

**THE
VIOLET QUILL
READER**

**THE EMERGENCE OF GAY WRITING
AFTER STONEWALL**

**EDITED BY
DAVID BERGMAN**



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birthday present. Then kiss my well-cosmetized cheek, and leave me. Forever."

He was serious now. Exhausted, too.

I stood up, dug into my deep pocket, and handed over the little package. It was wrapped in black paper with a narrow black ribbon.

"Happy forty-five," I said. And as he collapsed onto the toilet seat I'd just vacated, I kissed one of the cheeks I'd just made up.

"Thank you, Cuz. These wrappings! Couldn't you find anything with a skull-and-crossbone motif?" He ripped off the paper and held the metal palm-sized ebony-colored Sobranie cigarette box in one skeletal hand, then lifted its lid and said in a voice I'd never before heard out of him, "Ah, my hot-pink-and-electric-blue darlings!"

Alistair looked up at me as though surprised I was still there. "What are you waiting for? Go."

"I'm waiting for you to say something final to me."

"Make sure they play Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite* at my memorial service. The four-hand piano version."

"Oh, Alistair! That's not what I mean!"

He smiled an odd, crooked smile, doubtless twisted by the same Parkinson's that had affected his hands. "What's left to say? No, really, Cuz. What haven't we said? What haven't we *done* to each other?"

I left the bathroom. Left the apartment. Got into the elevator and descended.

When it arrived at the third floor and opened its doors for the blue-haired old woman with the beribboned dachshund to get in, she was treated to the possibly not-too-daily sight of a grown man soundly and methodically banging his head against the cleverly pre-aged wood paneling.

Gay Literature Today



Robert Ferro

Jordan Bailer, a student at Oberlin College, conceived the idea of inviting the leading gay novelists of the time to speak on gay fiction. Three novelists, Robert Glück, Andrew Holleran, and Robert Ferro, gave talks over the years. Robert Ferro took this assignment seriously, as Michael Grumley's last diary shows, and he labored over this talk, whose text is presented here for the first time. Writing in the last year of his life, Ferro takes pains to place himself and his work in a tradition of gay writing.

A writer's perspective on gay literature, today as in the past, is different from that of those who publish, those in the market, those who read, or those in academia who, from a great height and after some long or short period of time, judge and consign the work either to the library or into the dustbin. In fact, gay literature—no longer new—has in recent decades been in such a state of becoming as to render any single view of it incomplete and undependable, save that of the purely personal. As a novelist I am best advised to ignore most conceptions of what gay literature may be, just as any writer had better ignore most of literature if he or she expects to get anything done. It is useful to understand the market, the reader, and even somehow scademia, but in the end, literature—gay or otherwise—is never a question of perspectives or trends but of free creativity, individual art. Artistic genius may be defined in some way as the ability of an individual to find a way through dilemmas, the paradoxes of history, culture, human nature, life, sometimes with ideas that would have seemed to others unlikely or impossible or, in the case of gay literature, not in the best of taste.

From the gay writer's point of view, it is helpful, although not es-

sential, to place oneself within a context, even after inventing a world of one's own, remembering of course that the writer's appraisal of his situation is often wrong—wrong for his own reasons. In my view, what is happening today—the context in which we work—has so changed and will so continue to change as to foment a renaissance of activity we consider a true movement, one of the important movements of the century. Perhaps this renaissance appears clearer because it comes at the end of a period of intense literary activity, a period that has seen what some have called “the Death of the Novel” itself.

But “Death” in this slogan means change, not the end, and not, I believe, the death of the novel but of the narrator. And it may be that in the return of the narrator from his grave in the 1950s—a return effected to retell properly and subjectively the inside story of homosexuality—that the novel form becomes at last either the coda to an enclosed art form, or the greater prelude to what is to come: a renaissance of gay writing and the literature of the new age.

