

The male gender script as self-representation in the poetry of Sándor Vay*

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NORM-FOLLOWING AND NORM-REJECTING GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

In her study summarizing the novel paradigm generating gender performativity, Enikő Bollobás differentiates between two basic mechanisms of gender construction: gender performativity that follows norms vs. one that rejects them (2016, 284–291). The former involves alignment and reconstruction in which the ritual of the normativity of gender scripts based on the binary principle prevails. Norm-rejecting gender performativity regards the formation of a new signifier as essential: in this case coordination and the subjective I-positioning prevail, i.e. the necessity to align with existing norms is suspended.

This paper examines the interrelationship between the ego-formation strategies and aesthetic directions of poet and writer Sándor Vay (1859–1918) from the perspective of constructions of the Other and of corporeality, and the subject construction of gender scripts. The theoretical framework of norm-following and norm-rejecting gender performativity is a good starting point but it does not, by some distance, provide a sufficient distinction to describe the author's strategies in focus, since in his/her case the performativity of biological gender is just as important. Sándor Vay was born a woman but lived as a man, constructing his/her¹ writer ego as a male author as well. This construction could be understood as being one form of queer masculinity anchored in corporeality. The paper analyses Vay's poems published under a female name and those published later under a male name, investigating the strategies of textual creation of sexuality and mapping out those strategies which form the author's subjectivity placed into the position of the male gender script. According to the logic of the heterosexual script, this author appears as a man fixed in the position of the subject (as opposed to the female objective existence). In Vay's case this construction does not go together with any conscious construction of otherness – what is more, it forms an adversary relationship with otherness by relying on the discourse of heteronormative aggression in doing so. This study also reflects on Zsuzsa Rakovszky's novel written about Sándor Vay, which presents an image of Vay created in the spirit of corporeal feminism in opposition to a psychologizing discourse.

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SÁNDOR VAY VERSUS SAROLTA VAY

Sándor Vay was born under the name Sarolta Vay, living his/her entire life with an unquestionable male consciousness, which was in stark opposition with his/her biological gender. Naturally the “unquestionable male consciousness” is the labyrinth or daedal of self-fashioning strategies, which in this case may contain, among other things, an aggressive machoism or the suppressed androgyny of dandyism.

Even though Vay was a successful journalist, novelist and poet, his/her adventurous transgender life has always received more attention than his/her work as a writer. Geertje Mak, Associate Professor of Gender History at Radboud University and a specialist in the history of intersexuality, sees in Count Vay the incorporation of the “inverted” prototype of the masculine woman (2004, 54–77). The sociologist and historian Hanna Hacker positions the phenomenon in the paradigms of historical approaches to female homosexuality (1987, 40–57), while Judith Halbestram, Professor of Literature at the University of California, applies the non-sexual pathological category of the queer perspective to Vay’s case (1998, 45–73). Vay’s biographer, Anna Borgos, is closer to the latter perspective, also providing a thorough mapping out of the social, female historical and medical historical conventions of transgressing gender roles (2011, 220–231). Vay’s life strategy has not yet been narrowly examined through the mirror of his/her literary works except for an excellent study by Zsuzsa Török (2014, 466–484). In point of fact, Török deals primarily with the sociocultural aspects and with the name-using and self-fashioning strategies of the author using the theoretical framework of the historical concept of cross-dressing instead of an anachronistic transgender approach. Strangely, Vay appears as the androgynous character of new works and is almost neglected as an author. Zsuzsa Rakovszky recently wrote a novel about Vay under the title *VS*, including fictitious Vay poems in it and bypassing the real poetic life’s work (Rakovszky 2011; Bedecs 2011, 74–77; Ócsai 2012, 100–103; Bódi 2012, 95–97). Rakovszky also relied on Krafft-Ebing’s case description: most of what has been written about Vay is based on the work of this text. Sándor Vay appears as the subject of case study no. 166 in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s foundational work *Psychopathia sexualis* under the title “Count V”. Krafft-Ebing categorized Vay’s case as that of *gynandria*, a manifestation of female “congenital abnormal sexual feeling”, attributing a boyish upbringing to a misguided paternal capriciousness (1926, 331–339). Following a detailed description of the family, he provided a psychopathological portrait of Sarolta Vay: “she was often drunk, liked men’s sports, and was a skilled fencer”, who was attracted to actresses and frequented brothels, and who had “no constancy in her love”. Vay’s longest relationship was with Emma Eszéki (they lived together as man and wife) and lasted three years. Vay also worked out various techniques to physically imitate masculinity: “According to her father-in-law’s accounts and as she would also admit later, s/he would hint at a scrotum by stuffing a handkerchief or gloves in her trouser pocket. On one occasion, her father-in-law saw her wear something resembling an erect member (it was probably a strap-on dildo), and once S. made a comment about wearing a jockstrap when horse riding. And she does wear a support around her waist, possibly to secure the dildo in place” (Krafft-Ebing 1926, 334).

