

GAY AUTOFICTION:
THE SACRED AND
THE REAL

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Gay liberation began in 1969 with the Stonewall Uprising in New York, but it did not produce a significant literature for another ten years. To be sure, essayists (Hocquenghem in France, Tripp in America, Altman in Australia)¹ had begun in the early seventies to write theoretical works about homosexuality, but fiction had to wait until 1978 to make a major impact.²

At that time a new gay fiction emerged, which is still flourishing today. The defining characteristics of this fiction are that it is unapologetic, that it is addressed primarily to gay rather than straight readers, and that it conceives of homosexuality as an oppressed minority group rather than as a pathology. Less theoretically, this new fiction has commanded new bookstores, new publishing houses, and even new magazines to review it. In New York, where the phenomenon is at its most advanced, an organization of gay people in publishing counts several hundred members and hands out an important literary prize every year.³ In universities around the United States there are departments of queer studies; Harvard publishes a gay and lesbian review; the Beinecke library at Yale houses an important collection of contemporary gay and lesbian literary archives; the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at City University of New York, headed by Martin Duberman,⁴ the celebrated historian, has become a bastion of this dynamic new movement, but Duke University is also celebrated for its department of queer studies, headed by the redoubtable Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.⁵

Lesbian fiction has from the very beginning been associated in the United States with the feminist movement, except when it was entirely separatist. Only a few lesbian novelists—Jeanette Winterson in Great Britain,⁶ Rita Mae Brown in the United States⁷—have become “crossover” writers with a mass-market audience including, presumably, many straight readers. Perhaps a few more gay male writers—Paul Monette,⁸

David Leavitt,⁹ and Armistead Maupin¹⁰ in the United States, Alan Hollinghurst,¹¹ Paul Bailey,¹² and Adam Mars-Jones¹³ in England—enjoy this crossover status.

International comparisons, however, can be misleading, since they disguise the very different ways in which each country is culturally organized and politically structured. In Germany, where no major self-identified gay writer has emerged in the twenty years since the death of Hubert Fichte,¹⁴ gay fiction is considered to be little better than a joke, usually a dirty one; there may or may not be a more pronounced homophobia in Germany than in other European countries, but I suspect the differences are more reasonably attributed to the fortuitous absence of “out” gay novelists of the first rank. When the brilliant Rainer Werner Fassbinder was alive, for instance, and Werner Schroeter was more active, one could have spoken of a distinguished gay German cinema, despite Fassbinder’s lack of interest in male homosexuality as a subject (*Fox and His Friends* is his only gay film about men).

France represents a different social configuration. There are many outstanding gay writers—Dominique Fernandez, Tony Duvert, Renaud Camus,¹⁵ as well as several who have died in the last decade, such as Hervé Guibert, Guy Hocquenghem, and Gilles Barbedette¹⁶—but I’m sure none of these writers except possibly the militant Fernandez would accept the label “gay writer,” although all of them have written primarily about aspects of their own sexual identity. I don’t even bother here with those numerous writers such as Angelo Rinaldi and Hector Bianciotti who write only occasionally if quite convincingly about homosexuality.¹⁷

What is striking is that none of these writers, not even those most concerned with gay content, was willing to attend an international congress of lesbian and gay writers held in London some years ago; in fact all of them, with the exception of the lesbian poet Geneviève Pastre,¹⁸ responded angrily

to the invitation and denounced the ghettoization of literature, which the French contingent conceived of as a loss of freedom. Whereas most English-language writers perceive the evolution of openly gay fiction as progressive, in France the same label is treated contemptuously as reactionary and belittling. Nor can the French attitude be dismissed as closetedness or as a case of "Latin" *bellafigurismo*,¹⁹ since in Italy, at least, gay writers such as Pier Vittorio Tondelli and Aldo Busi²⁰ have gladly accepted the label.

No, France is a country in which at least the illusion is maintained of an open, civilized communication among all the elements of society; the strong push toward secularism, at least as old as the Revolution, has always militated against special interest groups of any sort, whether religious or ethnic; literature and the "genius of the French language" have been defined at least for three centuries as universal. In France there is no black novel, no Jewish novel, and certainly no gay novel, although a black Caribbean writer such as Patrick Chamoiseau can win the Goncourt,²¹ and many French writers have been Jewish or homosexual or both.