Gay literature today is the collective result of small and large forces, old and new, and the choices of many individual writers. It is something new in dimension that is part of something very old, and is, in this sense, today in a renaissance. For those now at work tie into earlier accomplishments, consciously or not; most immediately as a consequence or reaction to those who came immediately before us; or on the shoulders of those who connect us to an earlier but similar reality, an earlier literature. Once this connection with the past is made, it stretches back through history, most directly and immediately to the Edwardians, but before that to the end of the Roman Empire on the verge of Christian conversion in the third century, when a large gay canon was published and circulated, and would, it was hoped, be included in the official Gospels of the Church. Of course, other choices were made, and the precepts and spiritual ideas of a group called the Gnostics—the Gnostic Gospels—were lost. For homosexuals and lesbians this was the exact point of expulsion from the Church. However, a long and healthy tradition of homoeroticism existed all through the Italian Renaissance, as art historian James Saslow has recently and helpfully demonstrated, beginning with the seminal application of the Zeus/Ganymede myth in the poetry and drawings of Michelangelo. And most recently, the Edwardians provide us with a bridge to the past—a connection to all that had come before—in the life and times and fall of Oscar Wilde.*

The history of gay literature reaches back to a different world, to a

world in fact before literature. Gay history, to be properly understood, must be pursued back to a period before books, back to an ancient time before the Church, before the Bible, before monotheism, before Moses, practically before God. It is not my intention to trace seriously any of this today, except to say that gay literature is the result of many convergent cycles in history and the work of many people. It is a thread running through history, often broken, or lost between the lines, but always taken up again by individuals working on their own, either with a self-conscious knowledge of older traditions, or with an instinct for the truth of the matter which apparently is never completely lost; or because, from the beginning of human existence, homosexuality itself has never been far from the center of culture. *

The low social status of homosexuals from the third century A.D. until the near past largely prohibited and discouraged the composition and publication of literature in which the homosexual was not depicted, in some specific way, as a victim. The literature of homosexuality has long centered on the myth of the victim who must die to assuage an intolerable moral guilt.

In 1969, a group of patrons at a New York gay bar called the Stonewall replied with thrown bottles and resistance when police, as was routine, tried for the second or third time that night to shut the place down. It was the first time that anyone questioned their authority to harass homosexuals. Known now as the Stonewall Rebellion, this event marked the beginning of gay liberation, ushering in a period of unprecedented political and literary activity in the gay world. Most important, it marks a major shift in self-perception from the myth of the victim to activist. The ensuing twenty years have seen a general restructuring of the gay ethos by a growing army of writers whose work has helped to redefine the psychological, social, sexual, spiritual makeup of American gay people.

These writers—and I flatter myself to think I have been one of them—have done this primarily through the art of autobiographical fiction, on the theory that when a particular story must be told, invention may be superfluous, and even at times counter-indicated.

Autobiography has long been misrepresented in American fiction. It has often been considered the recourse of a limited imagination and, as such, writers have long suppressed or disguised that their writing was based not on imagination but on the facts of their own lives. This does not mean that autobiography is new to fiction; simply that within gay writing it has found new acceptance and utility. The relationship

between the frankness of autobiographical fiction and fiction itself has changed. What is different now is the perception that one's own version of one's own life is any less valid or successful than the purely fictional product of the imagination. In other words, one writer's attempt to construct a reality from autobiography may then be no less fictional or inspired than an invented novel, but will, in certain respects, reflect the range and depth of a new personality in ways never attempted or achieved in fiction. It is through autobiography that we best investigate a taboo. It can be said that autobiography has been used by gay writers to fill in the gaps left by the removal from fiction of various negative and stereotypical myths. This is not to say that invention, within the autobiographical framework, cannot be manipulated into a vital role. For it has been the secondary directive of these writers, after telling their own stories, to invent new myths, new themes, for gay fiction, and this continues to be largely a question of inspiration and imagination.

As mentioned earlier, the death or decline of the narrator took place in the fifties, principally in the English novel, culminating in the work of writers like B. S. Johnson, whose disillusionment with fiction also crossed over into his private feelings, causing him eventually to take his own life. Johnson, whose publisher was apparently most cooperative, once published a novel with a hole cut through the center; another with interchangeable unnumbered pages. Johnson's work is the history of the narrator on trial. At the end of the trial the narrator is found guilty of incompetence and irrelevance, and is executed before our eyes. Meanwhile, in Paris, the vestigial remains of the French novel were being slowly beaten to death by Samuel Beckett. Again the idea is the same: futility and chaos, truth overwhelmed. It can be said of Western literature in this period that writers lost faith with a central idea that had been prevalent since the rise of the realist tradition in nineteenth-century France, of the possible encapsulation of truth, large or small, in fiction. This loss of faith was brought about by a failure of confidence, on the part of the writers themselves, to find a point of view from which the increasingly complex and bewildering implications and revelations of modern life could be truthfully, adequately, or even competently represented. In this new postwar chaotic world, a world of huge population growth and strange juxtapositions of cultures and ambitions, the concept of "Art as a Lie" was increasingly, obviously, inadequate. To the writers of the period it did not seem to be art but life that was the lie.

