

Literary Historiography and the Gay Common Reader

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In the essay that follows I shall be violating two conventions governing the ways in which scholars are expected to speak of literature: I shall work from personal experience, using the first person singular; and I shall comment on, or complain about, reviews of my recent book, *A History of Gay Literature*.⁰ The justification for these two cavalier breaches of academic etiquette need not, I think, be too elaborate. In the first place, my work derives from a tradition of feminist and, later, gay male scholarship in which the "objectivity" of academic modes of speech was held to be illusory – often serving narrowly particular interests even while laying claim to an Olympian universality – whereas an openly acknowledged subjectivist approach to a given topic might illuminate it by placing it in a context of lived social experience. In short, my personal experience as a gay critic may enable me to generalise about the reception of gay literature and gay literary criticism.

For the most part, heterosexually identified critics attempt to disable the entire gay literary-critical project by applying to it an inescapable Catch-22 regarding which authors and texts the gay critic is to be permitted to comment on at all. Put simply, the problem is as follows. No literature that does not explicitly refer to homosexual acts – or, at least, to the desire for such acts – can legitimately be

described as homosexual literature. And yet the critics who impose such rules are also the very men who say that gay literature itself has been undermined by explicitness – it was much better when it was indirect, allusive, ambiguous. Jeffrey Meyers is a case in point. He wrote in 1977 (and has not, as far as one can tell, changed his mind since): “The emancipation of the homosexual has led, paradoxically, to the decline of his art.”¹

While working on my history I was aware that even some of the most undissimulating of homo-erotic texts would be fiercely protected by anti-homosexual vested interests. The question loomed heavily over much of my research: would I be permitted to speak of certain homo-erotic texts of the pre-1969 period in anything other than the most tentative terms? Let us take as an example a short poem by the bisexual African-American poet Langston Hughes. Although it is no masterpiece it is useful in as far as it exemplifies a certain kind of non-explicit gay writing which, far from being “obscure” or “oblique” or “coded” – all those qualities which heterosexual critics most admire in homosexual writers – is actually, on the contrary, clear and direct and undissembling. The poem is called “Joy”:

I went to look for Joy,
Slim, dancing Joy,
Gay, laughing Joy,
Bright-eyed Joy –
And I found her
Driving the butcher's cart
In the arms of the butcher boy!
Such company, such company,
As keeps this young nymph, Joy!²

If Joy is a woman, the speaker catches her making love with the butcher's boy. If, however, Joy is the abstract noun, the

poem means what it explicitly says: I (the male speaker) found Joy (that is, pleasure) in the arms of the butcher's boy. There is no hidden subtext here. There is, rather, a suggestiveness that is quite open. Wittgenstein's famous diagram of the duck-rabbit works in a similar way. It depicts not a duck or a rabbit, but both at once or in rapid alternation. If you can only see one of them you are not seeing the diagram at all. And yet, even with texts like "Joy," which seem to me to be so transparently gay, the gay critic is accused of "reading things into" them. (He would not be so accused if he spoke of them as black literature, of course.)

So, again: no literature that does not explicitly refer to homosexual acts can legitimately be described as homosexual literature. *But* gay critics who do, compliantly, confine their deliberations only to texts which do explicitly refer to homosexual acts are accused of being obsessed with sex. *But* gay critics who do apply their scrutiny to texts which do not explicitly refer to homosexual acts and call such texts gay literature or homosexual literature are accused of reading sex into texts which are "really" about friendship, or platonic love, or spiritual love, and are accused of thereby revealing the fact that they, too, are obsessed with sex. As a gay critic, I am allowed to write about gay sex – indeed, I am expected to do nothing but that – but I must be insulted for doing so. As a gay critic, I am to be taunted with accusations of obsessive narrowness and thereby encouraged to broaden the scope of my future enquiries. But by doing so I open myself to the automatic accusation of trying to sully the purity of universal texts (which means, of course, non-gay texts) by daring to apply my obsessive narrowness to their Olympian breadth.