In Britain the situation seems to be located somewhere between the extremes represented by the United States and France. High culture in general and gay culture in particular enjoy more visibility in the United Kingdom than in the United States; it was British television, after all, that made a series out of Maupin's *Tales of the City*, that featured my own biography of Jean Genet on a "South Bank Show," and did a filmed version of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*; now British television is filming Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library*. American television would never initiate such programs, and even these British productions are replayed in the United States after midnight and only on obscure cable channels with names such as "Bravo." This American invisibility will become still more marked given the current political climate and the Republicans' hostility toward

National Public Radio and public television, not to mention homosexuality—virtually the only common enemy hated by all the disparate elements making up the right now that communism has vanished.

In Britain an out gay writer, Adam Mars-Jones, can be named the film critic of a national newspaper and another gay novelist, Alan Hollinghurst, can be the deputy editor of the leading literary journal and be nominated for the Booker Prize. I suppose it is symptomatic of British attitudes that *The Folding Star* would be classified by Waterstone's both on the shelf for literary fiction and on the shelf for gay fiction. In France no bookstore would have a shelf for gay fiction and in America no gay novel could be classed with general literary fiction or, as the shelf is now labelled in the United States, "Proven Authors."

The ghettoization of gay literature in the English-speaking world—and the refusal of France to acknowledge the very existence of gay fiction—have been two equally effective if opposite strategies for disguising the fact that gay literature does exist and that it has been central to the evolution of "autofiction," one of the main tendencies in continental literature. All too often, even when sophisticated English-speaking critics discuss French fiction, for instance, those works that are labelled "gay" are the minor ones, whereas the truth is that a great twentieth-century tradition in France is based on autobiographical fiction by gay men who have written at least to a substantial degree about their gay experience. I'm thinking of Marcel Proust, André Gide, Jean Cocteau, Marcel Jouhandeau, and, in our own day, Hervé Guibert and Tony Duvert.

Perhaps because I live in Paris I can already imagine the outraged whispers. I can recall that when I was working on my biography of Genet, my French publisher (and Genet's), Gallimard, was terribly worried that I'd turn my subject into a "gay writer." This fear arose not only from my reputation

as an apologist but also because in conversation I'd once casually referred to Rimbaud as a "gay poet," which had profoundly shocked my editor.

Whereas I can understand the French reluctance to quarantine literature—a position I sympathize with in some ways on certain days—I cannot tolerate the reflex that bans all references to homosexuality while discussing a writer such as Genet, who wrote four autobiographical novels in which the narrator and protagonist, named "Jean Genet," presents his homosexual experiences in great detail to the reader, a reader who is explicitly designated as heterosexual. (Curiously, only in *Querelle*, the one wholly invented novel, is the reader imagined to be homosexual.)²² As I tried to show in my biography, an impressive part of Genet's originality lies in his positioning of himself and the reader with regard to homosexuality, which he called his "jewel" and counted among his three cardinal virtues, along with theft and betrayal.

At a time when most middle-class gay writers were projecting their sexual orientation on fictional characters and endorsing the idea that homosexuality is an illness that calls for condolences, Genet was laying claim to his own homosexuality and showing it to be a sin and a crime, a public and private menace designed to intimidate the heterosexual reader. Whereas most other gay novelists concentrated on the young and solitary protagonist, afraid to avow his forbidden desires, or on the gay couple (sensitive, noble, tormented), living in a forest or by the sea or in any event in romantic isolation (the alibi of love), Genet was picturing the gaudy homosexual ghetto of Montmartre, without alibis or medical etiology, and was delineating gay friendships and rivalries and inventing the drag queen for French literature. Indeed, one could say that Genet made a distinction between, on the one hand, the forced sexual relationships that existed between men in the all-male societies of prison, the army, and among those vagabonds too poor to be able to afford women, and,

on the other hand, the gay world of Montmartre in which transvestite whores and their pimps mingled, through elective affinities, with artists and criminals in the last flowering of classic bohemianism.

