# Undressing Literary History: The Censorship of Same-Sex Desire

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*The area that seems to have been quite persistently controlled up to the present day is that of sexual non-normativity. A clear expression of the still-present unspeakability of same-sex desire – as an instance of such non-normativity – is seen in the different ways of censoring literature representing same-sex desire.*

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Perhaps the issues addressed in this article may no longer appear particularly relevant, especially at a time when gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, and queer (GLBTIQ) issues are characteristically said to have been largely mainstreamed and, at least in the West, relatively emancipated. Indeed, has not the gay and lesbian affirmative, with its demands for positive representation, prevailed? Moreover, we live at a time when, as Michael Warner puts it, "most gay people want in-laws, not outlaws" ("Boys and the Banned"). Surely the times of the explicit censorship of same-sex contents of works known from literary history are definitely over? Yet, why is it that the Slovenian title of the performance of Copi's play *L'homosexuel ou la difficulté de s'exprimer* (1971), held in September 2007 at the most prestigious Slovenian cultural centre, only retained the second part of its original title?[1]

Therefore I would like to consider some (mostly Slovenian) cases of what I see as more or less implicit and discreet examples of censorship by criticism and omission: examples of glossing over, refusing to acknowledge, or repressing same-sex desire in literary texts. Let us call this practice what it is: attempts to control the circulation of ideas in a society and to confine the influence of those that were (deemed) potentially harmful through implicit and retroactive critical censorship. In other words, I would like to investigate how the "integrity" of literature can be – and often is – subject to various manipulations. Also, to refer to the title of the

colloquium where a version of this article was first presented, I examine how fear of the "truth" of literature can be sustained by notions such as homophobia and heterosexism that are so deeply embedded in the discourse that it might be hard to maintain that these phenomena are wholly conscious. Depending on how you look at it, this could possibly be even worse.

I would argue along with John Corvino that double standards in the discourses on hetero- and homosexuality are kept firmly in place, both in their everyday manifestations and in their academic/critical ones. Thus with heterosexuality we are always interested in a wide range of issues, whereas with homosexuality it is all about sex; heterosexuals have relationships, homosexuals have sexual affairs; heterosexuals have lives, homosexuals have lifestyles; heterosexuals have a moral vision, homosexuals have an agenda.

Censors have occasionally tried hard to erase any trace of same-sex desire, and sometimes they have literally done so. Thomas Gray's (1716–71) correspondence from the period of his romantic attachment to Henry Tuthill was selectively destroyed, and William Mason, his first editor and biographer, erased Tuthill's name from some of the remaining letters (*My Dear Boy* 98). However, more often these attempts have not been quite so blunt. Nowadays they live on chiefly in the academic and critical worlds of textbooks, anthologies, studies, and reviews. What is more, the contemporary censorship of same-sex desire is often difficult to prove, because most of it happens through various forms of critical or market interventions. Furthermore, there are very thin lines between censorship on the grounds of homoeroticism, homosexuality, obscenity, pornography, paedophilia, and blasphemy.[2]

Graham Robb notes that much historical/personal/biographical evidence has been destroyed and that "the standard of proof demanded of biographers is far stricter for homosexual than for heterosexual subjects" (137). However, when Jonathan Dollimore asks "Which is the more effective in keeping the peace: blunt state censorship of 'dangerous' texts, or 'safe' interpretations of supposedly 'respectable' ones", he reminds us that "to ban a book is to guarantee its place in cultural history", and notes that "more effective censorship arises with … benign interpretations" (95).[3] He maintains that "some of the most effective censors of art have been its most earnest defenders" (97).

