From Epistemology of the Closet

AXIOM 6: THE RELATION OF GAY STUDY TO DEBATES ON THE LITERARY CANON IS, AND HAD BEST BE, TORTUOUS.

Early on in the work on Epistemology of the Closet, in trying to settle on a literary text that would provide a first example for the kind of argument I meant the book to enable, I found myself circling around a text of 1891, a narrative that in spite of its relative brevity has proved a durable and potent central piece of gay male intertextuality and indeed has provided a durable and potent physical icon for gay male desire. It tells the story of a young Englishman famous for an extreme beauty of face and figure that seems to betray his aristocratic origin — an origin marked, however, also by mystery and class mismatch. If the gorgeous youth gives his name to the book and stamps his bodily image on it, the narrative is nonetheless more properly the story of a male triad: a second, older man is tortured by a desire for the youth for which he can find no direct mode of expression, and a third man, emblem of suavity and precisely, presides over the dispensation of discursive authority as the beautiful youth murders the tortured lover and is himself, in turn, by the novel's end ritually killed.

But maybe, I thought, one such text would offer an insufficient basis for cultural hypothesis. 
Might I pick two? It’s isn’t yet commonplace to read Dorian Gray and Billy Budd by one another’s light, but that can only be a testimony to the power of accepted English and American literary canons to edify and deform the reading of politically important texts. In any gay male canon the two contemporaneous experimental works must be yoked together as overarching gateway texts of our modern period, and the conventionally obvious differences between them of style, literary positioning, national origin, class ethos, structure, and the thematics must cease to be taken for granted and must instead become newly salient in the context of their startling erotic congruence. The book of the beautiful male body foregrounded on an international canvas; the book of its inscription and evocation through a trio of male figures—the lovely boy, the tormented desirer, the deaf master of the rules of their discourse; the story in which the lover is murdered by the boy and the boy is himself sacrificed; the deft magisterial recounting that finally frames, preserves, exploits, and desublimates the male bodily image: Dorian Gray and Billy Budd are both that book.

The year 1891 is a good year to which to look for a cross section of the inaugural discourses of modern homo/heterosexual identity—in medicine and psychiatry, in language and law, in the crisis of female status, in the career of imperialism. Billy Budd and Dorian Gray are among the texts that have been cast for a modern homosocial identity. And in the Euro-American culture of this past century it has been notable that foundational texts of modern gay culture—A la recherche du temps perdu and Death in Venice, for instance, along with Dorian Gray and Billy Budd—have often been the identical texts that mobilized and promulgated the most potent images and categories for (what is now visible as) the canon of homophobic mastery.

Neither Dorian Gray nor Billy Budd is in the least an obscure text. Both are available in numerous paperback editions, for instance; and, both conveniently short, each differently canonical within a different national narrative, both are taught regularly in academic curricula. As what they are taught, however, and as what canonized, comes so close to disciplining the reading permitted of each that even the contemporaneity of the two texts (Dorian Gray was published as a book the year Billy Budd was written). It may startle that every major character in the archetypal American “allegory of good and evil” is English; that the archetypal English fin-de-siècle “allegory of art and life” was a sufficiently American event to appear in a Philadelphia publisher’s magazine nine months before it became a London book; that the canonic regurgitation that effaces these international bonds has how much the more scope to efface the intertext and the intersected. How may the strategy of a new canon operate in this space?

Contemporary discussions of the question of the master-canon tend to be structured either around the possibility of change, of rearrangement and reassignment of texts, within one overarching master-canon of literature—the strategy of adding Mary Shelley to the Norton Anthology—or, more theoretically defensible at the moment, around a vision of an exploding master-canon whose fracture would produce, or at least leave room for, a potentially infinite plurality of mini-canons, each specified as to its thematic or structural or authorial coverage: francophone Canadian or Inuit canons, for instance; clusters of magical realism or national allegory; the blues tradition; working-class narrative; canons of the sublime or the self-reflexive; Afro-Caribbean canons; canons of Anglo-American women’s writing.