S/he regularly mimicked shaving and claimed menstrual blood to have originated from haemorrhoids.

Krafft-Ebing's detailed medical report based on Vay's writing and letters fits completely the male image whose stereotypes are present in the author's literary works. The famous psychiatrist and sexologist quotes Sándor Vay's letters to Mária Vay at length, highlighting the following passage: "Gentlemen, wise scholars of law, psycho- and pathologists! You should control my life, my every step was guided by romantic love, my every action driven by it – since God implanted it in me. If he created me like this and not any other way, that is not something I am responsible for, or are these God's unknowable ways?" (335) This important sentence clearly signals that Vay lived guided by a script coded as masculinity, her/his attention called to its problematic nature by the outside world. The heterosexual script traditionally places men in the position of the subject and women in that of the object. Vay regarded the position of the subject as natural and generated again the heterosexual norm in relationships. Vay's self-representation as a man completely fitted the norm that Miklós Hadas describes as follows:

Based on *libido dominandi*, the nobility's honor rests on the illusion that masculine perfection and omnipotence, invulnerability, unquestionability, straightforwardness, a sense of responsibility for how the world works, and the pride that goes with these burdens can, in the end, be considered to be charisma originating from God (2003, 97).

As we shall see, this masculine constellation became fetishized in Vay's mind and an artistic reflection of it – or a system of phases of change and awakening consciousness – is best traced in Vay's poetry.

In addition to providing a traditional training in the humanities, Sarolta Vay's tutor, Dániel Kászonyi, the liberally minded and dedicated supporter of the 1848 Hungarian revolution, taught his/her – according to contemporary public opinion – very boyish studentfencing and horse riding, with his/her father's full support (Borgos 2007, 185–194, or 2013, 161–187; Czagányi 2009, 6–18). After Kászonyi's voluntary emigration, Sarolta Vay was educated in Dresden, where s/he eloped with an English girl, although this feat eventually ended in failure. Eloping is a constant theme in Vay's career: at the age of 23, s/he is even said to have duelled for an actress, Mária Hegyesi. In his essay entitled *Négy gróf író* (Four count writers) originally published in the 20 December 1899 issue of *Előkelő Világ* (Affluent world), the famous Hungarian writer Gyula Krúdy comments in praise of a "smart and refined" book written by Sándor Vay under the pseudonym D'Artagnan as follows: "He is one of the individual personalities whom few everyday people understand and who do not care much about bourgeois opinions in the high flying of their artistic soul" (2008, 229–230). Clearly, Krúdy does not mean the radical outsider position of Vay's text but refers to the referentiality hiding behind the masks of the autobiographic self: the biological sex cannot be locked up in the world of the "bourgeois" ideal; however, the ideal world of art seems like sufficiently legitimate destruction and can lead, finally, to an acceptance of a queer form of behaviour. Krúdy and other critics never problematized precisely the issue of gender in connection with Vay's works: as an author, Vay acquired his final position in the male gender script.

It is a fact, however, that in another essay, Krúdy characterized Sándor Vay as the Hungarian George Sand, a “female gentleman” (1974, 409–419; 1966, 377–384).

Vay did not neglect his/her studies either, and after Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin, s/he received his/her degree in Budapest, and, with several early poems published, s/he joined the editorial staff of the newspaper *Pesti Hírlap* in 1895. S/he never questioned his/her male identity, but those around him/her did not always treat him/her as a male. According to one anecdote, when the poet Imre Gáspár confessed his love for Vay, the latter was so offended that s/he got the dagger out and almost wounded the “perverted” lover. Vay met one of his/her greatest loves, the actress Emma Eszéki in 1883, eloped with her and married her (they were said to have been married by a fake priest), and then, after another love affair of Vay’s, they were divorced. By this time Vay was courting a young teacher, Mária Engelhardt, whom s/he married in 1889. Her parents did not object to the strange marriage – they, supposedly, believed that Vay was a man and fell prey to a con game, together with the naïve bride – until Vay ran into debt and could not repay his/her father-in-law (s/he swindled him out of 800 forints). His/her father-in-law reported Vay to the police for actually being a woman (a “missy-husband”; *Borsodmegyei Lapok* 1889, 3). This is how Sándor Vay ended up in the sanatorium of Krafft-Ebing and at the centre of interest of modern sexology.