Thus, in some reviews of my *History of Gay Literature* – a book which, for better or worse, deals with 3000 years' worth of literary history and with cultures from all round the world – I was, not unexpectedly, accused of perverse

narrowness. Let the following remarks from the Irish poetry critic and academic Denis Donoghue, in *New Republic*, exemplify this tendency:

There are two main objections to Woods' book. The first is that he writes of gay life as if it consisted of nothing but sex. Gay men, so far as he is aware, do nothing but fuck. They have no other interest in life; they are not concerned with friendship, family, career, money, power, the weather. You would never divine from this book that there are gay couples as domestically sedate as any legally married couples, and just as interested as anyone else in mortgage rates. The second is that Woods deals only with the genteel tradition in gay literature. You would not discover from this history of the subject that there is a violent, sadistic underworld in gay life.³

Donoghue appears not to have noticed that the book he is reviewing contains a whole chapter called "The Family and Its Alternatives"; nor that the book acknowledges in great detail a sadistic literary tradition descending from Sade himself to the likes of Jean Genet, William Burroughs and Dennis Cooper. It is clear that nothing can stand in the way of the decree that a gay reader must be, by definition, narrowly obsessive. Even some critics who identify as gay adopt the same approach. For instance, the gay British poet Neil Powell wrote that my *History* was "a far narrower book than it at first appears to be, failing to acknowledge that gay writing needn't be about sex."⁴

A slightly different tactic was adopted by the gay American novelist Dale Peck, who took me to task for the three paragraphs in my book in which I briefly discuss the Pardoner in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as a possible candidate for the position of having been the first gay character in English literature. Peck calls this my "reading of *The Canterbury Tales*," as if I had attempted a reading of the whole poem – which I did not. I simply discussed one line of

it. Yet Peck therefore accuses me of the customary narrowness: "Woods narrows his discussion of Chaucer's massive allegory to a single quotation." Later in the review he adds: "Thus is the greatest English poem from Beowulf to Shakespeare dispensed with in less than a page."⁵ By erratic standards like these, the gay critic simply cannot win.

A number of reviewers have commented that I appear, at certain points in my argument, to be addressing gay readers; in other words, that my book, by a gay man and addressing gay readers, is itself subjective, narrow and distorting. Straight, white, male reviewers (or reviewers who identify as such) are complaining that they feel excluded. When Jeffrey Meyers reviewed my first book, *Articulate Flesh* (1987), his fiercest criticism of it was that it was "primarily intended ... for a homosexual audience" and that it was consequently "unlikely to convince an objective reader."⁶

What is at stake in all of these instances is the ownership of canonical literature. Virtually all reviews – positive and negative alike – commented in a proprietary manner on a couple of pages in which I dare to invoke the names of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. This is hardly surprising. The problem appears to be, at its most extreme, that once a text is labelled a gay text it is no longer deemed accessible to the heterosexual reader as having anything but marginal value. It is no longer relevant to heterosexual lives; indeed, it is no longer worth reading. Therefore, all the (hetero) critic's favourite texts have to be defended, as if they were Hollywood stars, against imputations of homosexuality.

I have been speaking of reviewers. For the most part, these come from outside the academic world. They are professional writers.⁷ However, there is another source of limitations on the gay critic. Paradoxically, this is queer theory itself. The slavish adherence to a Foucauldian (or supposedly Foucauldian) orthodoxy has inhibited gay

scholars from pursuing certain kinds of social-historical and cultural-historical research. Michel Foucault's judicious attention to historical development, if not always strictly accurate in its details, did at least alert gay academics to the constructedness of the concept of "homosexuality" as an identity, dating from the late nineteenth century and emanating from Europe. Since Foucault, it has been all the harder for literate homosexual men to make sentimental connections between their own feelings and those of (say) Socrates or Michelangelo or Frederick the Great.

When Yale University Press first sought comments on my proposal for a history of gay literature, in 1994, they received the following reply from a prominent American queer theorist:

Theoretical work on our categories of desire needs to move farther ahead before such a history of gay literature can be attempted; it's possible that by the time Woods completes the project, our understanding of the history of homo-sexuality might have altered enough to place Woods' conceptualization on shaky ground.

Note that this commentator does not suggest waiting until *historians* have completed their task: he or she is only interested in theorists. Theirs is the authority which must not be bypassed. But how could theory ever reach a point of readiness as this commentator envisages? This prohibition is like suggesting that one should not get up in the morning until philosophy has completed its task. These remarks must give us cause for some anxiety: for not only are they stupid, but they also show signs of an authoritarian, not to say bullying, tendency which has emerged among some queer theorists (as perhaps among theorists in general) and which, it seems to me, goes against the grain of gay studies, insofar as these are meant to be an essentially liberatory discipline. Theory is being used by some of its lesser luminaries as Latin

and Greek used to be: its complexity serves as an effective instrument of, on the one hand, status acquisition and, on the other, exclusion.