In fact, though productive canons effects that have been taking place in recent literary studies have occurred, not from within the mechanism either of the master-canon or of a postfractural plurality of canons, but through an interaction between these two models of the canon. In this interaction the new pluralized mini-canons have largely failed to dislodge the master-canon from its empirical centrality in such institutional practices as publishing and teaching, although they have made certain specific works and authors newly available for inclusion in the master-canon. Their more important effect, however, has been to challenge, if not the empirical centrality, then the conceptual anonymity of the master-canon. The most notorious instance of this has occurred with feminist studies in literature, which, by one hand confronting the master-canon with alternative canons of women’s literature, and on the other hand running rebelliously within the master-canon, has not only upset the table of contents for the master-canon but, more important, given it a title. If it is still in important respects the master-canon it nevertheless cannot now escape naming itself with every syllable also a particular canon, a canon of mastery, in this case of men’s narratives, or a canon of women. Perhaps we shall never again need women—need, one hopes, anybody—feel greeted by the Norton Anthology of mostly white men’s literature with the implied insolent salutation, “I’m nobody. Who are you?”

This is an encouraging story of female canon-formation, working in a sort of pincers movement with a process of feminist canon-naming, that has been in various forms a good deal told by now. How much the cheering clairvoyance of this story is indebted, however, to the sacrificing coarseness and visibility with which women and men are, in most if not all societies, distinguished publicly and once and for all from one another emerges only when attempts are made to apply the same model to that very differently structured though closely related form of oppression in modern homo/sexual identity. It is, as we have already seen, only recently—and, I am arguing, only very incompletely and raggedly, although to that extent violently and brutally—that a combination of discursive forces have carved out, for women and for men, a possible through intensification proscribed sexual identity in Euro-American culture. To the extent that such an identity is traceable, there is clearly the possibility, now being realized within literary criticism, for assembling alternative canons of lesbian and gay male writing as minority canons, as a literature of oppression and resistance and survival and heroic making. This modern view of lesbians and gay men as a distinctive minority population is of course importantly anachronistic in relation to earlier writing, however; and even in relation to modern writing it seems to faller in important ways in the implicit analysis it offers of the mechanisms of homophobia and of same-sex desire. It is with these complications that the relation between lesbian and gay literature as a minority canon, and the process of its dissalient the homosocial, and the many other homophobic strains and torsions in the already existing master-canon, becomes especially revealing.

It’s revealing only, however, for those of us for whom relations within and among canons are active relations of thought. From the keepers of a dead canon we hear a rhetorical question—that is to say, a question posed with the arrogant intent of maintaining ignorance. Is there, as Saul Bellow put it, a Tolstoy of the Zulus? Has there been, as the defenders of a multicultural curriculum, not intending to stay for an answer, has there ever yet been a Socrates of the Orient, an African American Proust, a female Shakespeare? However assaultive or fatuous, in the context of the current debate the question has been unanswerable. To answer it in good faith has been to broach inquiries across a variety of critical fronts: into the canonical or indeed world-historic texts of non-Euro-American cultures, to begin with, but also into the nonuniversal functions of literary and the literary, into the contingent and unevolved secularization and sacralization of an aesthetic realm, into the relations of public to private in the ranking of genres, into the cult of the individual author and the organization of liberal arts education as an expensive form of master-canonic theatre.

Moreover, the flat insolent question teases by the very difference of its resonance with different projects of inquiry: it stimulates or irritates or reveals differently in the context of oral or written cultures; of the colonized or the colonizers, or cultures that have had both experiences; of peoples concentrated or in diaspora; of traditions partially internal or largely external to a dominant culture of the latter twentieth century.

From the point of view of this relatively new and inchoate academic presence, then, the gay studies movement, what distinctive soundings are to be reached by posing the question our way—and staying for an answer? Let’s see how it sounds.

Has there ever been a gay Socrates?
Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?
Has there ever been a gay Proust?
Does the Pope wear a dress? If these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies. A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust; and, beyond that, legion—dozens
or hundreds of the most centrally canonical figures in what the monocularists are pleased to consider "our" culture, as indeed, always in different forms and senses, in every other.