The resulting fiction and theatre of the period, epitomized in Beckett and Johnson, is a narrative constantly interrupting itself to the point of distrust and confusion—books without plot, without stories, without characters, devoid of point of view.

I will not make the case myself here but think a connection can be made between the death of the narrator and subsequent schools of American fiction: dirty realism, for instance, and what is now called *New Yorker* fiction—in which the quotidian is approached carefully and meticulously, and without particular emphasis.

American fiction today, with exceptions, seems the result of a philosophy of the limited in the face of the too great. It is the writer himself made small in reaction to the sudden revelation of the complexities of life, of nature and the cosmos—the overwhelming revelations of the moderns.

However, it has not been difficult for gay writers today to step lightly over all of his, and to seek out earlier models—in particular, in my view, the great nineteenth-century realists of England and France. For unlike those of other writers—intimidated and beleaguered by modern chaos and its plethora of possibilities—the problems of the gay writer have been all too clearly laid out and defined. In fact, these problems themselves constitute the first fresh ideas in literature in a generation, and, perhaps, in a hundred years. For it can be said that the moral barriers erected around the subject of homosexuality have remained standing even after those of sexuality itself were dismantled. And the effect has been to keep the whole theme of flesh untouched as an idea. In claiming this territory for our own, gay writers lay claim to something new. And in ignoring the subject, or avoiding it, we waste a unique and valuable resource—ourselves.

The resuscitation and return of the narrator in gay fiction is in fact a return to the early models of the great realistic novel of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It cannot be said that we have had a monopoly on this return, for others have managed to get their feet under them with regard to a new vision of the world that allows them a specific narrative point of view. Blacks, certain women writers, Jews—in fact, the return of the narrator has been effected by those with a story to tell, and for whom the particularized devices of realism are again useful. Flaubert said, "*Madame Bovary, c'est moi.*" It is a motto easily applied to the workers of modern gay fiction, in which the teller of the tale is him- or herself.

My point is that no one else is qualified to do the thing justice, and

as such the gay writer faces a responsibility relatively rare in modern fiction: commitment to an idea, to a truth that flies in the face of convention and persecution. It may seem to you, as young students of the novel, that the large spate of coming-out books in the seventies broke enough ground and ice for the next generation to slip through without incident. This perhaps might have been true before AIDS, perhaps not. But it is quite clear that the pendulum theory, of accomplishment and setback, of advance and retreat, is as applicable to literature as it is to law and social justice. In certain ways, the battle for the liberation has been fought and won; in others, it has amounted so far to little more than a few bloody, and rather private, skirmishes.

It is not surprising or profound that the age-old enemy both to gay literature and homosexuality has been the same: homophobia. For if there is a single irreducible message to the literature of homosexuals it is that homophobia is the aberration, not homosexuality. Or, put another way, it will perhaps have been the lesson of our age, both in literature and religion, that there are so many different kinds of people in the world and that no one of them is any better than anyone else. Disparate types from the far corners of the world thrown into a single room, or into a single bed, seem to have been the *mise-en-scène* of the postmodern world. And discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, misandry, homophobia—these are failures of the human spirit, of the human soul and psyche. Religion has so far failed to rid us of these things; to some it appears that religion has only made them worse. Another topic for another day. But it may be in literature, as in the past, that the lessons of the future are to be learned.

Any course in the gay novel—and there should be such an offering in every college curriculum in the country—would name as our literary forebears the same eight or ten great homosexual writers, some living, some dead: Baldwin, Burroughs, Williams, Genet, Isherwood, Forster, and a few others. It is a rich list steeped in literary and moral bravery: *Another Country*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Naked Lunch*, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, *A Single Man*, *Maurice*. Homosexual literature is measured by these artifacts, assembled in the last fifty or sixty years in a still growing body of work comparable in quality and cohesion to any movement of the century.

As indicated, the central myth governing and informing homosexual literature of the twentieth century, and certainly dominating the novels I have listed, has been the myth of the victim, the martyred homosexual. In fact, it is this myth—which by its presence or absence in

twentieth-century literature, before or after Stonewall—which defines it as homosexual or gay. At the center of the myth is the idea that the homosexual is doomed, and in this century few homosexual heroes of novels have survived. He is doomed by the weight and force of his own moral guilt in the eyes of society. This imagined moral guilt, based on a two-thousand-year-old conflict with the male-dominated Judeo-Christian ethic, is the basis for one of the last lingering aberrations, homophobia, and it is within the context of homophobia that this myth has been generated and perpetuated.

