

Teaching Literature Gay-affirmatively

A homosexual individuation story

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the possibility of a 'homosexual hermeneutic' by which the great literary works of the western canon can be taught. This 'interpretative methodology' is based in the author's own individuation process as gay. The author details his personal journey from engulfment in heteronormativity to the first crisis of his homosexual adolescence whereby he suffers a severe illness and learns, with the help of a teacher, to apprehend the homosexuality hidden in Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser and so on. Psychological problems caused by co-dependency, homophobia and postmodernism eventually lead the author to embark on a gay-centered analysis wherein he learns how to descend into the inner world of internalized homophobia to encounter the 'double' of the transformational psyche. This homosexual death-and-rebirth motif is discussed as ubiquitously present in literature, informing the individuation not just of gay-identified individuals but of all those who seek self-knowledge.

KEYWORDS *gay, gay-affirmative, gay identity, heteronormativity, homosexual, homosexual individuation, literature, postmodern, psychology, toxic shame*

LIKE MANY A proto-gay child, I retreated into a secluded world of books at an early age. In creative works such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby Dick* and *The Hobbit*, I encountered a 'rich and strange' world spiriting me away from my lonely Kansas in the South Bronx to the marble men on a Grecian urn singing of truth and beauty and 'more happy, happy love' (Cook, 2001: 289).

My coming out process asked that I be further removed from the stultifying heterosexual sensibilities of family, extroversion and obligation in which I felt trapped. The year was 1974; I was 13; gay liberation was by then four. The one time I played tackle football I suffered a severe sports injury that sent me to Bronx Einstein hospital. I underwent four agonizing hip operations and

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a year-long recuperation during which I had no choice but to grasp the full and personal meaning of *Moby Dick*. I spent that stormy seclusion in a literary crash-course with Plato, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Spenser, Milton, Nietzsche, and so on. In the quiet of my inner world, reading Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, I was able to intuit a homosexual power hidden between the lines of everything deemed great. 'Tyger, Tyger, burning bright' (Blake, 1982 [1789]: 24) made all the sense in the world when I woke up in the middle of the night with *one of those dreams about the cute doctor again*. Is this what Blake meant when he contrasted 'Songs of Innocence' with 'Songs of Experience'? One day you are in the closet, one day, you are out. J. Alfred Pruffrock's modernist rant,

Let us go then, you and I,
when the evening is spread out against a sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table

(Eliot, 1970: 3)

spoke to me as a homosexual come-on. To become sick in the modern 'wasteland' of my mind helped me to find the 'God of the golden bow' (Cook, 2001: 53). An alchemical tree grows not only in Brooklyn, but in the Bronx too (Jung, 1957 [1916]; 1967 [1929]).

My father raged alcoholically while my mother fueled the flames of his jealous discontent by preferring my blossoming adolescent company to his. The situation engulfed me in 'a floud of poison horrible and blacke/Full of great lumpes of flesh and gobbets raw' (Spenser, quoted in Maclean, 1968: 11). The South Bronx erupted in flames of anti-war riots and racial discontent (I did not know then that this was also the peak time of gay liberation). And yet I found my 'secret sharer'. A New York City High School teacher for the homebound, married to a woman but in retrospect most probably a closeted gay man, noticed how wild-eyed I had become when reading Dickinson: 'And so of larger-Darkness-/Those Evenings of the Brain/-When not a Moon disclose a sign/Or Star-come out-within-' (quoted in Bloom, 1994: 278). I was coming out 'within'. During this period, as I pushed away the pain killers prescribed and instead forged ahead to try to stay awake during this obviously bizarre initiation rite, I had been reading the shamanic tales of Herman Hesse and also *Black Elk Speaks* (Neihardt, 1932); and yet I related most to Portnoy, although with a difference. Could I be? – I could not say the word. The teacher walked me through the readings with rapt attentiveness and did not discourage my questions about the homosexual ethos I noticed even in, of all places, *Middlemarch*. Could George Eliot be in love with Saint Dorothea? My teacher was my first gay guru. Who could find one's homophobic way without one? Entering into my adolescence with an

avalanche of homosexual fantasies so intoxicating that I could no longer deny them, I found an uncanny reflection of my less cowardly self, as odd as it may sound, in Shakespeare's grandiose pageant, *Henry V*.

