contrast, stems from the Finno-Ugric language family. Folklorist Elias Lönnrot had published the *Kalevala*, Finland’s national folk epic and the first major work of literature in Finnish, in 1835, fueling a Finnish nationalist movement that resulted in the formation of a Finnish Literature Society and the first Finnish-language schools by the late nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Finnish did not become the dominant literary language in Finland until after the Second World War. Today, the country is officially bilingual, with both Finnish and Swedish required in primary schools, government, and civil service occupations.

2. Södergran was at the time of this letter a relatively unknown literary figure despite the publication of her first volume of poetry, *Dikter* [Poems], in 1916. Her subsequent volumes included *Rosenaltaret* [The Rose Altar, 1919], *Brokiga iakttagelser* [Motley Observations (Aphorisms), 1919], *Framtidens skugga* [The Shadow of the Future, 1920], and the posthumous collection *Landet som icke är* [The Land That Is Not, 1925], published by fellow poet Elmer Diktonius.

3. Olsson 15. This and all subsequent translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

4. The other notable avant-garde manifestos written by women during this period were by Americans: Mina Loy, who wrote “Feminist Manifesto” in 1914, and Gertrude Stein, who wrote “Composition as Explanation” in 1926. Although Södergran does not call her open letter a manifesto per se, the form and content of her open letter, as well as the particular historical moment of its publication, place it within this genre. Suleiman (1990) breaks down the historically recognizable components of a manifesto in describing Héléne Cixous’ “Le Rire de la Méduse” [“The Medusa’s Laugh”], written in 1975. These components include the following: “It is written by an ‘I’ who represents a group (‘we,’ in this case women); it alternates in tone between the aggressive (when addressing the hostile ‘straight’ reader) and the hortatory (when addressing the other members of the group), and it suggests a program that implies both a revolutionary practice of writing and the disruption of existing cultural and social institutions and ideologies” (17). While Södergran’s tone in her manifesto is not as combative as Cixous’ or as that of her male contemporaries, it is unquestionably discriminatory, differentiating between those “few individuals who stand closest to the border of the future” and as such fits the genre Suleiman aptly describes.

5. In *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, scholars Sverre Lyngstad and Lars Warme claim manifesto status for an earlier essay, “Ordkonst och bildkonst” [“Verbal and Pictorial Art,” 1913], by the canonical Swedish Modernist Pär Lagerkvist, claiming that he “anticipat[ed] the Swedo-Finnish Modernists” (1241). While I agree that Lagerkvist’s essay is an important seminal work of Swedish Modernism, I do not believe it satisfies the formal, ideological, or functional requirements of the avant-garde manifesto. His was a theoretical essay that rejected literary naturalism, the prevailing style, in favor of the simplicity and purity of expression found in classical works of literature, such as Greek tragedy, the Old Testament, and Icelandic Sagas. He, like many Swedish Modernists, admired the work of the southern Swedish poet Vilhelm Ekelund, who in 1902 had been the first Swedish poet to write in free verse and who drew his inspiration from classical literary texts. In addi-

tion, Lagerkvist's first poetry collection that was considered a true Modernist breakthrough, *Ängest* [*Anguish*, 1916] was not published until three years later and thus did not function in a dialectic with a free-standing manifesto that sought to exemplify similar artistic ideals in a different form. While early twentieth-century avant-gardists did seek converts, their manifestos were enigmatic, flamboyant and provocative, and Lagerkvist employed the more conventional rhetorical speech of an argumentative essay in both his 1913 work and in several subsequent essays. Thus according to the criteria I have outlined here, Södergran's open letter satisfies the requirements of an avant-gardist manifesto while Lagerkvist's essay does not.

6. Some examples of other avant-gardist movements and manifestos from this period include F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" (Italian Futurism 1909); David Burliuk et. al, "Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (Russian Cubo-Futurism, 1912); Franz Marc, *Der Blaue Reiter* (German "Blue Rider" group, 1912); R. Aldington et. al, "Our Vortex" (English Vorticism, 1914); and Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto" (Zurich Dada, 1918). For an overview of such manifestos and movements, see Caws 2001.

7. See Caws 2001.

8. Olsson 16.

9. "Det stora" [greatness] here connotes both individual greatness and a more abstract power that such individuals would call into being.

10. Södergran's readership in Eastern Europe can likely be attributed at least in part to the Swedish government's concerted efforts to promote Swedish language and culture in Eastern European educational systems since the opening up of that region in the late 1980s. Because Södergran wrote in Swedish, her work has an honored place in the literary canon of Sweden as well as her native Finland.