“But why would you want to reduce a great writer like Genet to just *that*?” literary critics, many of them homosexual, complain. (I place to one side another group, those who complain about the very word *gay* or who object to it being applied retrospectively to writers of the past.) In France a closeted gay critic—one of the funniest, most independent, and vitriolic voices in a country known for its excessively genteel journalism (at least in the postwar period)—ridiculed me at the time my biography came out for having abandoned the promise of an early and highly coded, not to say obscure and “poetic” novel such as *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* for the sordid aftermath, my tiresome and overt obsession with homosexuality. Most French critics, I am happy to say, and in the end the publisher as well, were satisfied that I had not turned Genet into a gay folk hero, as they had feared—an absurdity of course, considering how hostile Genet was to everything we would group today under the label “politically correct.” Perhaps I surprised or even disappointed some readers by showing that Genet was attracted almost exclusively to heterosexual men. In the seventies he took almost no interest in gay liberation, which he no doubt perceived as a white, middle-class movement, a matter of French domestic politics, at a time when his sole commitment was to the Black Panthers and the Palestinians. To add the final insult, he insisted in one of his last interviews that Freud was the most important friend to homosexuals, since Freud had been the one to put across the theory of universal bisexuality.

But if I was eager to avoid any suggestion that Genet’s view of homosexuality was upbeat or communitarian, at the same time I did not want to minimize the key role his sexuality had played in his life and his fiction (if not his theater).

Genet felt that homosexuality had given him an entrée into many different worlds that he would never have known otherwise. He once said that, unlike Proust and Gide, who were liars and cheats, he'd never wanted to downplay his own homosexuality in order to assume a role in the social comedy. "My imagination is plunged into abjection," he said, "but in this respect it is noble, it is pure. I refuse to be an imposter; and if I should happen to go too far when pushing a hero or a plot toward what's horrifying or obscene, at least I'm going in the direction of the truth."²³ In his posthumous masterpiece, *A Prisoner of Love*,²⁴ he began a whole new meditation on homosexuality and even took up a new theme: the heroism of those who undergo a sex-change operation.

At this point, it might be worth mentioning that, whereas identification with an oppressed minority is seen as limiting ("gay writer"), no limitation is assumed if the individual belongs to a dominant group ("white writer" or "heterosexual painter," for instance).

If I insist on this perfectly obvious truth about the importance of homosexuality to Genet, I do not do so because I'm always on the lookout for the slightest sign of homosexuality. On the contrary, I'm opposed to overly ingenious interpretations of life or art. Typically, the other day I had an argument with an English critic who'd asked me to comment on an essay she'd written about Alberto Giacometti's friendship with Genet. She'd labelled their relationship "homosocial," an interpretation I questioned. I said that Giacometti was not homosexual, though he was an occasional voyeur who liked watching men make love to women. Genet did not fancy Giacometti nor had he ever had sex with another artist or intellectual; neither man, moreover, was the least bit repressed. Both would have eagerly acknowledged a mutual attraction had it existed, but it obviously did not. The word *homosocial* would not apply in any circumstances to two such liberated men, so

ready, even eager, to acknowledge their strangest, most unacceptable impulses, unless *homosocial* is used to mean merely an association of two members of the same sex, in which case it designates an uninteresting truism.

If I'm opposed to routine psychological reductionism or any other attempt to formulate a totalizing interpretation of an individual, by the same token I distrust a resistance to the obvious. Genet was a homosexual and wrote about it, just as the adolescent Arthur Rimbaud was homosexual and wrote about it. There may be convincing arguments against speaking of homosexual individuals rather than homosexual acts, although the violent hatred that homosexuality triggers means that anyone whose queerness is known about has had to live, year in and year out, *stigmatized* as a homosexual; this stigma—so constant, so oppressive—does not recognize nice theoretical distinctions between essentialist and social-constructionist explanations of sexual identity.

There may be convincing arguments against projecting contemporary gay cultural categories backward in time and speaking anachronistically about nineteenth-century or even twentieth-century pre-Stonewall “gay life.” But what cannot be denied is that homosexuality itself constitutes both a subject and a point of view for many major writers in the twentieth century, and to say that to classify them as homosexual writers is “belittling” means that one considers homosexuality itself to be an unmentionable stain.