There I read of the Duke of Exeter recounting a harrowing battle to Henry V, where the near-simultaneous deaths of the heroic Suffolk and youthful York are characterized as a matrimony between the two now-felled warriors. York kisses his friend's wounds with passionate physicality and tells his own ebbing soul to rush and die so that the two may 'fly abreast' to heaven where they shall keep each other's 'company' (Shakespeare, 1969 [1598]: 769). As Exeter poignantly says:

So did he turn, and over Suffolk's neck
He threw his wounded arm, and kissed his lips;
And so, espoused to death, with blood he sealed
A testament to noble-ending love.

(*Henry V*, IV. vi. 23)

We also read *As You Like It*. My teacher mentioned that in Shakespeare's time all of the female characters were played by boys or men. Here is how strange this seemed: 'Rosalind' is played by a boy, but spends much of the play disguised as 'Ganymede'. (I would learn later that Ganymede was 'code' for 'homosexual' – Saslow, 1986). I thought it outrageous that 'Rosalind'/'Ganymede', or the boy actor who played them both, was offering to kiss the male members of the audience. They did not teach *this* Shakespeare in school:

If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not. And I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths will for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell. (*As You Like It*, V. iv. 294. Shakespeare, 1969 [1598]: 273)

In the all-male worlds of *Troilus and Cressida* (1603) and *Coriolanus* (1608) mutual male aggression met with much magnetic masculine attraction. Caius Marcius, in *Coriolanus*, intercepts the consul Cominius, fleeing the bloody battle, using the language of sexual consummation to describe the capture:

O, let me clip ye
In arms as sound as when I wooed, in heart
As merry as when our nuptial day was done,
And tapers burn to bedward!

(*Coriolanus*, I. vi. 28. Shakespeare, 1969 [1608]: 1222)

Once back to school, and without my teacher and my guide, I felt caught like a spider in the web of heteronormativity and 'toxic shame' (Bradshaw, 1988). Reluctantly, I retreated into my personal closet. It was not until I left home and began reading Nietzsche as a literary figure that my gay identity flowered yet again. Nietzsche was so much more real (gay) than Majister Ludi

or Don Juan. During my first relationship with a man at 18, I imagined Nietzsche counseling me not to feel guilty: 'What does your conscience say? You should become who you are' (Nietzsche, quoted in Frey-Rohn, 1989: 62). When I read, 'Everyone has his good day, when he finds his higher self . . . Many . . . fear their higher self because, when it speaks, it speaks demandingly' (1989: 61), I equated 'demandingly' with the force of my heart and penis wed together the first time I kissed a man.

Nietzsche seemed to have found the whole tradition of moral values that had been force-fed to everyone to be morally repulsive and scientifically untenable. The only ethical thing that could be done was to deconstruct the heady mess and call for the 'Death of God' and the 'transvaluation of all values' (quoted in Kaufmann, 1974: 96–120; also see Nietzsche, 1966 [1892]: 27). This body emerged as a new teacher and guide: 'But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body' (Nietzsche, 1966 [1892]: 34). 'God is dead', Nietzsche declared in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1966 [1892]: 12). 'I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome' (1966 [1892]: 12), and later, 'The overman is the meaning of the earth' (1966 [1892]: 13). I had no idea what the overman meant. Everyone criticized the figure. I secretly lusted after him. And a question nagged at me when I read these lines: 'Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage – whose name is self. In your body he dwells: he is your body' (1966 [1892]: 34). Was Nietzsche gay? He never proclaimed any sexuality directly. If anything, his furtive efforts to marry Lou Salome indicated to me that he was probably a 'closeted homosexual' trying to conform in Prussian society (despite how some greedy scholars still persist in trying to fit Nietzsche into a straight-jacket through any crumb they can obtain). But insidious homophobia compromises our capacity to read same-sex desire between the obscuring lines.