If there is one historical figure who epitomizes the victim myth it is the great poet, aesthete, playwright, aphorist, and novelist Oscar Wilde, leader and inspiration of the English Aesthetic movement, an early gay movement. Oscar Wilde is the pivotal figure in homosexual literature, not only for his work but also for his life, which qualified him—some would say doomed him—to this position and fate. Wilde was arguably the most important and certainly the most visible artist of his time, with perhaps only Yeats challenging this position. The Victorians had been the first and only people in Western society to discuss sex openly and publicly. The celebrated and scandalous sex trial, *Oscar Wilde v. the Marquess of Queensbury*, was the occasion on which they brought the subject up. It both ruined Wilde and established him at the center of the myth of the victim.

Here is a passage from a recent *New York Times Book Review* by the novelist Peter Ackroyd:

But it was not just the bravura of Wilde's self-expression that gave him such a hold on his contemporaries. It was something much more profound and perhaps more dangerous, for, if he was a man of genius, he was one because he came to embody the obsessions of his own period. He said of himself, "I was a man who stood in symbolic relation to the art and culture of my age," but it was both his blessing and his eventual tragedy that the age itself might most aptly be termed fin de siècle. Since we are now entering an equivalent period, perhaps we are in the best position to understand that joy in artifice and parody, the celebration of style and pastiche, that mockery of previous values, which such a time seems to encourage. In Wilde's lifetime the end of "Victorianism" (and all that it had come to represent) was in sight, but nothing had come to take its

place: it was a time of spiritual, moral, social and artistic chaos, when even the most formidable conventions and the firmest convictions began to crumble, to slide and eventually to dissolve. In many ways it was a worn-out society, theatrical in its arts, theatrical in its life, theatrical even in its devotions. It happened to be Wilde who defined both the conscience and the consciousness of the artist at a time when all the other values were thrown into doubt. Indeed, it was from the wreck of those values that he tried to save the concepts of beauty and pleasure.

Moreover, Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, called the only French novel written in English, is the connection between the English novel and the realist tradition of nineteenth-century France which dominates Western literature throughout the twentieth century, and which with the return of the narrator in modern gay fiction is the early model for much work being done today. In his audacity, in his inability either to hide or abnegate his responsibilities—to himself or his art—and as the most visible proponent of what Edward Carpenter and others called Uranian philosophy, Oscar Wilde was a logical choice for the martyrdom required by Victorian morality, once its austere attention had been drawn by Wilde himself to the subject of homosexuality. Judeo-Christian morality, the assumption of Wilde's guilt in the eyes of God, was the basis of the trial, as it has been the basis of homophobia throughout the history of Christianity. For the ensuing hundred years, until the literature of the post-Stonewall era in the 1970s, the myth of the homosexual as victim has held dominion. It still lies at the heart of many novels dealing with the subject, from the First World War all the way to the age of AIDS.

It would appear that the primary argument today in gay-studies circles is the discussion of the legacy of the Essentialist poets—Blake, Whitman, Wilde—and the development of the Uranian philosophy of Edward Carpenter and others, which posited a magical quality developed in those who are freed from the constraints of conventional human response, and who find in themselves a sympathy with what we would call the mystical. This is a pre-Judeo-Christian notion, referring to what is called the Old Religion, or paganism, which it was the early and continuing goal of Christianity to eradicate. Essentialism is in many respects the vestiges of that Old Religion, based not on a militaristic patriarchy but on the permanent sensibilities of matriarchy, in-

cluding shamanism and the worship of the White Goddess, the center of the first cults and the first religion. By this view, the history of religion is the history of the transfer of the control of society from woman to man, from matriarchal to patriarchal system. Under the former, those instincts which Essentialists marked for value were treasured and developed. Under the later patriarchal system they have been considered as threats and systematically eradicated.

The alternative view to Essentialism is Constructionism, which holds that we are what society makes of us in any given age, rather than what we have, under Essentialism, has always been within ourselves and can be again.

E. M. Forster is the time bomb gay literature set in 1913 and exploded in our day with a great novel called *Maurice*, which is very much the image of homosexuality that modern society is prepared to accept and the point to which gay people have developed.