I want to be very clear about the fact that I am not defending the idea of a constant and unifying, transhistorical gay sensibility. I'm not even sure what a *sensibility* is; to the degree that it seems to mean anything it means something racist or sexist—what would a *black sensibility* or a *feminine sensibility* be? No, I'm prepared to recognize that there is an experience and not a sensibility, and that even that experience is different for men and for women, for rich and for

poor, for whites and for people of color, and that even in a precise category of class, gender, and color that experience varies considerably from decade to decade.

I'm even prepared to entertain the possibility that the homosexuality that Proust or Genet or Hollinghurst spend so much time contemplating and dissecting does not really exist, that it is no more a real, unvarying entity than the Jewishness Kafka analyzes in his letters, or the limits and duties of the feminine role that preoccupy George Eliot in *Middlemarch*. Perhaps homosexuality is a nonsubject: endlessly fertile, ceaselessly shifting, devoid of all stable content, an invitation to musing rather than a fixed object of inquiry. Genet wanted to write an entire book devoted to homosexuality, which he thought would be his highest achievement; that he ended up with only a few painfully self-conscious pages reveals how elusive this nonsubject is if confronted head-on. In fact the most arresting pages are those that are devoted to Egyptian funerary imagery, since Genet linked homosexuality to death, a sterility that could be redeemed only through the fertility of art. That this fascinating cipher, homosexuality, provokes Genet to think about his recurring obsessions—death, sex, and art—reveals that the subject itself is vague only because it is coterminous with the limits of his very being. If homosexuality as a subject lures Gide toward absurd thoughts about monkeys²⁵ and Proust toward equally preposterous theories about orchids²⁶ and if all this fantastic botanizing is mixed up with confused thoughts about the Bible and ancient Greece, about the virginity of young girls, and the mating habits of bees, we can only conclude that this nonsubject, homosexuality, is full of exciting conflict and unresolved tensions and can invite its own share of nonsense.

To recapitulate a few of the points I have made up to now, the very category *gay fiction* is accepted or rejected by different cultures according to their varying attitudes toward the ghet-

toization of culture. In America, the land of lobbies and special interest groups, homosexuals have been styled as the equivalent of an ethnic minority and their literature as its cultural and political expression. In France, a country where a confluence of powerful unified state, intense patriotism, and a vigorous defense of secularism as an ideal creates a taboo against identity politics, the phenomenon of gay literature is treated as a loss of liberty, virtually as a violation of human rights.

Quite distinct from these contradictory national responses to a new category of literature, there is a strategy that closely resembles the French response but is actually a very different maneuver: the bourgeois recuperation of all dissident literatures (and of gay literature in particular) through an appeal to universalism. Middle-class critics may be willing, at least in the English-speaking world, to grant that certain contemporary works of fiction that enjoy a low prestige can be called a part of gay literature, but highly praised works, especially works of the past, are labelled classic and canonical.

To be sure, all serious works of art hope to communicate across racial, national, class, ethnic, generational, or gender barriers, and older homosexual fiction was usually addressed explicitly to a heterosexual reader (most gay art before Stonewall was a form of apologetics). Yet the effort to exempt from the category of gay literature the novels of William Burroughs and Jean Genet, or the poetry of Allen Ginsberg or James Merrill simply because these works are superior, serious, and consecrated, is a rearguard action designed to trivialize the label of gay art. It is also a strategy to recuperate for a purely imaginary, if politically charged, category of "universal art" everything that is admirable, celebrated, or puissant.

But what is this tradition of gay fiction I alluded to earlier? And why is it so loaded with contradictions, fraught with such inner tensions? And why does the very drama of its unfolding generate such hypnotic interest?

I would claim that the characteristic form of gay fiction in the twentieth century, from Proust to Genet to Isherwood, is "autofiction," a convergence of two very different literary traditions, realism and the confession, and that each of these two traditions sets up different expectations on the part of the reader; the troubling synthesis of these two traditions, in fact, is what generates the powerful current of autofiction in general and much of serious gay fiction in particular.