There is, for example, Nietzsche's aversion to heteronormative relating: 'But that which the all-too-many, the superfluous, call marriage – alas, what shall I name that? . . . Alas, this filth of the soul in pair!' (1966 [1892]: 70). And then, 'What child would not have cause to weep over such parents' (1966 [1892]: 70). Instead, he valorizes things this way: 'Behold, here dances the last gay man' (1966 [1892]: 243). In fact his veneration of masculine friendship as the redemptive antidote to the mean-spirited '*resentiment*' (1966 [1892]: 127) of the Christian 'mass man' seemed not unlike the uncanny attitude I read about simultaneously in the also-closeted Walt Whitman. Speaking differently than Whitman, Nietzsche nonetheless seemed, at least to me, to honor a similar type of male-male love:

Friendship . . . in classical antiquity, friendship was experienced deeply and strongly . . .
In this consists their headstart before us: we, on the other hand, have developed idealized

love between the sexes. All the great virtues of the ancients were founded on this, that man stood next to man, and that no woman could claim to be the nearest, the highest, or . . . the only one whom he loved . . . Perhaps our trees do not grow so high because of the ivy and the vines. (Cited in Kaufmann, 1974: 233)

My own tree was stunted by the drought of homophobia. The time saw the arrival of AIDS, Reaganomics and the 'French Wave' of critical theory. I found myself allying with the chic postmodernism of the time, believing that this brand of nihilism was what Nietzsche willed. The intellectual ideas in postmodernist discourse that swept into the lives of young gay intellectuals such as myself attacked the universality of any view that 'truth' existed, insisting that concepts such as 'essence' and 'soul' were tools of unjust power. The taxonomic categories of 'homosexuality' and 'gay identity' were analyzed as little more than modern inventions (Weeks, 1991) that could not reasonably be applied to people like Plato and Shakespeare. How could I argue with seeming common sense? My gay idealism faded. I began to feel that there was no coherence to existence. If there was anything 'borderline' in my fragmentary sense of self, postmodernism exploited it. I handled the problem by becoming an AIDS activist/journalist and getting 'married' to a young performance artist. I enjoyed dialectical materialism by day, codependent fusion by night.

Five years of living repressively compromised my functioning. I could not 'fix' my problems, no matter how much I 'willed' to do so, because they arose from my unconscious. I sought the help of a gay-centered therapist. Coming to terms with inner chaos through my dreams and fantasies exposed a nefarious inner world dominated by parental complexes. I suffered nightmares of being a concentration camp victim. I saw the persecutory flights as symbolic of my psychic reality as a gay man fascistically trapped in an inner hell of his loving mother. I had to descend into the Panopticon (Foucault, 1991) of my mind if I were to stand up to my oppressors. I woke up to a realization that I had always intuited but never experienced: an inner world existed of its own right, independent of outer reality, with its own rules, values, and eros. I learned that if this libido were actively engaged and assisted through psychoanalytic self-discourse (called 'inner work' and 'active imagination'), the encounter with the unconscious would result in a fateful expansion and 'ensoulment' of my then very enfeebled personality, strengthened in terms of a greater coherence and the slow realization of a creative aptitude I had never before known I possessed.

