

Speaking out from the Closet? The queer reader's position of knowledge and the works of Marguerite Yourcenar

A variation on the theme of presenting a queer theoretical doctoral thesis

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Everyone broods in silence over his own secrets and dreams, without ever admitting them, even to himself, and everything would be made plain if one would not lie (Marguerite Yourcenar: *Alexis* 1929/1984, 93).

An assumption underlying the book is that the relations of the closet – the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition – have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Epistemology of the Closet* 1990, 3).

In Marguerite Yourcenar's debut novel *Alexis ou le Traité du vain combat* (1929)¹ [*Alexis, or the Treatise on a Battle in Vain*], the eponymous hero, a young aristocrat coming out of the closet to his wife Monique, muses on the shifting boundaries of truth and lie, secrecy and openness, or narration, confession, and silence. Writing a farewell letter to his wife he comes out shyly, slyly or subtly – depending on the reader's point of view. In his long soliloquy in the form of a letter, Alexis explains why he is leaving Monique and their infant son. He maintains that he is trying to explain his life and who he really is, instead of confessing,

¹ The English translation *Alexis* by Walter Kaiser in collaboration with Marguerite Yourcenar was published 1984.

apologizing or justifying his decision to leave, and express openly his homosexual feelings. As Alexis himself points out, putting life, ideas and experiences into words is, however, a project tainted by an inevitable failure.

I have often read that words falsify thought, but it seems to me that writing words falsify it even more: you know how little is left of a text after two successive translations. – For if it is difficult to live, it is even more difficult to explain one's life. (Alexis, 3.)

Alexis' musings bring forth the discursive structure of the closet, or half-hidden, half-open homosexual secret, which is central both to the French author Marguerite Yourcenar's (1903–1987) fiction, and more generally to our Western culture with the homo/hetero-dichotomy that queer theory aims to make visible and open to critique. Throughout the novel, Alexis as a narrator is simultaneously constructing and deconstructing the closet – the area of unarticulated sexual secret. The closet can be defined as a space of an *open secret*, a concept coined by D. A. Miller (1989, 207) in order to define the cultural sphere of unarticulated knowledge that so often focuses on sexuality and sexual non-normativity. The open secret defines the boundary between public and private, thus constituting the idea of homosexuality as an alternative “impossible” to think and

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express. That is why homosexuality is discursively located in the spheres of publicity and privacy at the same time. (Miller 1989, 19–195, 207.) Dealing especially with male homosexuality by strategic silences, omissions, and coded expressions is a classical example of the discourse of the closet. In *The Wilde Century* (1994), Alan Sinfield also analyses the status of homosexuality as a volatile, but culturally necessary secret:

The secret keeps a topic like homosexuality in the private sphere, but under surveillance, allowing it to hover on the edge of public visibility. If it gets fully into the open, it attains public status; yet it must not disappear altogether, for then it would be beyond control and would no longer effect a general surveillance of aberrant desire. (Sinfield 1994, 9.)

Above all, the notion of closet is associated with *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She begins her seminal study by a bold statement:

Epistemology of the Closet proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured – indeed, fractured – by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century. The book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; and it will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin is from the relatively *decentered* per-

spective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory. (Sedgwick 1990, 1. Italics PLH.)

The unarticulated knowledge identified by the closet is produced and regulated by the strategic silences and rhetoric of circumvention, coded expressions, and omissions, as Sedgwick has significantly pointed out. The closet provides us with the means to discuss various sexual secrets, but it also provides us with a methodology to investigate the production of knowledge even more generally (Sedgwick 1990, 3, 11). That is why the methodology of the closet and strategic silences are so necessary, even inevitable questions to any scholar of literary or cultural studies. Not only has the notion of the closet been associated with the sexual secret, but even more specifically with male homosexuality that has gained such a crucial position in the modern epistemology of normality, perversion, and the division between centrality and marginality. That is why the closet – the area of unarticulated secrets – is crucial to the modern Western production of knowledge, and why the central focus of this interest has been the borderline between male homosexuality and heterosexuality, while male homosexuality has been given a symbolic status as the closeted matter *par excellence*. (See Edelman 1994; 2004.)

