

The Subversive Construction of Gender in the Poetry of Kristina Hočevar

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Abstract: The article focuses on places in the poetry of Kristina Hočevar that perform gendered positions by subverting existing conventions. In her texts, the latter is carried out in such a manner that the lesbian body acts as an expression of all genders. The speaker unites both “a little boy” (*Naval I 34*) as well as “a little / not so little girl” (ibid.). Monique Wittig asserts that a lesbian is not a woman, since the category of gender only has meaning in the heteronormative matrix. The lesbian position exits the gendered matrix and erodes the category of gender. The use of gendered labels in her poetry does not only destabilize gendered roles, but allows, in an anti-ageist manner, for a different reading of age-specific expressions. This textual strategy can already be observed in Hočevar’s third book of poetry *Little Tails* (2008), the poet further develops and uses it in her fifth book *Aluminium on Teeth, Chalk on Lips* (2012), and in her latest book *Rush* (2017).

Keywords: Kristina Hočevar, lesbian poetry, gender, linguistic masquerade.

Genderiness

In her essay *One Is Not Born a Woman*, Wittig asserts that “the category ‘woman’ as well as the category ‘man’ are political and economic categories” (105). The economy within which they operate is heterosexual. The category of sex¹ is therefore a political category that founds society as heterosexual. Wittig writes that as such it does not concern beings but relationships. Heterosexuality grips our minds in such a way that we cannot think outside of it (*The Category 3*).

Zimmerman in her essay *Lesbians Like This and That: Some Notes on Lesbian Criticism for the Nineties* questions herself: “In what way, then, can the lesbian, lesbian desire,

1 Butler explains that “for Wittig there is no distinction between sex and gender; the category of ‘sex’ is itself a gendered category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural” (*Gender* 112).

or lesbian textuality exists outside this system?” (6) And even more importantly: “but does the lesbian, metaphorical or otherwise, exist ‘outside’ anything” (ibid.)?

It is no doubt Monique Wittig has attacked this question “most forcefully” (Zimmerman 6). The outside imagined by Wittig, her only outside, is lesbian. Wittig asserts that a lesbian is not a woman, since the category of gender only has meaning in the heteronormative matrix. In this sense Wittig reinstates homosexuality as radically separated from heterosexuality.²

Wittig’s thought was later criticized from an anti-essentialist perspective for changing one signifier (phallus) for another (the lesbian body).³ Butler wrote that “Wittig’s radical disjunction between straight and gay replicates the kind of disjunctive binarism that she herself characterizes as the divisive philosophical gesture of *“the straight mind”* (*Gender* 121). The consequence is to rob and deprive lesbianism “of the capacity to resignify the very heterosexual constructs by which it is partially and inevitably constituted” (128).

So what exactly are our chances in the world “where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms” (Butler, “Critically” 23) and how can we use language to work for us as a *war machine* as Wittig puts it (*“The Trojan”* 45).

Zimmerman quotes Meese, who claims that “existing in relation to an institution is not quite the same thing as existing in” (6) and continues with questioning herself: “Might this not be a model for conceptualizing the lesbian difference? To be sure, in order to disrupt heterosexuality one must engage with/in it. But one must also maintain separateness, a difference, an outsideness, or simply be devoured by the dominant term, or culture” (ibid.). At this point relation must be recognised as a springboard for “subversive and parodic redeployment of power” (Butler, *Gender* 124).

Historically there were several different strategies of the lesbian *inside-outness*, with butch-femme couples of the working class certainly being at the forefront. Grosz writes about “butch-femme relations as those which, when lived out by women’s bodies, constitute a transgression of the naturalizing effects of heterosexual ‘gender roles’” (170). Sue-Ellen Case, Susan Sontag and many others emphasize camp aesthetics: “costume, performance, mise-en-scène, irony, and utter manipulation of appearance” (de Lauretis 150). Literature represents a platform for various vivid gender destabilizations and articulations of lesbian existences, lesbian desires, it is one of the privileged fields in which the repressive aspect(s) of language can be displayed, redeployed and exceeded. The distinct genderedness of language can represent an obstacle and at the same time, a place to overcome, to deal with this obstacle as Hočevar’s poetry shows us.

2 Beside Wittig also some other lesbian feminists in the 1970’s tried to present “lesbianism as an attack on heterorelations, or heterosexuality” (Zimmerman 6). Among them Charlotte Bunch, Marilyn Frye and Adrienne Rich (ibid.).