I became familiar with the scholarly work of psychologist Mitch Walker, who built on the classical Jungian concept that the 'soul' is an erotic figure who lives inside the unconscious, and is projected unselfconsciously onto the love object. Challenging Jung's homophobia, Walker advanced the concept

that for gay men, this mesmerizing soul personality ‘moving in the depths’ exists in homosexual form, as a same-sex: a double (Walker, 1976; 1991). This archetype takes three forms: the partner, youth-adult, and competitor. To help facilitate my fascination with the haunting psychic double, an interest was cultivated in me to learn about my gay ‘forebears’, to read some of the basic literature on ‘gay spirituality’ (Grahn, 1984; also see Thompson, 1987). I started to learn in a more ‘naïve’ and elemental way, deconstructing skepticism as a form of internalized homophobia. I discovered how to honor the inferior feeling function as the doorway into a truer intellectual honesty and integrity, not the disembodied ‘thinking’ I, like so many other so-called intellectuals, retreated into.

I learned that many visionaries throughout human history saw homosexuality as culturally significant, as the basis of philosophy: Whitman, 1982 [1891–92]; democracy (Carpenter, 1921); free thought (Ulrichs, 1994 [1864]); personal healing (Hirshfeld, 2002), and social transformation (Hay, 1996). Plato (in the *Symposium*) espoused homosexual love as uniting the ‘heavenly’ (that is, psychological) form of marriage that procreates ‘children’ of the mind in the form of art, poetry and wisdom, thus setting the foundation for Walt Whitman’s celebration of the ‘dear love of man for his comrades, the attraction of friend to friend’ as the ‘Base of All Metaphysics’ (Whitman, 1982 [1891–92]: 275). Harry Hay, the principal cofounder in 1950 of the first successful gay liberation organization in North America, the Mattachine Society, grounded his own efforts in these ideas to initiate a political movement based on ‘subject–subject consciousness’ – the concept that gay people, in contrast to heterosexuals, have the proclivity to treat others as subjects like themselves (that is, in a loving and empathic way) rather than as competitors and objects to dominate and kill, thereby modeling a key liberationist attitude desperately needed in a violence-wracked society (Hay, 1996: 182–215).

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It has taken me more than two decades of work as a client, therapist and now as the director of the first specialization in LGBT studies in a clinical psychology program, to recover from the attacks on gay identity, mounted equally by postmodernism and my unfinished family business, to develop my own ‘subject–subject’ consciousness sourced in the thunderous power of gay love. I have realized that to teach literature gay affirmatively I have had to struggle in a psychological way with the mean-spirited ‘jester’ and victimized ‘ropewalker’ (Nietzsche, 1966 [1892]) of my own internalized homophobia ongoingly, and in fact to deal with this struggle as the main subjective ‘data’ by which literature can be read and taught.

Working with my unfinished family business, and learning how to alchemically partner what Jungian psychology calls the ‘personal shadow’, has served me as well in other teaching venues, such as in my psychotherapy practice. Gay-affirmative psycho-education in psychotherapy emerges as an indispensable pedagogical tool in confronting the ongoing crisis of assimilation cancerously plaguing gay self-esteem in ways not always detectable. I have additionally been instrumental in founding the Institute for Contemporary Uranian Psychoanalysis, a non-profit educational organization in Los Angeles which offers required continuing education courses on gay-centered psychology to licensed psychotherapists. There, with my colleague psychotherapist Chris Kilbourne, I have explored these canonical works as anticipatory mirrors helping students of literature and psychotherapy to realize the full archetypal breadth and erotic maturity of gay identity in ways still inconceivable to most of us today. I have focused in those talks (and in this essay) on gay male dynamics and potentialities, but I am certain these concerns can be extrapolated to lesbians too.

My journey to become a functioning and self-loving gay person via, and sometimes in spite of, literature has helped me to discover inside my own process a post-postmodern methodology for honoring what I would call ‘gay essence’, and thereby to appreciate what could be called the ancient Hindu teaching of Shiva, albeit in modern gay liberation terms. As Shiva gaily tells us:

I am not distinct from the phallos.
The phallos is identical with me.
It draws my faithful to me.
And therefore must be worshipped.
Whenever there is an upright male organ,
I, myself, am present, even if there is no other representation of me.