However, there is another, enormously important strategy: silence. A refusal to speak about something can be just as censorious – and perhaps even more effective – as explicit prohibitions. As regards the topic of same-sex desire, this is only too pertinent. How to speak about a phenom-

enon traditionally referred to by the Latin formula *peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum* (that horrible crime not to be named among Christians), also known as the *peccatum mutum* (silent sin)? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, accordingly, draws a clear parallel between the openly repressive projects of censorship and the dismissive knowingness based on the mechanism of the open secret, which comes from "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 interpretative consequences" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 53). The same author notes that too many academics (including liberal ones) "simply neither ask nor know." However, the need for dismissals does occasionally arise and Sedgwick somewhat sarcastically sums them up in eight points:

> 1. Passionate language of same-sex attraction was extremely common during whatever period is under discussion – and therefore must have been completely meaningless. Or
> 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 1869 – 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. (52–53)

Let me begin my analysis with two earlier examples of censorship-by-criticism that show how criticism that "in its time … seemed … the height of good judgement … obviously right and sensible" can, in a couple of decades, seem myopic and outdated (Dollimore 95–96). Having said that, it has to be emphasized that the circumstances of each of the examples have to be taken into account; after all, homosexuality was only decriminalized in Slovenia in 1977.

Shakespeare's sonnets have been one of the most frequent sites of the type of censorship I am talking about. When John Benson published a heterosexualized version of Shakespeare's sonnets in 1640[4] he made explicit what others following him have tried to do implicitly: "As soon as the accurate text of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* was restored in the late eighteenth century, scholars systematically began to deny their homosexuality" (Cady 152).[5] I am not suggesting, however, that Shakespeare or his sonnets could be termed homosexual, let alone gay in their own historical context, but it is obvious that the texts can be, and have been, perceived as expressing same-sex desire by later readers, and that is why certain critics have gone to almost incredible lengths to try to explain that possibility away.

One of the most prominent Slovenian literary scholars, writing in 1965 on Shakespeare's sonnets, maintains, "it is more than unlikely that the feeling [between the speaker and the male addressee] could be more than friendly; that is, homoerotic" (Kos 95). He then engages in spiralling historical, social, moral, and other explanations of why the fact that the majority of the sonnets are devoted to a man, not a woman, is not as suspicious as it may first appear. With a premise like this, the conclusions cannot be surprising. However, it is interesting to observe how the critic remains locked in conspicuous interpretative amplifications, avoiding at all costs the possibility of what could be "unnatural and almost incomprehensible, if not also unheard of" (97).

Another author, writing in the same year, is less cautious about granting the reader the possibility of conceiving the first 124 sonnets as expressive of same-sex desire. However, he reveals the same censorious attitudes in slightly different modes. The male addressee is practically always referred to as the "friend", whereas the female one is the "lover" (Menart xi). Moreover, when discussing the nature of the relationship between the two men, the author reaches the point at which he has to address "a rather difficult question"; namely, "what was the 'love' between the friend and the poet like – platonic or otherwise?" The word love is, to be sure, between quotation marks. Even though the author does not think that "platonic" is a satisfying label (he sees the spirit of the sonnets to be "positively on the side of excessive friendly affection and sometimes even more"), he gets "the feeling that the sonnets could be written to a woman" (Menart xiv). Here we are on a familiar ground again: it is only heterosexual love that deserves to be called love (without quotation marks). A poet such as Shakespeare cannot be guilty of "inverted love", so the critic has to find a way around it (*xiv*). So, it is just as we expected: "I have the feeling", the critic reveals to us, "that Shakespeare had mostly wished for pure, even if excessive friendly love, and that it was his friend who dragged him into

something more" (xv). There we are: Shakespeare's honour is saved. Any doubts? Anyone?

From Shakespeare I would like to move on to more contemporary examples of critical analysis of writers whose homosexuality is today widely accepted as fact. When speculating on the sexual aspect of Walt Whitman's life, a critic/translator (writing in 1989) weighs arguments in favour of either the homosexual or heterosexual orientation of the poet, and before going on to say that "today it is no longer all that relevant what Whitman's attitude to men was like", he gives the following as the main argument *against* the poet's homosexuality: "Homosexuality is contradicted by Whitman's cosmopolitan spirituality and cosmic love – the intimate devotion to all living beings" (Mozetič, "Whitman" 110). It is perhaps somewhat difficult to be sure about what this comment is supposed to signify exactly, but it seems again that "cosmopolitan spirituality and cosmic love" are qualities only available to heterosexuals. This is particularly striking because the critic does acknowledge the effect Whitman's homoeroticism had on the hypocritical contemporary American society. However, when it comes to Whitman's biography, "all the heated polemics on his abnormal sexual inclination" (109) cannot convince the critic.[6]