Realism is an eighteenth- and, especially, a nineteenth-century movement in fiction that coincides with the emergence of a prosperous, self-improving, curious, and insecure middle-class readership; the subsequent economic independence of a few writers; a widespread, anxious desire to make sense of the city (which had suddenly grown large and chaotic); and a corresponding appetite for analyzing manners, morals, and passions, no longer held in check or immobilized by traditional social forms. It is primarily a secular form, indicated by the fact that when religion is treated at all it is presented sentimentally and as a program of worldly self-improvement rather than ascetic self-abnegation.

Of course, almost all aesthetic theories are about realism in a larger sense, that is, mimesis, an idea as variable and vast as experience itself. Indeed even the most extreme artistic revolutions often justify themselves by claiming that they have distorted perspective or eliminated punctuation in the interests of a higher realism. Perhaps such innovative movements eschew the notion of documentary realism but typically they invoke the reality of inner experience. Twentieth-century paintings and texts that seem forbiddingly avant-garde and abstract, certainly formalist, almost always rely on the alibi of mimesis, the imitation of human perception or of an objective inanimate reality purged of human conventions. When the American painter Robert Ryman paints all-white canvases, he argues that he is dispensing with illusionary images and revealing the brute reality of the canvas as such, just as when

Alain Robbe-Grillet eliminates all anthropomorphic metaphors he argues that he is rendering with greater clarity the reality of nature.

One of the few exceptions to realism and its constant recourse to nature (human nature or nature *tout court*) is Charles Baudelaire. No one can forget Baudelaire's praise of the "artificial paradise" of hashish and wine, nor his defense of cosmetics, nor his preference of the city over the countryside. As his friend Théophile Gautier wrote of him: "Everything that distanced man and especially woman from the state of nature appeared to him to be a happy invention."²⁷ Baudelaire saw poetry not as natural but as supernatural, and thought that merely human passions were too violent to suit the aesthetic sentiment, which is a foreglimpse of paradise. Since we are exiled from paradise during our lives, our aesthetic feelings are necessarily melancholic. To be sure other philosophers of aesthetics have seen the supernatural in the sublime, but none has posited nature as the enemy of this vision, though some have suggested that only the artist can interpret nature in such a way as to extract from it its spiritual dimension. Where Baudelaire is radical (of course he was followed by Oscar Wilde and other late nineteenth-century decadents) is in his insistence that nature is antithetical to the beautiful. Not only external nature is the enemy, but even human nature; as Baudelaire writes: "For passion is a *natural* thing, much too natural not to introduce a stinging, discordant note into the domain of pure beauty; too familiar and violent not to scandalize the pure Desires, the gracious Melancholies and the noble Despairs who live in the supernatural region of poetry."²⁸

Of course in one particular sense Baudelaire was considered by his contemporaries to be a "realist" since he took an acute interest in low life, in *les bas fonds de Paris*, in the manners and morals of prostitutes, the old, the ill, the poor, the despised. Since at least the eighteenth century the "shocking" has been deemed an aspect of realism. Here realism is con-

trusted with the religious side of literature and painting—the overwhelmingly dominant tendency of art since its very beginnings. It is no accident that so much of the history of modern art has been associated with scandal—we think of the trials occasioned by the publication of *Les fleurs du mal* and *Madame Bovary*, not to mention the more recent legal judgments concerning James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Vladimir Nabokov.

Why is it that these “shocking” writers, these transgressive authors, are also now labeled the most important? Foucault suggests an answer when he writes:

Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors (other than mythical, “sacralized” and “sacralizing” figures) to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive. In our culture (and doubtless in many others), discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act—an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous. Historically, it was a gesture fraught with risks before becoming goods caught up in a circuit of ownership.