Now, I am not one of those academics who foolishly declare themselves “anti theory.” I am too aware of the ways in which theoretical debates have opened up gay studies to many fresh possibilities. But I am willing to declare myself anti some of the uses to which theory is put. In particular, I am opposed to its being used to prevent the opening up of fresh possibilities. I am also opposed to its tendency to override the needs of lesbian and gay readers beyond the narrow limits of the academic world. It is in this tendency that queer theory most conspicuously serves the purposes of anti-homosexual critical thought. I have said that gay critics cannot win, but of course they can: by directly addressing the gay common reader. This is a point to which I shall return in due course. For the moment, let me merely iterate that the gay common reader is not always being well served by the uncommon queer theorist.

To return to the construction of *A History of Gay Literature*, let me discuss the kinds of question I had to ask myself when first attempting to plan the book I had been asked to write. Many people asked me them, and I must admit that my answers varied – as they still do. The key point at issue was, of course, the very definition of “gay literature” itself. Is gay literature: by gay men? about gay men? the literature that gay men read? If it is any or all of these, how do we define “gay”? In its purest form, gay literature is going to be post-1969 texts by gay men about gay men (or about being gay); that is, literature by gay men who identified as such after the onset of the gay liberation movement in 1969 – and who choose to write *as* such gay men (the American novelist Edmund White, for example).³

In its second purest form, gay literature is going to have to be something which would otherwise be called “the

literature of homosexuality" – that is, post-1869 texts by homosexual men, and possibly about them. This would be the post-Foucauldian definition of a culture of homosexuality emanating from a self-identified group which emerges after the coining of the word "homosexual" to denote an identity in the late 1860s. Under this heading we would include the work of men for whom there is accepted biographical evidence of homosexuality or bisexuality, and in whose work we might expect to find homo-erotic material of some kind – corroborative evidence, if you like. I am thinking of writers like Mikhail Kuzmin, Marina Tsvetaeva and Sergei Esenin; but is their work "gay literature" in its entirety or only when dealing with male-male love? What of the works of an earlier writer like Nikolai Gogol – the short stories, for instance, so amenable to gay readings – how much evidence of the author's sex life, or of his dream life, do we need in order to justify gay readings? Clearly, insofar as they are absolutely dependent on the sexuality of the author, both of these definitions are limiting.

There is a further temptation to include under the "gay literature" rubric representations of male-male sexual relationships (lasting or brief) from all cultures and all periods, either by men who had such relationships, or by any men. The question that then arises is the same again: do we have to know the details of a writer's sexual life before we can call his texts gay? Moreover, one is further tempted to widen the scope of "gay literature" to include representations of male-male "love" (as opposed to "mere" friendship) from all cultures and all periods, either by men who had such relationships, or by any men. Where does one draw the line between love and friendship? Are Leo Tolstoy's many intense, loving relationships with other men to be ruled out of the reckoning merely because no genital contact was involved – assuming that to be the case? In the texts themselves, gay readers will address their attention to such

passages as those on comradeship in Gogol's *Taras Bulba* or those on the sexual apprenticeship of schoolboys in Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

It may be that the best definitions of what a gay or lesbian text is depend on practice. They discard the idea of a stable text, in both senses "containing" homosexuality while still on the bookshelf, and approach the question via readership and readings. I have to keep coming back to a remark made by Bonnie Zimmerman back in 1985: "If a text lends itself to a lesbian reading, then no amount of biographical 'proof' ought to be necessary to establish it as a lesbian text."⁹ As I added in *Articulate Flesh*: "A gay text is one which lends itself to the hypothesis of a gay reading, regardless of where its author's genitals were wont to keep house."¹⁰ (This is all very well, but it does, of course, raise the problem of exactly what a gay *reading* consists of. Does it depend on what the reader's genitals do or want to do?)

If we take Zimmerman's proposition seriously, "gay literature" will include any text that is read by a gay person and is therefore informed by a gay reading. Gay literature is literature that serves the gay reader. This would suggest that there is a kind of gay literature which is simply invisible to the reader who is not gay. It also suggests that *all* literature is potentially gay. Well, why not? The very absence of gay themes from a given author's work may be open to productive gay reading. For instance, it does not seem to me to be possible to read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* without being virtually deafened by its silences on the homosexual prisoners of the gulags.