3 Beside Butler, Zimmerman in the above-mentioned essay quotes Meese, Fuss and Shaktini.

Linguistic Masquerade

Kristina Hočevar is a Slovenian poet. She has written six books of poetry: *V pliš* (*Into Plush*, Cankarjeva založba 2004), *Fizični rob* (*The Physical Edge*, Cankarjeva založba 2007), *Repki* (*Little Tails*, Škuc 2008), *Nihaji* (*Oscillations*, Cankarjeva založba 2009), *Na zobeh aluminij, na ustnicah kreda* (*Aluminium on Teeth, Chalk on Lips*, Škuc 2012) and *Naval⁴* (*Rush*, Škuc 2017). She has been nominated for several awards and won the Jenko and Golden Bird Award.

In this paper I will focus on the phenomenon in her poetry which I briefly name *a linguistic masquerade*. The method of linguistic masquerade can be divided in two interconnected groups. The first method appears as *a dialogical position* and the second as *a juxtaposition*, although their interconnectedness works on the basis of juxtaposition of both methods and this is the crucial point where all the excitement of Hočevar's use of gendered labels is produced. The textual strategies of Hočevar's linguistic masquerade can already be observed in her third poetry book *Little Tails* (2008), the poet further develops and uses it in her fifth book *Aluminium on Teeth, Chalk on Lips* (2012), and in her latest poetry book *Rush* (2017).

English when compared to Slovene has the reputation of being almost genderless, while Slovene passes for a distinctly gendered language. Hočevar takes advantage of exactly this aspect of the Slovene language.

So, in order to make my point clear, I will sometimes have to use both languages when quoting her poems. Some translations are available on Versopolis and have been made by Županič, Zavrl and Eckman, others are my modest approximations used only for this purpose.⁵

Dialogical Positions

In Hočevar's love poems there are several different dialogical positions, speaking positions. Verb suffixes make it clear that on a linguistic level a love statement is directed from a woman to a woman, which appears to be the prevalent dialogical position. Although in parts the situation blurs when the second person singular is introduced. The speaker positioned in the second person singular addresses a non-gendered instance in such a manner that it remains unclear whether the speaker addresses herself or someone else. I will illustrate this situation with a verse from *Rush*: "(you change a person, you jump and you withdraw into it, you are replacing it into yourself)" (*Naval I 35*)⁶

The strategy produces the blurring of boundaries between subject and object, self and other. Zimmermann quotes Farwell: "Confusing the boundaries between subject/

4 *Naval* (*Rush*) consists of three books.

5 Unless stated otherwise, the translation is by the author of the paper.

6 "(spreminjaš osebo, skačeš in se umikaš vanjo, vase jo nadomeščaš)" (*Naval I 35*)

object and lover/beloved undercuts the heterosexuality which is based on this dualism. The point in the narrative where this deconstruction begins is what I would call lesbian narrative space” (10). It is possible to add: not only heterosexuality but the Western thought in general.

In the following example of a dialogical position, a love statement is directed toward a non-gendered instance, I want to emphasise the content of the statement in which the speaker wants to share with the other person “all my genders, / all my sexes / all my hands / and all my famished, all insatiate mouth”.⁷ A similar moment of *many genders* also appears in *Little Tails*: “a scene of variations on theme of boys and girls. all percentages of them and all my percentages of genders” (*Repki* 119).⁸

Hočevar plays with “the complex and nonlinear relations between gender and sexuality” (Butler, “Critically” 28). Heterosexuality “requires that identification and desire are mutually exclusive” (ibid.). Hočevar’s poetry focuses on their “complex interimplication” (ibid.).

The latter could also be read in the context of “what Deleuze and Guattari have described as ‘a thousand tiny sexes’: to liberate the myriad of flows to proliferate connections, to intensify” (Grosz 184). And this is desire, desire as intensification, “it experiments; it makes: it is fundamentally aleatory, inventive” (180). Similarly Audre Lorde has positioned desire outside of psychoanalytic coherence between desire and identification. Lorde understands desire as “a creative force for revolutionary change” (Abelove 339). Or as Lorde puts it: “And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love” (342).

Age-Specific Expressions

Hočevar prefers to use age-marked gender expressions, related to the manifestation of gender in a certain lifetime, and hence to a certain age-prescribed gender role with corresponding attributes. The age-specific gender expressions she uses are: a kiddo (mulc), a boy (fant, fantek), a girl (punca, deklica), a doll (punčka). Thus, in relation to gender, we are faced with another problematic construct – age – and ageism, discrimination on the basis of age. Explicit problematization of the preference of youth, especially in the capitalist socio-economic system, can be read in the following verse: “sipped is youth, while wrinkles, / lines of emotions and work, are levelled” (Hočevar).⁹

In general the use of gendered labels does not only destabilize gendered roles, but allows, in the anti-ageist manner, for a different reading of age-marked expressions; another example from *Aluminium on Teeth, Chalk on Lips*: “wrinkled and grey-haired,

7 “delila bi / s tabo vse svoje spole, / vse svoje sekse, / vse svoje roke, / in vsa svoja zlakotnjena, vsa nezadostljiva usta” (*Naval* I 22).