(Cited in Monick, 1987: 29)

The Whitmanesque ‘myth of meaning’ I am spinning here has helped me to stay alive, to connect ‘the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss’ (Whitman, 1982 [1891–92]: 271) with the leaves of grass which are the natural forces of my mind. Because this ‘archetypal’ perspective on the unfolding nature of homosexual identity works for me, I feel it can reasonably be taught to others who yearn for more than postmodernism’s materialism and who wish to further actualize their hidden gay potential through existential encounter with one’s unexpressed trauma. I have found that it has helped individuating gay men to see their homosexual wrestling match with the shadow mirrored in the unfolding world process (Hegel, 1991 [1822]). One place in which the evolution of gay consciousness as the delicious fruit of psychological inner work can be witnessed objectively is, oddly enough, in the western canon.

As literature progressively moves from the first recorded piece up until Nietzsche, who writes the very first book on gay depth psychology, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we can see the movement of homosexual archetypes aiding and abetting the rise of gay subjectivity, first in gay people, and then in others.

Starting with Sappho's invocation of a different kind of Aphrodite than what we see in Homer (she is more of a sisterly aid and less mean-spirited), we can witness the gay feminine further differentiated in Plato's conception of two Aphrodites. The Heavenly sort, Urania, who blesses same-sex love and procreation, can be seen in literature as the spirit of the 'pastoral' as well as the 'magical'. This form of the goddess of love can be contrasted with the common sort, Dione, who officiates over biological procreation. The masculine double appears in the first recorded piece of writing, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, saturating the initiatory love relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and the heroic quest that sees Gilgamesh descend into the underworld to find his dead lover. In Homer, the partner aspect of the double archetype flowers in the romantic-heroic-tragic relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, while the competitor aspect of the double is seen in the often sexualized hatred between Achilles and Hector.

These two archetypes – the double and Aphrodite Urania – come together auspiciously in Virgil, in particular in his infamous *Second or Corydon Eclogue: The Lament of Corydon for his Faithless Alexis*. There the royal Corydon, in love with a catamite, begs, 'Come, live with me and be my love in my simple pastoral home' (Fone, 1998: 67), and later continues, 'Ah, Alexis, my love, my lad/Come to my arms, and have the gifts which nymphs prepare' (1998: 67). This union of magical romance with homosexual incestuous love peaks in Ovid's story of the rape of Ganymede by Zeus: 'The king of the gods once loved a Trojan boy/Named Ganymede . . . He made himself an eagle, the only bird/Able to bear his thunderbolts, went flying/on his false wings, and carried off the youngster' (Fone, 1998: 69).

The *Divine Comedy* can be regarded as Dante's descent into the underworld to birth a double relationship (Virgil is Dante's friend and guide through hell) via the auspices of the divine feminine. If we regard Beatrice as an imaginary dream-figure, as the shining light of Sophia, who herself is the mere manifestation of an even greater light, that of the divine Lucy, and not as a heterosexual lover but as 'she who confers blessing', the tale emerges as a testament not to Christian orthodoxy but to gnostic self-realization, culminating in the alchemical image of Ezekiel's vision of the wheels and their work, the Chariot and the Enthroned Man.

Although overt homosexuality does not fare well in Chaucer, one could say that the Chaucer of 'endless good nature' who believes everything he hears, 'and has an amazing capacity for admiring even the dreadful qualities

displayed by some of his twenty-nine companions' (Bloom, 1994: 103) is a type of 'gay' figure, embodying 'subject–subject consciousness'. He anticipates, according to Harold Bloom, the fundamentals of 'depth psychology' (1994: 105), by creating characters who go deep inside the nether world of mind to unleash a vitality matched only by Hamlet, Falstaff and Sancho Panza.