While writing my *History*, I felt nostalgic for a pre-Foucauldian era when it seemed possible unproblematically to speak of homosexuality trans-historically, trans-culturally. I am thinking of the time (1902) when Edward Carpenter could introduce an anthology of texts about male "friendship" with these remarks:

In making the following collection I have been much struck by the remarkable manner in which the customs of various races and times illustrate each other, and the way in which they point to a solid and enduring body of sentiment on the subject [of male friendship]. By arranging the extracts in a kind of rough chronological and evolutionary order from those dealing with primitive races onwards, the continuity of these customs comes out all the more clearly, as well as their slow modification in course of time.¹¹

Now, in the closing years of the century, post-Foucauldian inhibitions (which have prevailed in gay studies in the later 1980s and the 1990s) may be beginning to weaken. It appears that we are beginning to see signs of an essentialist backlash. As the gay historian Rictor Norton puts it, "I take the view that there is a core of queer desire that is transcultural, transnational and transhistorical, a queer essence that is innate, congenital, constitutional, stable or fixed in its basic pattern."¹² The existence of such a core would enable the gay cultural critic to write comparative criticism which is likewise "transcultural, transnational and transhistorical." Norton makes a similar point, at greater length, in his introduction to an anthology of gay love letters:

When one man says to another "I love you more than anyone else in the world" it means exactly the same thing whether it is uttered by the sophisticated twentieth-century American literary critic F.O. Matthiessen, or by the seventeenth-century Japanese samurai Mashida Toyo-noshin, or by the fifteenth-century Dutch scholar Erasmus, or by the eleventh-century saint Anselm, or by the second-century emperor Marcus Aurelius. The love of one man for another is the fixed root or core value upon which a gay identity is constructed within historical constraints. It may be true that modern gays have characteristics of a recognizably modern personality, but

it is an absurd exaggeration to say that "the homosexual" was invented in the late nineteenth century.¹³

I have recently been asked to read the proposal for a major *History of Lesbian Literature* to be published by Yale University Press. (I regret that I am not allowed to name the author, a well-known lesbian critic and writer.) A sentence in the first paragraph of this proposal strikes me as interesting for the relaxed way in which it dismisses – or, at least, sidelines -- the whole of the nature/nurture debate. She says of her proposed history:

Neither essentialist nor social-constructionist, it will study common themes and motifs of lesbian identity and relationship across six centuries, while remaining acutely aware of the differences between an Elizabethan lady and a modern dyke.

While one is tempted to dismiss this as a lazy attempt, on the author's part, to have her cake and eat it, I am not certain that much is to be gained by such lofty academic fastidiousness. On the contrary, this author's strategic *sang froid* strikes me as the most efficient way of ensuring that lesbian criticism reaches a general lesbian readership. While writing her history, she has put the theoretical debate on hold. It may be that this strategy will become increasingly common as it is increasingly recognised as being both available and viable. After all, most gay critics have emerged from a shared belief in and understanding of a gay liberationist ethos whose ultimate aim is to ease the circumstances of homosexual people in everyday life. Such critics cannot afford to go on indefinitely ignoring the needs of the common reader, the person to whom gay criticism should ultimately be addressed, even if only through mediators (such as journalists and teachers).

By way of a final exemplary enactment of textual-critical processes, let us consider what we should do with a text like this -- Alexander Pushkin's "Imitation of the Arabic" ("Podrazhanie arabskomu," 1835):

Sweet lad, tender lad,
Have no shame, you're mine for good;
We share a sole insurgent fire,
We live in boundless brotherhood.

I do not fear the gibes of men;
One being split in two we dwell,
The kernel of a double nut
Embedded in a single shell.¹⁴

Is the title's invocation of Arabic literary traditions genuine or a pretext? Is the image of "One being split in two" a deliberate invocation of Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*; and, if so, is it therefore a deliberate reference to a homosexual tradition? Why is the poem not an "Imitation of the Greek"? Is the love which exists between the speaker and the lad "mere" brotherhood -- a chaste form of intense, masculine friendship -- or has it flourished into physicality and does it therefore merit the dutiful boy's apparent tendency to feel "shame" for it? It is certainly perceived as an inappropriate relationship by other men -- hence their "gibes" -- but is there likely to be any other reason for this than an assumption that man and boy are having sex together? Is the "shell" of security and privacy in which the two lovers take refuge a defensive measure, not only against "the gibes of men" but also against the sanction of the law? If the boy is the man's beloved "for good," what is to become of the Greek/Arabic proprieties of pederastic involvement, namely the convention whereby a boy ceases to be the beloved once his beard has begun to grow? Will the two friends become an

adult couple? Finally, the only matter which can actually benefit from hard research: does the poem's account of an intensely felt love have any correspondence with the life of the poet?