Focusing on the closet and sexual secrets in the twilight zone of private and public opens up a larger discussion on cultural silences, silencing acts, and the ways and rights of representation of the different, dissident, aberrant, or queer positions of knowing and producing knowledge. It

is also a matter of course that the words of fictional Alexis started this paper, since as a narrator he is so thoroughly dedicated to the grammar and rhetoric of the closet: the discursive acts of circumlocution, omission and deliberate ambiguity. The same characteristics are present in *Alexis*, the novel, and throughout the works of Marguerite Yourcenar, as I set out to claim in my PhD thesis *Yhden äänen muotokuva. Queer-luentoja Marguerite Yourcenarin teoksista* [Portraits of a Voice. Queer Readings on the works of Marguerite Yourcenar] (2006). The thesis focuses especially on the representations of love and desire between men in Yourcenar's prose, and examines the peculiar textual and structural strategies by which she analyses and deconstructs the cultural construction of closeted male homosexuality and the figure of a man desiring men. Throughout the study, my focus stays on *the grammar of the closet*, the delicate textual and narrative strategies by which Yourcenar, in her works of various literary genres, analyses the epistemological structures of sexual secret and male homosexuality.

A queer reader and the eccentric position of knowledge

In the novel, the fictional Alexis explores poetically the relationship between the closet, secrecy, and production of knowledge. In the same vein, queer theorist David M. Halperin analyses the queer position as a legitimate location of knowing and producing alternative, decentered knowledge. He argues for understanding homosexuality not as an object, but as a subject of knowing: to take a

stance as queer is to be able to provide dissident knowledge, alternative perspectives to our understanding of the formation of generally accepted "truths", identities, and power structures. For Halperin, the queer position is not something in need of reparation: queer appears not as an object of investigation or a flaw to ameliorate. Instead, queer/queerness is "an eccentric positionality to be exploited and explored: a potentially privileged site for the criticism and analysis of cultural discourses" (Halperin 1995, 61). It is a position that differs from the normative, "non-marginal" positions of producing knowledge. Thus, (homo)sexuality can be constituted not substantively but oppositionally, not by *what* it is but by *where* it is and *how* it operates, he argues, and defines the queer position of knowing structurally: "Those who knowingly occupy such a marginal location, who assume a de-essentialized identity that is purely positional in character, are properly speaking not gay but *queer*." (Halperin 1995, 61–62. Italics in the original text.) Analogously, Alexis identifies his homosexuality as a privilege assigned by aberration from the norm, as "a less conventional view of the world" (*Alexis*, 92). He goes on analysing his eccentric position as a knowing subject, his ability to decode closeted secrets around him:

Men do not say the whole truth about themselves, but when, like me, one has been forced into the habit of certain reticences, one very quickly perceives that they are universal. I had acquired a singular aptitude for guessing hidden vices or weaknesses. My conscience, stripped naked, revealed to me the conscience of others. [–] I was finally able to tell myself that my only mistake

(or, rather, my only unhappiness) was to be, certainly not worse than everyone, but only different. (*Alexis*, 92.)

Alexis' musings in his coming out letter prove illuminating for my position as a researcher, too. In the investigation of queer textual strategies in Yourcenar's works, my own position as a queer reader, as a critic using one's own queer capacity of knowledge, is one of the means of producing knowledge. Consequently, while analysing, for example, the representation of the Japanese author Yukio Mishima (1925–1970) by Yourcenar I also reflect my own relationship to the concepts such as sexuality, masculinity, femininity, or cross-gender identifications (see Castle 1996; Maddison 2000). In the course of the study, I will make visible alternative, queer locations of knowledge and competence in interpretation, while analysing Yourcenar's works. According to my argument, as an author she constantly analyses and deconstructs, both covertly and overtly, representations of male homosexuality and the cultural codes assigned to them.