If Harold Bloom celebrates Shakespeare as the 'inventor of the human' (Bloom, 1998), is it not possible to consider him also 'the inventor of the gay human'? The Sonnets tell the story of the 'growth, maturity and decline of a passionate affair' (Fone, 1998: 189) and as one scholar says, 'a physical relationship between the two men' (1998: 189). The poet is addicted to his man in Sonnet 57: 'But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought/Save where you are how happy you make those' (1998: 191) until the relationship sours in Sonnet 87: 'Farewell! Thou art too dear for my possessing,/And like enough thou know'st thy estimate' (1998: 192). The Shakespeare of his Sonnets, at the risk of modernist anachronism, sounds a lot like the gay men I see today in my practice. Here homosexual individuation is motivated by the projection of a double onto a beloved who then betrays the lover. There is the need to 'own' the double-projection as sourced inside one's unconscious. From this view, Don Quixote can be seen as Sancho Panza's double, the phallic 'master' whom he loves and for whom he would risk his life, as a personification of his unconscious double in homosexual form.

Milton follows in Shakespeare's footsteps by humanizing the problem of evil in the sexualized figure of Satan, the quintessential rebel fashioned after Achilles. God and Satan can be metaphorized as the ego and the unconscious in a homosexual wrestling match. My favorite teaching moment in Milton takes place in *Paradise Regained*, when Satan tempts God into turning gay during the famous banquet scene, citing Alexander and Scipio as individuals unsusceptible to heterosexual temptations, and then continues to further tantalize Christ with a moving cinematic *tableau* that includes 'Tall stripling youths rich clad, of fairer hew/Then *Ganymede* or *Hylas*' (Shawcross, 1971: 543).

Spenser's *Faerie Queene* depicts an Arcadian realm 'outside the binding law of the Christian dispensation, one in which men were allowed free play of homoerotic feelings' (Fone, 1998: 157), an interweaving of the double archetype with that of Aphrodite Urania that reaches a crescendo in Book 4 of *The Faerie Queene* with the description of the 'thousand payre of lovers' in the Temple of Avenue. To me, this epic evokes a world so sensually exquisite and erotically miraculous that anyone who comes into contact with its unfolding story feels transcendentally transported to a royal realm inhabited by a Faerie Queen who 'sendeth light from farre/To all, that in the wide deepe wandering erre' (Spenser, cited in Wofford, 2001: 110).

Here it may be useful to note that Wilfred Owen, himself a homosexual, wrote of having evoked the *Faerie Queene* in the thick of battle to conjure in his otherwise wracked mind the healing 'realm of Avalon, and the peace of Arthur, and where Lancelot heals him of his grievous wound' (Hadfield, 2001: 1). Another officer is said to have read the *Faerie Queene* to men who knew they were to die in battle. 'The men did not understand the words, but the poetry had a soothing influence upon them' (2001: 1). What is so soothing is the royal realm of Aphrodite Urania, as the feminine archetypal presence in gay male psychology. Her beneficence shines down upon all who turn introvertedly inside. There, now more open as a man, they can find the friend of self-realization. Or as Nietzsche so well put it: 'Have you ever seen your friend asleep – and found out how he looks? What is the face of your friend anyway? It is your own face in a rough and imperfect mirror' (Nietzsche, 1966 [1892]: 56).

I hope that the frank tone of this essay has not biased the reader not initiated into a psychoanalytic world-view to dismiss my effort as narcissistic. My own personal struggle over the last 30 years to find my voice as a gay person after having been damaged by the inculcation of familial heterosexism, and later by postmodernism, is, I believe, representative of a serious predicament corrupting the education of young gay people today. Homosexuality is not just a form of sexuality, which it is, but also a 'hermeneutic', or a theory of understanding, sprinkling the water of renewing life on the dormant seed of individuation resident in every human being vis-à-vis the double archetype: 'Your wild dogs want freedom; they bark with joy in their cellar when your spirit plans to open all prisons' (Nietzsche, 1966 [1892]: 43).

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