Once a system of ownership for texts came into being, once strict rules concerning author’s rights, author-publisher relations, rights of reproduction, and related matters were enacted—at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century—the possibility of transgression attached to the act of writing took on, more and more, the form of an imperative peculiar to literature. It is as if the author, beginning with the moment at which he was placed in the system of property that characterises our society, compensated for the status that he thus acquired by rediscovering the old bipolar field of discourse, systematically practising transgression and thereby restoring danger to a writing which was now guaranteed the benefits of ownership.²⁹

I'm not utterly convinced by Foucault's explanation, though he has certainly pinpointed a phenomenon neglected by everyone before him. I would suggest that prose fiction—enjoying the sacred status of religion inherent in poetry and drama, but motivated by a new documentary urge to record aspects of life previously neglected—awakened contradictory expectations from its public. There is certainly a ceremonial side to literature, to all the arts, symbolized by the French Academy, say, or the Académie des Beaux Arts. There is a minister of culture in most countries, a budget for the arts, the arts define each nationalism, the key works of literature establish the best style in the language, inscriptions on tombs are drawn from literature, and so on.

But there is an equal and opposite tendency toward investigation, muckraking, revelation, toward speaking for the disenfranchised or the silent. In literature this scandalous, politically combative aspect of fiction arises with the bourgeois author, the writer who is no longer dependent on an aristocratic sponsor but who can live from selling his works to a large, anonymous public, a public that is also usually middle class. This is a public that creates, as a parallel to the notion of progress in technology, a corresponding idea of the avant-garde in art—an idea that institutionalizes the transgressive, that sacralizes the scandalous, an idea summed up by the title of the key critical work about abstract expressionism, Harold Rosenberg's *Tradition of the New*.³⁰

Just as so much of the “progress” or at least development in painting from the early Renaissance until the invention of photography was in the direction of greater realism—that is, a closer approximation of art and life, whether in the rendering of three-dimensionality, of atmospheric conditions, of human anatomy, of forms and lines (seen near and far, in sunlight or in fog), or of the very act of perception—in the same way “progress” or at least development in literary creation was associated with either an unsparing analysis of the passions

(Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* [1816]), a depiction of unexciting, middle-class life and its squalid experiments with romance and adultery (Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* [1857]), or an evocation of immorality (Émile Zola's *Nana* [1880]).

Gay fiction has always been an important tributary to this flood. Proust describes cruising in his chapter on Charlus and Jupien; he also talks about male brothels, sadomasochism, social climbing through homosexuality, a lesbian couple's compulsion to desecrate the sacred memory of an otherwise beloved parent, and the secret signals by which homosexuals recognize each other in *le grand monde*. Here he is as objective, as scientific, as entomological as Honoré Balzac, which is to say, not very scientific at all. Only people who have not read Balzac recently can imagine that his melodramatic plots resemble reality. Balzac set the melodramatic precedent for Proust, especially when he goes over the top in his supposedly accurate descriptions of a kept woman's suicide. In one of his best-known works, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, we read of the death of Lucien de Rubempré's mistress. Esther knows that Lucien is going to marry another woman for her money. She decides to make a noble gesture, to commit suicide and leave him a small fortune she's acquired; she thinks that if she only had seven or eight millions Lucien would marry her. On the fatal day her friend Val Noble arrives with two pearls. Esther throws one at her greyhound Romeo. "His name destined him to die thus!" said Esther, and threw the pearl, which Romeo crunched between his teeth. The dog uttered no cry, he spun round and fell in the rigidity of death. This happened while Esther was still speaking her brief elegy."³¹ At five that evening Esther dresses up as a bride in a lace dress and a white satin skirt. She receives Lucien for the last time, gives a big party, swallows the other pearl, and dies before learning that she has by coincidence just inherited the seven millions that would have won her happiness with Lucien in marriage. A criminal called Trompe-

la-Mort forges Esther's will to make sure that Lucien receives the money, as the dead woman would have wanted.