There has always been a lag between the pronouncements and discoveries and advancements of a minority group, and the opinion in which that group is held by everyone else. In our case I would have thought that lag amounted to something like twenty or thirty years, but Forster and others, including Wilde and Carpenter and most especially the Essential poet Walt Whitman, have shown us that this lag may be far longer—as much as eighty or one hundred years. It is Forster who takes from Wilde and the English Aesthetes the visionary, romantic ideals of the Essentialists and transforms them into concepts that a nation might sit down and discuss over coffee. *Maurice* demonstrates as clearly as any novel of the century how little these issues have changed in sixty years.

Forster is an Essentialist in his belief in the survival of the homosexual, and in *Maurice* he was generations ahead of his time. Forster's belief is based largely on old instincts of anti-militarism, of sensibility and honor, which to him is a belief in self. The ending to *Maurice*, which Forster himself characterized as a fairy-tale ending, in which the upper-class Maurice runs away from his life, class, family, his very future, with an assistant gamekeeper named Scudder, is Forster's triumph in that in our day this ending has descended to the realm of possibility and even cliché.

Since the small but symbolically important act of rebellion in a gay bar in 1969, which was a long-needed symbolic shift from victim to activist, an army of scribes have attempted to replace this central destructive myth with others. It has been a collective effort to change

the perception of homosexuality in society, to write ourselves out of one role and into something more workable and self-assigned. And as such this is a movement, like those of women and blacks before us, like also Jews, whom, with supreme irony, we most resemble. We, too, have been murdered and burned, gassed and clubbed, persecuted for centuries, reviled and treated with contempt.

The myth of the victim, it could be argued, is the setup for AIDS itself, as a central part of the idea that AIDS is our fault; for in the old metaphor, illness is punishment brought by the wrath of God, in this case for the contamination of society by gay people. The inclusion of the wrath of God is mythic indication of a millennium of conflict between the Catholic Church and gay people. To a lesser degree, but importantly, Jewish orthodoxy has abetted the Church in support of the major development of Western thought: the Judeo-Christian ethic, which, because of the teachings and amendments of Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, and other subsequent interpreters of the *intentions* of Christ, has pitted the Church against sexuality, particularly the so-called unnatural sex acts: anal intercourse and fellatio. Simply stated, the Church's opinion of sodomites is based on the belief that only the Devil would contemplate sex between men; and thus, coming from the Devil, such acts were considered heretical and punishable throughout the Inquisition by death. There is irrefutable evidence—unearthed and published by an ever-growing discipline of gay studies—of the unbroken persecution of gays and lesbians by the Catholic Church from the fourth century A.D. to, in subtler forms, the present. The Judeo-Christian ethic established a patriarchal dictatorship-religion, a religious world of masters and slaves, a cause for which, over the centuries, more blood has been shed than in all the wars of history. Its conflict with homosexuality predates religion itself, and is resolved only in anthropology, in the Darwinian horde where, as Freud has shown, non-dominant males lived together after expulsion from the tribe, and where homosexuality was born. Church dogma is at the true heart of the victim myth. The modern effort of gay literature seems to be to change those myths and thus alter dogma.

It usually takes literature four or five years to get its feet under itself on a major issue, like Vietnam, or AIDS, whereas music and drama are on the case immediately. A longish period is necessary for literature to see what is happening and to figure out what it all may mean, how it began, and how it may stopped. And then there is the interval of composition, which may take years, and the publishing process,

which takes more time. And in the actual event, AIDS has killed many before they were able to control creation, or finish it, overwhelming them beyond the demands of fiction.

It seems to me that if our movement is to produce something truly worthwhile, it will do so in the literature which is a response to AIDS. Several new books we know to expect, and have long been waiting for. And there will be others, as from this dreadful calamity, which touches all our lives, new directions are chosen and new myths are made.

The new direction, to me, appears to be at once spiritual and pragmatic: combining the Essentialist and Constructionist. It is spiritual in the sense of going beyond principles of pleasure and gratification learned in the Sexual Revolution—not the spirituality of religious faith but the magic of belief and the confidence in self, not in the rewards of an afterlife, but in the development of the continuing moment of life. It will also be pragmatic in the sense that it resists with ourselves to change the world if the world does not suit us, to dispel the ignorance and fear that is homophobia with knowledge, openness, and achievement.

As the poet James Broughton has recently pointed out, we are in a meridian/central position of human existence, not its lunatic fringe. The lessons we must learn are the lessons of the age, and much depends on our learning them.