Writing in 1994 in a prestigious series on translated poetry, the same critic, discussing W. H. Auden, exemplifies how double standards are still brought into play. It often appears as if biographical interpretations were entirely valid and acceptable when it comes to philosophical, religious, national, racial, gender (especially if it is a woman poet), and similar questions, but much less so when it comes to non-normative sexualities. In Auden, "autobiographical elements are practically not to be found" (Mozetič, "Auden" 92). I find this in itself a questionable statement, but it becomes even more so when the critic goes on to say that "even his most intimate love poetry … can entirely possibly be read as a universal form of human relationships" (92–93). Of course, it may be "entirely possible", but this gives an uneasy impression (especially to paranoid readers like myself) that the critic thinks it would be somehow *preferable* (or more *acceptable*) to read it in that way, as if heterosexual love poetry were simply love poetry, whereas even the most intimate same-sex love poetry was almost out of necessity about something else, something to do with "universal forms of human relationships".

To go with this view, there is a biographical chart of Auden's life and work included at the end of the book. The entry for 1935 includes "Marriage to Erika Mann" (Mozetič, "Življenje" 117) without characterizing this pro-forma marriage in any way. What makes this controversial is the fact that Auden's relationships with men do not merit any explicit

mention in that same chart. Arguably his most important intimate relationship – with Chester Kallman, his partner for over 30 years – is only approached indirectly (118–20). A reader like me is likely to protest here again: why is a reportedly unconsummated marriage more relevant to a poet's life and his poetry than a relationship that without doubt had ineradicable influences on both?[7]

Same-sex desire and relationships are often seen as trivial, or even as instances of attention-seeking. In a biography of Oscar Wilde, a chapter on his homosexuality is thus simply entitled "Being Different at Any Cost" (Čater 74). The writer of the biography furthermore suggests that Wilde only engaged in homosexuality "to do something provocative", and that it was not something related to his "nature". "Perhaps nowadays he would not be all that interested in men at all" (75). And this is within a relatively sympathetic portrait; imagine those which are less sympathetic.

The following examples are all from the last couple of years. First I wish to consider a contemporary Slovenian book reviewer. Having given a brief outline of David Sedaris's book *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, the reviewer goes on to say that "the fact that the main character of the stories is gay is totally irrelevant". Wait a second! Why are you mentioning it then? But the answer is promptly given and it seems that the previous statement functions as a trigger to disqualify the label "gay literature": "And, thank God, nobody forces the label of 'gay literature' onto this book", she writes (Hrastar, "Sedaris"). Now this calls for a bit of attention. Why is "gay literature" such a stigmatizing (even degrading) label that even some gay writers refuse to use it?

This is the same reviewer six months earlier, writing on David Leavitt's *Family Dancing*: "It is becoming increasingly apparent that the definition of the genre of gay literature is burdened by the perception of the reader: if readers want to see only homosexual issues, they will see them; otherwise a book is just a book" (Hrastar "Leavitt"). Without going into the definitions of gay literature, or what "*only* homosexual issues are", I should like to explore the logic behind these statements (for which the present reviewer's work is simply a convenient example).

Does this view not remind us of the lamentations of certain types of criticism, saying that it is irrelevant whether there is any homoeroticism in a text or not, because this has no significance for our reading (namely, "a book is just a book")? That is why our interpretations should not be "burdened" with homoeroticization. The criteria of "universal values" thus remain largely unstated. It has often been argued that such "universality" is often implicitly opposed to homosexuality and only compatible with heterosexuality; indeed, opposite-sex desire seems to be its prerequisite.