In American literature, similarly, realism begins with Hawthorne and Melville, but Hawthorne's stories are so allegorical that they must be treated as mystical fables; and Melville, despite his accurate and detailed descriptions of sailing and whaling, presents actions and dialogue inspired by Shakespeare and the King James version of the Bible, in other words a highly stylized version of reality at odds with the documentary urge found elsewhere in the same books. We could even say, along with the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, that much of the force of these works derives from the "dialogic" encounter between quite different genres of literature, between competing voices and styles.³²

All I'm trying to suggest is that realism is never simple, that it is always shot through with fantasy and melodrama, but that as a horizon toward which writers march it has long fascinated novelists, perhaps especially gay novelists. Genet, for instance, is anything but a documentary realist, but his descriptions of gay Montmartre or of prison routine are the best records of these phenomena we have from his period. Similarly, John Rechy is a lyric novelist akin to the Beats, but his *City of Night*³³ also remains the best study of the gay underworld of the late fifties in America. Nor is this function of gay fiction by any means exhausted. If I just mention three books at random that I've read recently, you'll see what I mean: Samuel R. Delany's *The Mad Man*,³⁴ a frightening novel, is the story of a black middle-class American who has sex with homeless men, white and black. It is so compelling partly because it makes voyeurs out of its readers; if we felt it was wholly invented from the imagination we would read it with much less horrified interest. Similarly, *Crystal Boys* by Pai Hsien-Yung,³⁵ although confused and amateurish as a novel, intrigues us because it gives us a glimpse into contemporary gay life in Taiwan among rent boys and other outcasts. Finally,

René de Ceccaty's recent nonfiction book on the lesbian novelist Violette Leduc³⁶ freely mixes his own long obsession with her work with parallel scenes from his own intimate life—a startlingly new way to write personal criticism that enjoys all the queasy-making and exhilarating freedom of gay autofiction.

If gay autofiction does seem slippery and free it does so, I would argue, because it not only embodies the continuing documentary ambitions of the realistic novel, but because it also participates just as actively in a very different tradition, the confession, which is by its very nature religious and exemplary. Most ancient art, whether it is Greek sculpture or Egyptian tomb paintings or the poems from the Greek anthology or African sculpture, had a religious dimension, a social, celebratory aspect, sometimes a funerary function. We must not forget that even the Greek comedies and tragedies were propitiations of the gods. In a Christian context the religious function of art continued in every domain until the eighteenth century.

I think it was the nineteenth century English art critic Arthur Symonds who called art “spilt religion.” Certainly the *philosophy* of art was dominated by spiritual if not strictly religious thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries down to our own days.

Today what has happened is that the two traditions of realism and spirituality have come together, and they exert strangely unequal and contradictory pressures on the artist or on the consumer of art.

One of the key figures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the artist-martyr. Perhaps the prototype is Van Gogh, the inspired genius tormented by madness who manages to sell just one painting during his lifetime.³⁷ Or we are drawn to the life of Antonin Artaud, the madman whose body was wracked by electroshock administered by hostile psychiatrists, whose final work is nothing but a scream, whose grandiose and influential ideas about the theater of cruelty foundered

into madness. Or we prefer to read about the life of Fernando Pessoa (his nonlife) than to read his poetry.

Today the artist is a saint who writes his own life. The fusion of autobiography and fiction has been a slow process, still not entirely achieved. Writers have always drawn on their own experience, of course, but usually in highly disguised forms, or they have written straightforward confessions, although any sustained look at Rousseau's *Confessions* or Benjamin Constant's *Journaux Intimes* will show how devious or partial even such so-called "full disclosures" can be.

We should not forget that the first autobiography in English was the confessions of Margery Kempe, a would-be saint of the fourteenth century³⁸ (and, perhaps not coincidentally *Margery Kempe* is the title and subject of an extraordinary new gay novel by Robert Glück).³⁹ Going even farther back, we could mention Saint Augustine's *Confessions*.

The autobiographical urge, from its very beginnings, has been the site where two codes—the realistic and the spiritual—have crossed. If Arthur Schopenhauer, for instance, placed biography and autobiography above history (if still below poetry), he did so because he felt biography—and especially autobiography—"in a narrow sphere shows us the conduct of men in all its nuances and forms, the excellence, the virtue, and even the holiness of individuals, the perversity, meanness and malice of most, the profligacy of the many."⁴⁰ In other words, whereas history shows us formal long-shot panoramas of crowds—especially armies—autobiography gives us the individual, in all his glowing detail, remarkably free of lies, as Schopenhauer believes, since he contends that writing a confession calls for honesty. The traditional lives of the saints were highly formulaic: the mortifications, the early calling, the doubting friends and family members, finally the decisive, convincing miracles, and the edifying death.