What's now in place, in contrast, is most scholarship and its curricula is an even briefer response to questions like these: Don't ask. Or, less laconically: You shouldn't know. The vast preponderance of scholarship and teaching, accordingly, even among liberal academics, does simply neither ask nor know. At the most expansive, there is a series of dismissals of such questions on the grounds that:

1. Passionate language of same-sex attraction was extremely common during whatever period is under discussion — and therefore must have been completely meaningless.
2. Same-sex genital relations may have been perfectly common during the period under discussion — but since there was no language about them, they must have been completely meaningless. Or...
3. Attitudes about homosexuality were intolerant back then, unlike now — so people probably didn’t do anything. Or...
4. Prohibitions against homosexuality didn't exist back then, unlike now — so if people did anything, it was completely meaningless. Or...
5. The word “homosexuality” wasn’t coined until 1896 — so everyone before then was heterosexual. (Of course, heterosexuality has always existed.) Or...
6. The author under discussion is certified or rumored to have had an attachment to someone of the other sex — so their feelings about people of their own sex must have been completely meaningless. Or (under a perhaps somewhat different rule of admissible evidence)
7. There is no actual proof of homosexuality, such as sperm taken from the body of another man or a nude photograph with another woman — so the author may be assumed to have been ardently and exclusively heterosexual. Or (as a last resort)
8. The author or the author’s important attachments may very well have been homosexual — but it would be provincial to let so insignificant a fact make any difference at all to our understanding of any serious project of life, writing, or thought.

These responses reflect, as we have already seen, some real questions of sexual definition and historicity. But they only reflect them and don’t reflect on them: the family resemblance among this group of extremely common responses comes from their closeness to the core grammar of Don’t ask; You shouldn’t know. It didn’t happen; it doesn’t make any difference; it didn’t mean anything; it doesn’t have interpretive consequences. Stop asking just here; stop asking just now; we know in advance the kind of difference that would be made by the invocation of this difference; it makes no difference; it doesn’t mean. The most openly repressive project of censorship, such as William Bennett¹ literally murderous opposition to serious AIDS education in schools on the grounds that it would communicate a tolerance for the lives of homosexuals, are, through this mobilization of the powerful mechanism of the open secret, made perfectly congruent with the smooth, dismissive knowingness of the urban and the pseudo-urban.

And yet the absolute canonical centrality of the list of authors about whom one might think to ask these questions — What was the structure, function, historical surrounds of same-sex love in and for Homer or Plato or Sappho? What, then, about Euripides or Virgil? If a gay Marlowe, what about Spenser or Milton? Shakespeare? Byron? But what about Shelley? Montaigne, Leopardi ... ? Leonardo, Michelangelo, but ... ? Beethoven? Whitman, Thoreau, Dickinson (Dickinson?), Yeats, Wilde, Woolf, Hopkins, but Brontë? Wittgenstein, but ... Nietzsche? Proust, Musil, Kafka, Cather, but ... ? Mann? James ... ? Lawrence? Eliot? but ... ? Joyce? The very centrality of this list and its seemingly almost 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. The emergence, even within the last year or two, of nascent but ambitious programs and courses in gay and lesbian studies, at schools including those of the Ivy League, may now make it possible for the first time to ask these difficult questions from within the very heart of the empowered cultural institutions to which they pertain, as well as from the marginal and endangered institutional positions from which, for so long, the most courageous work in this area has emanated.

Furthermore, as I have been suggesting, the violently contradictory and volatile energies that every morning’s newspaper proves to us are circulating even at this moment, in our society, around the issues of homo/heterosexual definition show over and over again how preposterous is anybody’s urban pretense at having a clear, simple story to tell about the outlines and meanings of what and who are homosexual and heterosexual. To be gay, or to be potentially classifiable as gay — that is to say, to be sexed or gendered — in this system is to come under the radically overlapping aegis of a universalizing discourse of acts or bonds and at the same time of a minoritizing discourse of kinds of persons. Because of the double binds implicit in the space overlapped by universalizing and minoritizing models, the stakes in matters of definitional control are extremely high.

Obviously, this analysis suggests as one indispenisible approach to the traditional Euro-American canon a pedagogy that could treat it neither as something quite exploded nor as something quite stable. A canon seen to be genuinely unified by the maintenance of a particular tension of homo/heterosexual definition can scarcely be dismantled; but neither can it ever be treated as the repository of reassuring "traditional" truths that could be made matter for any settled consolidation or congratulation. Insofar as the problematics of homo-heterosexual definition, in an intensely homophobic culture, are seen to be precisely internal to the central nexuses of that culture, this canon must always be treated as a loaded one. Considerations of the canon, it becomes clear, while vital in themselves cannot take the place of questions of pedagogic relations within and around the canon. Canonicity itself then seems the necessary wadding of pious obtusiveness that allows for the transmission from one generation to another of texts that have the potential to dismantle the impacted foundations upon which a given culture rests.

Steven Kruger

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