The novelist Rakovszky attempts to confront, from the point of view of convention formed by legal and psychiatric discourse, SV’s autobiography with unshakable “naturalness”, although her novel can also be interpreted from the perspective of corporeal feminism and drawing on the experience of fields of science studying the human body. “SV” are not just the initials but (as the Hungarian original, VS) also the abbreviation of the Latin ‘versus’, which is part of Hungarian legal register also. Investigating the dichotomy of body and soul, Elizabeth Grosz noticed that, due to the subordination of the notion of the body, our thinking regarding the body has resulted in an unruly, unstoppable, subordinated and dismembered term which is void of any of the rationality of the dominant notion. In her view, the relationship of body and soul is similar to the two sides of a ribbon (1994, 138–159). The physical outer self and psychic inner self are not separable in Vay’s case either. Medical categories lose their meaning because maintaining the dichotomy strengthens an imperative which is not conscious of the realization that the body is nothing else but the performative surface of subject construction. The body is registered in society but cannot be made independent of subjectivization. Krafft-Ebing writes that, even though Sándor Vay can be turned into Sarolta and forced to wear women’s clothing, s/he behaves naturally only as a man; sexual intercourse with men disgusts him, but s/he also despises lesbian love. His/her body does not accept the object position of the construction of female sexual heteronormativity, but it also rejects the coordinating position of the gay subject, since s/he does not want to get tangled up in the potentiality of either the object or subject position. S/he is invigorated by the hegemony of the masculine gender script: s/he perceives a body of a different gender (perceiving his body as a fully masculine one) than his/her doctor (who sees the same body as an “inverse” female body). Two processes of subjectivization stem from this duality of vision and can never be harmonized: the contrast cannot be resolved by the medical position of

gynandromorphy. Vay does not recognize gender ambivalences, his/her subjectivity is not the accidental male charge of female existence – instead, it could be a form of queer masculinity resting on corporeality. Vay’s fetishized masculinity is not so much either essential or fixed, but feels this way through repeated performance. In his/her two (male and female) poetic profiles we can best apprehend the dynamism of this oscillation.

THE MALE AND FEMALE POETIC PROFILES

Sándor Vay’s poetry was published in a separate volume in 2009 as a result of Ferenc Valentyi’s research (Vay 2009). The poems were published by their author for five years under the name Sarolta Vay, then, beginning with 1880, exclusively under the name Sándor Vay. In the year 1879, as Zsuzsa Török indicates, there is a duplex using of Sándor or Sarolta, or sometimes the author applies some ciphers (2014, 478–480).

The poems written under the name Sarolta Vay consciously obscure the gender markers of the romantic feeling of love, but if we apply the methods of Jacob Stockinger’s theory of homotextuality, thanks to the dynamics of signals and masks, we arrive at the realization that these erotic and love texts were written to a woman (1978, 131–151). What we have here is not traditional “secretive” lesbian lyrical texts. The system of conventions of love poetry also plays a role in the complex and divergent identification mechanisms, since love/erotic lyrical poetry written by women hardly had any models to follow in the Hungarian literature of the time. Sarolta Vay finds her/himself in a difficult position, then, not only as a woman but also as a female author. The gender neutralization of the texts written under the female name becomes a performative gesture. At the same time, the author is aware that the possible masculine nature of the conventions of the almost entirely male-voice dominated Hungarian love poetry does not cause any astonishment, since it strengthens the language of power and of the norm dominant in the textual world. In contrast with Sarolta, Sándor Vay writes “authentic” and liberated male lyrical poetry: the presence of the sexes is more obvious, the way of writing more traditional, and the construction of the poetry consciously or unconsciously focuses on stereotypes and assimilation.