Gay readings are always going to begin with questions like these. Yet, as I have suggested, such readings are often regarded as being transgressive even before any attempt is made to provide the answers. Merely to have asked the questions is already to have overstepped the mark of propriety. And yet we have to conclude that not to do so is to leave the text – in this case, Pushkin's suggestive little poem – virtually unread. It might just as well have remained, unappreciated, in the archives.¹⁵

By contrast, it is the project of those who are involved in establishing and assessing gay literature to bring as many texts as possible into the gay public domain, thereby pointing gay readers in the direction of the texts which might interest them. The theorist of gay literary culture Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick provides an optimistically broad impression of what gay literatures might consist of when, in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, she offers her own version of a canonical list of gay texts, including various deliberately tentative additions (Brontë? Nietzsche? Joyce?), and then adds:

The very centrality of this list and its seemingly infinite elasticity suggest that no one *can* know *in advance* where the limits of a gay centered inquiry are to be drawn, or where a gay theorizing of and through even the hegemonic high culture of the Euro-American tradition may need or be able to lead.¹⁶

In other words – and it seems so obvious to be saying it – the subject of gay literary criticism is literature itself. This is why our histories of gay and lesbian literature, contrary to

those who accuse us of narrowness, are always likely to be expansive and inclusive.

NOTES

⁰ Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹ Jeffrey Meyers, *Homosexuality and Literature, 1890-1930* (London: Athlone, 1977), p.3.

² Langston Hughes, "Joy," *Selected Poems* (London: Pluto, 1986), p.57. A poem with a similar effect is Countee Cullen's "Tableau":

Locked arm in arm they cross the way,
The black boy and the white,
The golden splendor of the day,
The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,
And here the fair folk talk,
Indignant that these two should dare
In unison to walk.

Oblivious to look and word
They pass, and see no wonder
That lightning brilliant as a sword
Should blaze the path of thunder.

– Countee Cullen, *On These I Stand: An Anthology of the Best Poems* (New York: Harper and Row, 1947), p.7. Is this a poem about interracial friendship or homosexuality? It is both in alternation: duck-rabbit-duck-rabbit...

³ Denis Donoghue, "The Book of Love," *New Republic* 6 April 1998, pp.36-38; p.38.

⁴ Neil Powell, "A Load of Cock," *Gay Times* May 1998, p.79.

⁵ Dale Peck, "Out of the Closet and into the Woods," *Lingua Franca* Spring 1998, pp.4, 27; p.27.

⁶ Jeffrey Meyers, untitled review of Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), *Journal of English and German Philology* 88, 1 (January 1989), pp.126-129; p.127.

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- ⁷ In the case of my book, they have all been male, and apparently equally divided between straight and gay. Some were novelists (Peter Ackroyd, Adam Mars-Jones, Dale Peck, Graeme Woolaston), others biographers (Peter Parker, Humphrey Carpenter). So far, not one has been an academic working in gay studies.
- ⁸ But note that there are some writers who are openly gay but refuse to be defined as gay writers, since they consider, understandably, that this will limit the ways in which they will be received. John Ashbery and Renaud Camus are cases in point.
- ⁹ Bonnie Zimmerman, "Lesbian Feminist Criticism," in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (eds.), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1985), p.185.
- ¹⁰ Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p.4.
- ¹¹ Edward Carpenter, *Anthology of Friendship: Ioläus* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 2nd ed., 1906), p.v.
- ¹² Rictor Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* (London: Cassell, 1997), p.12.
- ¹³ Rictor Norton, introduction to *My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters Through the Centuries* (San Francisco: Leyland: 1998), p.13.
- ¹⁴ Alexander Pushkin, "Imitation of the Arabic," in Kevin Moss (ed.), *Out of the Blue: Russia's Hidden Gay Literature, an Anthology* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1997).
- ¹⁵ Anyone wishing to study Russian gay literature should start with the pioneering critical essays of Simon Karlinsky. He provides the entries on Russia in the standard reference texts: "Russia and the U.S.S.R.," in Wayne R. Dynes (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (Chicago and London: St. James Press, 1990), volume 2, pp.1133-1138; and "Russian Literature," in Claude J. Summers (ed.), *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage: A Reader's Companion to the Writers and Their Works, from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), pp.611-618. Karlinsky is also the author of *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, Her World, and Her Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976). See also Kevin Moss (ed.), *Out of the Blue: Russia's Hidden Gay Literature, An Anthology* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine, 1997).
- ¹⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.53.