However, this is a hotly disputed issue, even among GLBTIQ writers. Thus Bruce Bawer maintains that "every writer or artist – male or female, black or white, gay or straight – is part of the common human heritage; the obvious corollary to the misguided idea that a gay writer belongs specifically to gay readers is that a straight writer's work belongs *less* to a gay reader than to a straight reader" (cited in Sinfield, *Gay* 112). In contrast, Alan Sinfield answers that "'the common human heritage' is predominantly heterosexist, and that, as a matter of fact, gay readers often *do* feel excluded from heteronormative works" (Sinfield *Gay* 112).

Sinfield, on the other hand, rejects the notion of disinterested, or – as it is often called – "universal" reading. There is no such thing as "a central reading … which we all call the meaning of the text"; rather, "central" means merely "another, rather arrogant, subculture" (Sinfield, *Cultural Politics* 65). In this context, Sinfield also argues against the presumptions of traditional literary criticism with regard to its suppression of homosexuality. Sinfield is interested in "what viewers and readers bring to texts" and, in so doing, how they co-create them. This they do "in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a result of their particular social location" (65). If an individual's "particular social location" happens to be gayness, then such a reader will clash with the traditional notions of criticism, which "never has had 'reason to see any homosexuality'", and where "the possibility of gay readers is not entertained; 'the sympathetic and sensitive reader …' is heterosexual by definition" (61). A specific "reading position", in this instance a gay reading position, might thus first of all indicate, on principle, a stance against the definition of literature "as that which is not homosexual" (62). At a more practical critical level, such a position may be aimed at violating the notion of discretion as something that is "beneficial to literary culture" knowing that "manifest discretion protects the dominant by indicating that boundaries are respected" (63). Of course any resisting reading, including a queer reading, should go beyond the boundaries of discretion.

To come back to the reviewer of Leavitt's book, she furthermore observes that "if readers want to, they will only notice gay characters, otherwise they are faced with a myriad of dysfunctional families, the most intimate subject matters of the human soul, from the fear of death to the vengefulness of an estranged wife", by which she again puts gay characters on a level quite separate from "the most intimate subject matters of the human soul". She finishes her text by describing Leavitt's collection of stories as a book "for everyone, not only for gays". I find it somehow puzzling why a book would be "only for gays", and another book, presumably, only for straight people. Saying Leavitt's book is "for everyone, not

only for gays" is obviously meant as a compliment; that is what makes this book a good one. And – just to follow this logic to its final consequence – if it were "only for gays" (whatever that might mean), would this in itself make it less praiseworthy?[8]

The point on how texts are selected, anthologized, and so forth, and authors made more acceptable was emphatically driven home at the 2007 prestigious national Prešeren Fund Award given to the writer Suzana Tratnik for her collection of short stories *Vzporednice* (Parallels). At the awards ceremony, in the description of Tratnik's prize it was rather curiously suggested that the books she had written previous to the one she received the award for had not been the works of a "mature writer", and that only now she approached her themes as a real "author", which gave her book universality, as opposed to the intensity of experience typical of her previous books. Needless to say, her previous books were more explicitly about non-normative sexuality.[9]

A reviewer of the same work by Tratnik finds it surprising that it "ranks among the very top writings of contemporary Slovenian literature" given that the writer is a lesbian activist (Črnigoj 509). Almost the same benevolently censorious standpoint had been expressed by another reviewer of an earlier Tratnik book, *Na svojem dvorišču* (In One's Own Backyard): *"Although* the writer is a lesbian activist and her stories predominantly feature homosexual women, her writing undoubtedly surpasses the description 'lesbian literature'" (Ciglenečki 1540; emphasis added). Again, "the description 'lesbian literature'" is implied to mean something of a lower quality *a priori*. But by what definition?[10]

By way of concluding my presentation, let me dwell briefly on how "to become a benign force and take a central place in a liberal education, art, especially literature, has to be tamed and censored [through] both explicit censorship and even more far-reaching censorship by interpretation" (Dollimore 157). Now that mere discussion of homosexuality has lost its aura of obscenity and filth, "efforts at censorship have become somewhat more subtle, often centring on questions of the public support for art, and on the protection of the innocence of children" (Kaczorowski 76). In the educational context, "the prosecutors aren't lawyers, but teachers and parents, and their buzzword isn't obscene but inappropriate" (Weir).[11]