Now the autobiographical novel enjoys the prestige of confession and the freedom of fiction, yet within that rather

vague context there is room for lots of new, concrete, idiosyncratic detail, as long as it does not depart too far from the ideal of the martyr. Genet can question the very roots of our way of perceiving the self, as long as that self is the suffering outcast child who is tortured by society in prison, yet emerges triumphant through his art. Whereas Proust recasts his own sexuality, conceals his Jewish origins, and ascribes a social importance to himself that apparently he did not enjoy, he nevertheless does not fail to portray himself as a martyr to love and to art. For him love is always unreciprocated and his book is a long dissection of hopeless passion, just as the book itself is a testament to his own martyrdom to art.

By now you're probably annoyed with all my second thoughts, perhaps the very abundance of my theory-spinning, but I can't resist adding here that I am rather dubious about my entire enterprise today. When one attempts to relate the history of art to the history of society, has one really said anything? Paul Veyne, the great historian, has given us this warning in *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* He asserts that to relate literary history

to society is an undertaking that no one has accomplished and which is perhaps less false than empty. The historicity of literary history is not there. It resides in the enormous unconscious changes that over three centuries have affected what we have not ceased to designate with the illusory words "literature," "the beautiful," "taste," and "art." Not only have relationships between literature and society changed; the Beautiful itself, Art itself have been transformed. Indeed, the core of these realities contains nothing immutable to leave to the philosophers. They are historical and not philosophical. There is no core.⁴¹

Undoubtedly the words I have used—realism, spirituality, mimesis—are misleading words and mean something differ-

ent in each epoch, but if my proposals have no historic validity perhaps they at least blaze an imaginary tradition that imaginative artists at least imagine they are following.

If I put aside these scruples for a moment (which I'm not at all certain I'm permitted to do), I might conclude by asking why should homosexual writers be especially drawn to autofiction and its double heritage?

The form itself, which is neither purely fact nor fiction, gives the writer both the prestige of confession (this is my story, only I have the right to tell it, and no one can challenge my authority in this domain) *and* the total freedom of imaginative invention (I'm a novelist, I can say whatever I please, and you can't hold me responsible for the opinions expressed by my characters, nor even by my narrator).

This wavering between authority and unaccountability, this way of saying both "This really happened and I alone have survived to tell the story" *and* "How dare you assume I'm speaking of my own life?"—this doubleness reflects perhaps the unfinished business and ambiguous status of homosexual identity itself. Is that identity an eternal essence, biologically or theologically determined and unvarying, a quiddity that the individual very slowly uncovers within himself? This possibility corresponds to the confessional face of autofiction. Or is homosexuality created by society? Does its very formation mark a stage in the public invasion of the private sphere, in the social colonization of individual consciousness? If so, the novel remains the most fluent way of showing in a dramatic context the dynamic tension between society and the individual. Or yet again is the particular form homosexuality takes in any given era the result of a social elaboration of a biological predisposition? Wouldn't such a formula correspond well to both the creative and the documentary claims of this peculiarly modern literary form?

At this point, in summing up, it would be rhetorically tempting to come out in favor of another possibility, a humanist

reaffirmation of the power of the individual to *shape* his or her identity, to overcome adversity, to impose his or her will on circumstances.

I will not fall prey to this temptation, but I would suggest that the gay novel, in adumbrating the arbitrariness of social conventions, by challenging the “naturalness” of gender roles, by proving how the deviant, sometimes desperate outsider can occasionally realize his desires despite all the force of societal condemnation—that this fictional reconstruction of a historic struggle is one of the most gripping examples we have of dissident literature as well as the one most suited to the genius of autofiction as a genre.

For in the contemporary gay novel, as I’ve tried to show, the alternation between the sacred tradition of exposing an exemplary life (exemplary in its excesses, its courage, its martyrdom) and the secular tradition of documenting a particular life in sensuous fullness and detail, in its social context and in all its idiosyncratic individuality—this alternation best dramatizes the double heritage of gay writing as an *apologia pro vita sua* and as a sexologist’s case history.



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