Sarolta Vay’s first poems were published in the papers *Vasárnapi Újság* and *Családi Kör* in 1875. This early poetry activates primarily the registers of Romantic lyricism, but their symbolism is sometimes surprisingly distanced from this aesthetic universe. The poem *Tantalusz* was published in the 14 March 1875 issue of *Családi Kör*. The poem, which documents the realization of the tantalizing pain of the suffering of love, refers back to Sándor Vay’s hopeless situation exactly through its mythological reference: it alludes to the usual paradoxes of love, confesses passionately, and concludes in an expression of fatal hopelessness at the end of the poem:

Imádom őt, ki engem nem szeret,
Ölve tartja szíve lelkemet,
De oh! a végzet olyan mostoha
Nem, nem lehet ő enyémmé soha!

“I adore him, who does not love me, / His heart holds my soul in his embrace, / But oh, fate is so unkind, / he cannot, cannot be mine ever” – in the original Hungarian text there are no grammatical references to gender; the English translation reproduces the conventional horizon of supposed contemporary reading strategies.)

Tantalus is not just a symbol of eternal unsatisfied desire but somebody who tested the omnipotence of the gods. Compared with his/her alter ego, Sándor Vay rarely uses such intellectual symbolism: tantalizing suffering finds a resting point here; the love poem does not require secret coding, and the author's name and the self-generated in the poem do not necessarily require the elimination of discrepancy that follows from the positioning.

A classic method of love poetry, according to which the position regarded masculine is different from the socially masculine position or is in direct opposition to it, is also of help to Vay (e.g. in the emotional masculinity of the collection of poems called *Dalok* – Songs). The poem published under the female name and entitled *A lugosban* (In the summer house) can be read as a role poem, but it is clear that it is not addressed to a man. “Sweet chatter” evokes a Sapphic or Catullus-like image, and the description of the adored body is completely feminine: Vay constructs a poetic world for him/herself based on antique traditions. The addressee of *Viszontlátlak* (I'll see you again), published in 1877, is a “good angel”. Suffering and images of persecution become the brazen creed of a personality defying the world. The poem, which starts out with references to suffering (“Elmondom majd mennyit szenvedtem, / Hogy üldözött, mart a világ” – “I'll tell how much I suffered, / How the world chased and burned me”) ends with an image of stoning. The thrown stones also evoke the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the poem *Egy virágszál* (A flower), a linden flower received from a loved one compensates for the intensity of bodily contact. This fetishized object is personified and compensates for the missing voice, the counter-confession. Vay is careful not to leave a mark of explicit sexuality in his/her love poems.

Happiness appears in an erotic way in the poem *A radványi parkban* (In the park in Radvány), published in *Családi Kör* in 1878. Undoubtedly, in some of Vay's poetry all attributive adjectives are commonplace; still, for Vay, the stereotypical image of love, the “commonplace” of the situation and of the feeling as well as the textual assimilation, represent perfect happiness, since these commonplaces prove that he can ideologize himself as a man and everything progresses towards its goal according to heterosexual normativity, and in this paradigm he is actually a man with a clear self-identity. The poem ends, in complete triumph, with a symbolic and cosmic ejaculation: a ray of the setting sun shoots its light at happiness. In the poem *Arczképed* (Your portrait, 1880), the mention of the angelic nature of the adored individual is connected with the nostalgia of the past: angelic existence, however, is not an asexual ground but collateral against the memory of the pleasures of Paradise. Dreams, apparitions and daydreams relate love to the space of imagination: the gushiness of rhetoric is counterbalanced by the surprising nakedness of the Odyssey of the soul.

In 1880 a significant change is detectable in Sarolta Vay's poetic self-representation: her/his poems are published under the name Sándor Vay, and her/his former

self is silenced forever. The poem *Szabó Endrének* (To Endre Szabó), written in 1879 and published in 1880, is one of the most special Vay poems. This humorous poem is a satire on married life, written from a radically male perspective. Endre Szabó was a well-known translator of fiction, editor and writer, a “joyful, mischievous Hungarian Béranger”, who had left men’s circles, exchanging tarot, his pipe, and the world of adventures, practical jokes and drinking sprees for “slippers”. Vay is more masculine than men: it is true that he evokes the self-ironic system of gestures of “real” masculinity however. The voice of the love poems of the poet who lived his/her social life as a man changes: s/he now addresses women unequivocally as a man, making a show of using gender markers in his/her poems. Genders are made concrete now in his/her poems, girls and women appear in them (“Éljen a lány, a dal, a bor!” – “Long live girls, songs, and wine!”) as part of an emphatically masculine rhetoric, in the position of objects. The intensity of the love resonance is still diverse, but the possibilities of the fulfilment of desire are more optimistic. Hiding places, the secret natural environment and secession are replaced by the world of interiors (*Kedvesem szobája* – My love’s room), in which gender roles become more evident and the intellectual game of the Sapphic system of references ends.