8 “scena variacij na temo dečkov in deklic. vseh odstotkov njih in vseh mojih odstotkov spolov” (*Repki* 119).

9 “srka se mladost, medtem ko se gube, / črte čustev in dela, ravnajo” (*Aluminij* 65).

/ the dolls don't outgrow the chairs" (Hočevar).¹⁰ The destabilization of gender norms is in her poetry interconnected with the destabilization of age-specific expressions. In her poetry the boy, the girl, the doll lose their *age*, or rather the speaker plays with their age.

Juxtaposition

The next juxtapositional method of linguistic masquerade illustrates a poem from *Rush* in which the speaker unites both "little boy" as well as "little / not so little girl". The following poem is an eloquent example of how to make use of the distinct genderness of language, an aspect that is lost if I translate the poem to English:

majhna pred mehko polnega telesa
 živo nahranjen fant majhna.
 to telo je nahranilo tvojo majhnost. tvojega majhnega fanta
 in tvoje malo manj majhno dekle" (*Naval I* 34).

A similar example from *Aluminium on Teeth, Chalk on Lips*: "a husband / you were walking beside her – your / husband your tearful woman" (Hočevar).¹¹

In the untranslated poem above the speaker is a boy (fant) and it marks (her)self in the contradiction to the adjectives that accompany the noun boy. So, we have a noun which is in masculine form and two adjectives that refer to the noun boy but are one in masculine and the other in feminine form.

In both examples the speaker changes persons and also uses third person for (her)self, which functions as alienation, an inner break, "the clot and fissure" (Rich). And again, we can't determine whether the speaker refers to some third person or to (her)self or possibly both, to (her)self as some third person.

The strategy upsets the structure itself and its functioning. Through the juxtaposition both terms "lose their internal stability and distinctness from each other" (Butler, *Gender* 123) and begin to "multiply possible sites of application of the term[s], to reveal the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified, and to destabilize and mobilize the sign (122) and "[i]t is precisely this dissonant juxtaposition and the sexual tension that its transgression generates that constitute the object of desire. [...]. [T]he object [and clearly, there is not just one]" (123) is based on "the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay" (ibid.). The juxtapositional method constitutes a "highly complex and structured production of desire" (ibid.). The strategy resembles that of Akerman in her *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974). "Akerman establishes pronouns *je, tu, il, elle*

10 "gubaste in sivih las // punčke stolov ne prerastejo." (*Aluminij* 59).

11 "mož / si stopala ob njej – svojem / možu svoji solzni ženski". (*Aluminij* 30) Husband in the translation is not completely adequate, because *mož* in Slovene is not only a husband, but also a man – the translation somehow narrows the meaning.

in relation, at the same time, all the pronouns are comprised in Julie/Akerman, in the main character itself. With fragmentation of pronouns she cuts into heterosexual symmetry, similar to what Monique Wittig did in *Le Corps lesbien*. Akerman deliberately remains ambivalent – we never know exactly who the pronoun *you, tu* refers to” (Šepetavc 888). In the case of Akerman this strategy positions the subject “at the same time inside and outside the patriarchal culture, in the spaces of interposition” (Šepetavc 889-890).

What Wittig tried to achieve in *Le corps lesbien* can be understood, not only as “a specifically lesbian deconstruction of heterosexuality” (Findlay in Zimmerman 11) but also again with Grosz’s alternative comprehension of desire as surface and decomposition effects: “[i]n order to understand this notion, we have to abandon our habitual understanding of entities as the integrated totality, and instead focus on the elements, the parts, outside of their integration or organization, to look beyond the organism to the organs that comprise it”(182). Wittig decomposes the lesbian body in order to re-establish it, or better establish it, and with this erogenises lesbian subject as a whole. Hočevar’s texts are focused on details and shaped into sharpened and impetuous fragments. Her poetry eliminates the possibility of total control and redirects one towards facing metonymical details. And the main possible advantage of “fragmentation, difference and mutability is to undermine the monolithic notion of the Lesbian self” (Zimmerman 9).

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