A reviewer writing about Janja Vidmar's book for adolescents *Fantje iz gline* (The Clay Boys), which explicitly deals with homosexuality, begins the review with the following statement: "In the latest book by the popular writer, homosexuality is only the outer frame, the real essence is elsewhere", and later on quotes the author of the novel as saying: "I hope the readers will know how to read between the lines and will thus get to

the real message … It is namely a story about the search for love and the fear of loneliness" (Bercko). Not only do these statements suggest that writing about homosexuality seems irrelevant or at least not worthy of any particular attention *per se* (because the definition of homosexuality appears to be very limited and limiting – and bearing no or little relation to love and loneliness – "the real essence" has to be "elsewhere"). Such comments also reveal the fear of calling things by their proper names; parents and teachers must not be frightened, and the fear of the corruption of the minds of adolescents has to be minimized.

NOTES

[1] Copi: *Težave z izražanjem* [The Difficulties of Expressing Yourself]. Translator Ante Bračič. Produced by ŠKUC gledališče and Cankarjev dom. The director of the performance, Edvin Liverić, rejecting any allegations of censorship, justified the intentional abridgment of the title through the attempt at making the issues of the play strike a more universal note, without historical (provocative and GLBTIQ-political) connotations that might confuse potential audiences (e-mail, 17 December 2007). However, I see arguments like this one to be (at least partially) censorious. More on "universality" and its negation of homosexuality follows later in the article. Similarly, in 1993 the New York producer of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* asked the playwright to remove the subtitle – *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* – from the play, without success (Cady 155).

[2] In 1977 the *Gay News* and its editor were convicted of blasphemy for publishing James Kirkups' poem "The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name". How large the role of homosexuality (or perhaps obscenity) was in the conviction remains debatable, because the poem depicts a Roman centurion making love to the dead Christ (Cady 155). Due to the conviction, the poem remains unavailable in print, but is available on the Internet.

[3] Dollimore furthermore asserts that even "in the celebrated censorship trials of *The Well of Loneliness*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the subtler censorship emanates from the defence rather than the prosecution" (97).

[4] In 1623, Michelangelo the Younger had done the same with his great uncle's *Rime*.

[5] Cf. Woods 99–107 and Tóibín 20–22.

[6] Colm Tóibín, on the other hand, writes of Whitman as of one of the writers "who were clearly and explicitly gay, and whose homosexuality, ignored by most critics and teachers, has a considerable bearing on their work" (7). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick correspondingly affirms that both Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* "have figured importantly in the formation of a specifically homosexual (not just homosocial) male intertextuality" (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 28).

[7] It must be mentioned that the study accompanying the poems does describe Kallman as Auden's "life-long partner" (Mozetič, "Auden" 98).

[8] Leavitt himself has something to say on this: "Because heterosexuality is the norm, writers have permission to explore its nuances without raising any eyebrows. To write about gay characters, by contrast, is always, necessarily, to make some sort of 'statement' about the fact of being gay" (Leavitt xxvii). Moreover, Armistead Maupin states: "There's an assumption in the publishing business that 'gay books' will only appeal to gay readers" (cited in Smith 58). This has much to do with the demands for the above-mentioned "uni-

versality" of literature as opposed to the so-called "ghettoization" of certain subcultural forms of writing. See also Putrle Srdić and Zavrl, "Heteroseksualcem vstop prepovedan" (Entry Forbidden to Heterosexuals). For another example of an indirect denial of the worth of subcultural texts, as well as a demand for universality and "ideologically neutral" writing/reading, see Potocco.

[9] Cf. Zavrl, "Ljudje so sami sebi največja kazen" (People Are Their Own Worst Enemies) 9.

[10] I am grateful to Suzana Tratnik for drawing my attention to the two reviews of her work.

[11] It is no coincidence that the extremely homophobic Section 28 (passed in 1988) of British legislation, which "practically banned council funding of books, plays, leaflets, films, or any other material depicting homosexual relationships as normal and positive", had been prompted by a book about a girl living with two gay fathers (Prono; Dollimore 157).

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