The scrutiny of masculinity and especially male homosexuality forms a recurrent feature in the Yourcenarian *œuvre* and her characteristically understated prose, which is famous for the various masculine protagonists with same-sex love relationships such as Alexis, Zénon, and the Roman emperor Hadrian. The study focuses on the characteristically Yourcenarian strategies of analysing the cultural secrets and codes around male homosexuality, and the textual means of constructing and deconstructing the closet that pervades her works. She makes visible the lin-

guistic, textual, and narrative strategies of closeting and outing male homosexuality at the same time. In my study, I examine how our understanding of Yourcenar's *œuvre* and authorship changes with the present queer reading and queer methodologies focusing to the centrality of the notions of same-sex desire, the dynamics of the closet, and representations of masculinity differing from the gender norms formed in the heteronormative culture.

Gender in text and criticism: textual female masculinity

In my research, I explore a canonised Belgian-French author in the context of the Anglo-American tradition of queer theory instead of the more familiar or typical context of French literature and the Yourcenarian studies. In other words, I especially focus on the representations of gender, sexuality, and non-normative desire in the texts from various phases of Yourcenar's career. The figure of boundary-crossing manifests in her fiction as well as her personal life: she was an author writing in French while living the major part of her life in the United States, and her nationality alternated from French to American and once again to French. She wrote extensively about men desiring other men, while she shared her life with Grace Frick, her female partner for forty two years.

Not only did Yourcenar write about men loving and desiring other men, but she has often also deemed, or even been accused of writing like a man – whatever the phrase might have signified to various critics (see e.g. Rousseau

2004). Female masculinity as a cultural and textual concept proves another crucial topic for my study, in which masculinity appears at three levels: as a psychoanalytically construed notion, as a set of characteristics, acts and gestures formed historically and discursively, and as a set of textual and stylistic features. Based on the concept of female masculinity, which is understood as an alternative masculinity outside the hegemonic male-bodied masculinity (Halberstam 1998), I elaborate a new literary critical concept of textual female masculinity. I use the concept to analyse the conflicting critical reception of Yourcenar's writing, and the queer textuality pervading her work.

The aspect of boundary-crossing is an essential part of representation of humanity, gender, sexuality, and desire also in Yourcenar's fiction. While the female author's keen, life-long exploration of gay male characters' internal life has formed a stumbling block for many feminist critics, my study takes as its point of departure the notions of (textual) female masculinity and queer cross-identifications present in her works (see Castle 1996). In the Yourcenarian studies, however, the queer desire in the author's fiction has formed a closet of its kind. In opposition to this tradition, my investigation demonstrates how the queer theoretical discussion of non-normative gender and sexuality is interwoven as an integral part into the whole Yourcenarian *œuvre*.

Marguerite Yourcenar crossed an over three hundred years old gender boundary in 1980, when she was elected to L'Académie Française as the first woman ever in the his-

tory of that highly conservative institution.² This election has often been assigned to her so called masculine style and themes, or the claimed gender neutrality of her prose, although many feminist critics expressed strong antipathy against the first female member of the French Academy. Feminist criticism has often accused her of gender blindness, a phallacy of neutrality, masculinist universalism, or masculine or patriarchal identification, and failing the feminist emancipatory project. (See Allamand 2004; Cliche 2004; Gaudin 1985; Stillman 1985.) For the most part, the controversies between Yourcenar and various feminists are due to the conception of feminism and feminist politics in the 1970s and 1980s. The identitarian politics, celebration of femininity, or separatist tendencies of the 1980s feminism were irreconcilable with Yourcenar's views. Instead, they are more easily consistent with the views of the recent postfeminist and queer feminist theorists, as I argue in the thesis. In Yourcenar's literary activity, as well as in my thesis, representation, textuality, sexuality, and gender are interlaced. In *Yhden äänen muotokuva. Queer-luentoja Marguerite Yourcenarin teoksista* [Portraits of a Voice. Queer Readings on the works of Marguerite Yourcenar], I argue for the necessity and timeliness of queer theoretical approach in analysing and interpreting Yourcenar's fiction.

² She was elected on March 6, 1980, and the official induction ceremony took place on January 22, 1981.

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