11. "Avant-garde" here is a specific term I use to describe artists who cast themselves as historical figures concerned with "discovery and self-transcendence" as opposed to arbiters of fashion or taste (see Kostelanetz 1982). I differentiate this term from Modernist art in two senses. "Avant-garde," drawing from its original (French) militaristic connotation as the vanguard of an advancing army, evokes in this context an artistic vanguard, i.e. the aggressive forerunners who announce the death of old, decadent art forms and the coming of new ones. Their semantics and their forms tend to be more aggressive than that of so-called Modernist and Postmodernist artists. Avant-gardists' historical function is cyclical: their art appears at those moments when contemporary art becomes decadent in order to blaze a path for a new and more advanced art, such as so-called Modernist and Postmodernist art. My claim is that Södergran's poetry paradoxically has functioned both aggressively, as avant-garde art, and perpetually, as canonical Modernist art and popular poetry in Scandinavia.

12. These have been published posthumously under the title *Vaxdukshäftet* [*The Wax-covered Notebook*].

13. The only book-length translation of Södergran's work available in the United States is *Love & Solitude: Selected Poems 1916–1923*, trans. Stina Katchadourian (Fjord Press, 1992, 2nd), an award-winning bilingual edition which unfortunately has gone out of print. British translator David McDuff has translated Södergran's entire oeuvre into English, albeit less elegantly, in *Complete Poems: Finland's Greatest Modern Poet* (Bloodaxe Books, 1993). His monolingual translation is still in print in the United Kingdom.

14. Olsson 115.

15. Kostelanetz 4.

16. All translations of Södergran's poetry are my own except where otherwise noted.

17. In her second open letter to *Dagens Press*, titled "Öppet brev till recensenter och riddare" ["Open Letter to Reviewers and Knights"] and published on January 29, 1918, Södergran refers to herself as "den först uppträdde berättigade arvingen till Zarathustras lagor" [the first legitimate heir to Zarathustra's doctrines to make an appearance]. Olsson 39.

18. Olsson 16.

19. Brennan 26.

20. Hogue 2.

21. Magnus and Higgins 41.

- 832 22. Katchadourian 144–145.
 23. Hackman 157.
 24. Södergran 65.
 25. Katchadourian 144–145.
 26. In a March 9, 1920 letter to Olsson, who had sent her excerpts from the German expressionist's poetry, Södergran writes: "Else Lasker-Sch. är ju överjordiskt härlig, det var då endast hennes tidigare diktning jag kände" [Else Lasker-Sch. is of course divinely magnificent, I had only been familiar with her earlier poetry]. Olsson 115.
 27. See Witt-Brattström 1997 and Brunner 1985.
 28. Trans. Janine Marie Schwab.
 29. Katchadourian 21.
 30. Subjunctive tense designates the mood of a verb used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility, etc. rather than state an actual fact.
 31. Translation mine.
 32. In Swedish, the formal and/or deferential "you" form would be *Ni*.
 33. Trans. Katchadourian, 21. I changed one word of her translation here, from "frozen eyes" to "cold eyes."
 34. Translation mine.
 35. *Ibid.*
 36. Gilbert and Gubar 68.
 37. Trans. Katchadourian 29. Note: I modified line 12 of the translation from "I am water" to "I am a body of water," which I believe is grammatically and semantically more accurate.
 38. Witt-Brattström 209.
 39. Unlike many Indo-European languages, Swedish does not demarcate its nouns as "masculine" or "feminine" in assigning corresponding gendered articles.
 40. Irigaray 29.
 41. "Gude sade till Mose, 'Jag är den jag är.' Och han sade vidare: 'Så skall du säga till Israels barn: 'Jag är' har sänt mig till er'" [God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' And he continued, 'So you shall say to Israel's children: 'I am' has sent me to you.]. *Andra Mosesboken* 3.14 [Exodus 3:14, emphasis mine].
 42. Tideström 208.
 43. Both Diktonius, who was four years younger than Södergran, and Olsson were active in contributing to the short-lived Finland-Swedish avant-garde journal *Ultra*, which began in 1922, a year before Södergran's death, and ceased publishing that same year. Its successor, a radical cultural journal called *Quosego*, published from 1928–29 in Swedish-Finland and demonstrated more success in championing the cause of artistic and linguistic innovation.
 44. Examples include Brunner 1982; Schoolfield 1986; Witt-Brattström 1997; and Hackman 2000.

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