Zsuzsa Rakovszky’s novel *VS* is essentially a fictional account of Krafft-Ebing’s famous psychosexual case study. Medical-legal discourse gets a separate voice in it, following Dr. Birnbacher’s notes, but the inserted pseudo-Vay poems also contain it as a counterpoint. The critic Csaba Károlyi expresses a very stern opinion about these poems and diary entries: “the phrasing in the diary is somewhat surprising, and the poems are rather dim-witted” (2011, 7–8). In Sándor Radnóti’s opinion, the pseudo-Vay poems written by Rakovszky do not sound authentic for their era, although a “language” based on the consciousness of otherness and missing from the register of the era would have been a serious challenge and could have given an authentic voice to Vay’s feelings (Károlyi 2011, 8). However, Radnóti does not take into account the fact that Vay did not write his/her poems in the name of otherness but cultivated assimilating lyrical poetry with a maximal imitation of a “male” voice as his/her goal. Rakovszky creates Vay’s profile as poet, diary author and subject of medical papers, of legal discourse and of psychological case studies with Vay’s sensitivity fully in view: Vay builds on the knowledge of the body that interprets itself solely from the perspective of the male position. The pseudo-autobiographical voice of the novel is like a performance of a private theatre company in which one actor doggedly clings to his favourite part, unable to agree to the smallest compromise to change it. In Vay’s fate the motif of the mirror becomes cardinal: when s/he is made to confront her reflection in the mirror, wearing girls’ clothes, s/he breaks the mirror. István Margócsy already drew attention to the system of lyric portraiture and mirror games of self-perception (Károlyi 2011, 8). The peak point of this system is the actors’ excursion to the lunatic asylum, during which Vay is faced with the misshapen reflections of his/her own existence (N. Tóth 2011, 133–136). With his/her biological gender exposed and forcefully exhibited (in a suggestively described midwife’s examination) it is the essence that remains essentially the same: there is an unwavering ego which is not willing to confront the fact that s/he is living in a society in which the

body forces on us a predestined gender role. Sándor (vs. Sarolta) Vay becomes the metaphor of being unconditionally him/herself: a champion of the need for liberty in our existence, even if in his/her age it was easier to move ahead as a man (cf. the George Sand effect) than as a lesbian woman. Anna Borgos argues that Vay opted for the choice of living as a man because this had already had a precedent, rather than choose the lesbian way of life, which was socially unchoreographed at the time. “Vay broke the expected consistency between her biological gender and gender identity but did not overcome the alignment between her gender identity and sexual orientation”, she states (2007, 192). That is, having broken the norm s/he became a follower of norms, and turned from a woman into a man, and from an object into the subject. S/he replayed the normative rites of gender performativity with dogged determination, also recreating the physical attributes of his/her female body in this spirit.

CONCLUSION

Vay creates and keeps performing the author positioning him/herself in the position of the male gender script through the pattern of heteronormative matrix. In his/her works, s/he manifests him/herself as a man fixed in the position of the subject: but in this discourse, no conscious construction of otherness is created, and what is more, s/he dismisses otherness according to the usual blueprint of the discourse of heteronormative aggression. Vay's becoming a man reaches its climax in him/her blending into the norm: his/her poetic life work is, accordingly, that of the follower. From the perspective of poetic imagination and invention, s/he reproduces the poetic clichés of male poetry which serve to strengthen the heteronormative matrix.

NOTE

- ¹ In my study I am using the pronouns and determiners in queer sense to sign and signalize, that our gender is performative, and all gender is imitative performance within the current gender system.

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Genderscript. Gender performativity. Queer. FTM (Female to male). Transgender. Hungarian poetry.

In this paper I have analysed the artistic manifestations of the ego-forming strategies of Sándor/Sarolta Vay (1859–1918), guided by the patterns of norm-following and norm-rejecting gender performativity and also by stepping outside of these patterns. Sándor Vay was born a woman but lived as a man, constructing his writer ego as a male author as well. This construction could be one form of queer masculinity based on corporeality. The first part of this paper demonstrates Vay’s career; the second analyses Vay’s poems published under a female name and those published later under a male name, investigating the strategies of textual creation of sexuality and gender.

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