

Dead Letters Sent

Queer Literary Transmission

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Introduction

... viersified and piersified may the treeth we tale of live in stoney.
Here line the refrains of.

—James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Dead Letters Sent: Queer Literary Transmission explores the queerness of “transmission,” understood broadly: the conveying of knowledge in pedagogy, the transmission and material preservation of texts, the maintaining of a tradition of knowledge about those texts, and even the impalpable communication between text and reader. “Queer transmission,” then, can be understood in at least two ways: First, it can be understood as the transmission (in all these senses) of a minority queer culture, of the modes through which queer forms of life and specialized knowledges move from generation to generation. How is such knowledge passed on in a world that is, to say the least, inhospitable to queer forms of life? How do texts encode queer meaning in contexts that often forbid explicit mention of queer concerns (or that cast them as trivial or unworthy of sustained attention), for example, or, from the other side, what is entailed in “recognizing” one’s desires in a literary text or an often inexplicit or elusive queer “intention” in the work of art? Second, “queer transmission” can be understood to ask, more generally, what is queer about the transmission of literary and cultural knowledge, and what conclusions might be drawn about the effects of that queerness on the literary “objects” conveyed.

Recurrently, literary texts concerned with tradition and the transmission of knowledge turn not to preservation but to loss, to scenarios of thwarted transmission: writings lost or of equivocal provenance, texts reduced to fragments or adulterated in translation, historical contexts lost to posterity, tantalizing details left unrecorded by unobservant contemporaries, critical receptions of seminal texts inalterably shaped by charismatic misreadings, and pedagogical relations thwarted by incompetent or too interested teachers or by dull or otherwise distracted students. *Dead Letters Sent* begins with the intuition that such scenarios allow texts to

Queer Transmission and the *Symposium*

Insult, Gay Suicide, and the Staggered Temporalities of Consciousness

In *Place for Us*, D. A. Miller writes of the Broadway musical:

Along with a very few other terms . . . , "Broadway" denominates those early pre-sexual realities of gay experience to which, in numerous lives, it became forever bound: not just the solitude, shame, secretiveness by which the impossibility of social integration was first internalized; or the excessive sentimentality that was a necessary condition of sentiments allowed no real object; but also the intense, senseless joy that, while not identical to those destitutions, is neither extricable from them. Precisely against such realities, however, is post-Stonewall gay identity defined: a declarable, dignified thing rooted in a community, and taking manifestly sexual pleasures on this affirmative basis. No gay man could possibly regret the trade, could be anything but be grateful for it—if, that is, it actually were a trade, and his old embarrassments (including that of whatever gratification he was able to find through them) had not been retained, well after the moment of coming out, in the complex, incorrigible, rightly called fatal form of character.¹

Like Miller's book more generally, this moment movingly and lucidly poses some of the psychological consequences, for the gay subject, of "queer transmission." For it seems to me that at issue here are (at least) three kinds of questions: First, whether it is possible to make experiences of exclusion and social isolation the ground of community, whether "the impossibility of social integration," shared, can become a principle of social communion. Can the isolation of the closet (its solitude, its shame, but also its unspeakable joy) be assimilated (phylogenetically speaking) to

Forgetting *The Tempest*

A curious scene in *The Tempest* has Prospero repeatedly, even obsessively, interrupting his narration to Miranda of the circumstances of their exile from Milan with injunctions to pay attention: "dost thou attend me? . . . thou attend'st not . . . dost thou hear?"¹ Reading Prospero's weird, almost paranoid, fear that Miranda's attention will lapse just as he is telling her (as he would have it) who she is—a tale, she notes, that he has several times begun only to break off, midstory, himself—we should, perhaps, before "explaining" it psychologically, attend to its strangeness, which links it to the play's recurrent concern with forgetfulness.² His narrative leads Miranda to confess both amnesia and absorption: "I not remembering how I cried out then / Will cry it o'er again" (1.2.133–34). A strange "I" that, "not remembering," can, nevertheless, cry "it o'er *again*," its gesture of encompassing its own oblivion throws into question its coherence while also asserting a kind of mastery.³ One is led to suspect that in this transmission of the histories of a daughter and a state it is as important for Prospero to establish Miranda's forgetfulness as it is for the play to establish her capacity for sympathy.⁴ To the extent that his obsessive reminders demand the forgetfulness they seem to worry about, he might be said to get what he wants; it is curious to me that, later in the play, Miranda seems to have forgotten Prospero's reassurances about the shipwreck. She allows Ferdinand to continue believing that his father perished even though she ought to know both who was on the ship (1.2.177–85) and that everyone on the vessel is safe (1.2.25–32)—"The direful spectacle of the wreck . . . I have with such provision in mine art, / So safely ordered that there is no soul— / No, not so much perdition as an hair / Betid to any creature in the vessel / Which thou heard'st cry, which thou saw'st sink" (1.2.26, 28–33).

If Miranda can be said to forget what she ought to know, such forgetting, in this earlier scene, comes to seem all but originary. Memory is less an object to be recalled than the marker of an oblivion that forms her. Small "wonder" that it is difficult to tell whether Miranda is to remember

Tradition in Fragments

Swinburne's "Anactoria"

Algernon Charles Swinburne's "Anactoria" (in *Poems and Ballads*, published in 1865) is explicitly about the relation between erotic desire and literary transmission. Sappho's fragmented corpus—only one poem comes to us complete; the rest we have only in fragments—becomes, in the heroic couplets of Swinburne's dramatic monologue, the desired body of Anactoria, rent and reassembled by a voice riven against itself, in turn, by the extremity of desire. The poem's imperious voice—in its expression of desire, but also, I will suggest, in its appropriation of Sappho—embodies the two sides of "queer transmission"; the fragmented body of Anactoria and the voice split apart by its address to an absent, desired body make the poem's atomizing of desire one with its understanding of transmission (an extreme but signal instance insofar as the Sapphic corpus is transmitted to us by being fragmented). The questions raised by Swinburne's appropriation of Sappho—his speaking "in" the Lesbian's voice, citing her, but never attempting actually to sound like her—are not separable from the questions of voice, desire, and transmission *in* the poem. For an inevitable question for a reader of this poem is how to formulate the relation between its two most evident strands: on the one hand, its extravagant lament at a lover's desertion, which imagines her torn apart, abolished, and consumed (literally eaten up, even) by the speaker, and, on the other, its equally extravagant claims of poetic immortality, often in contrast to the beloved's merely mortal body. And in fact the transitions are notably bumpy—at one level, the poem's remarkable creation of an unforgettable voice represents a mind distracted by grief and thwarted desire. Beside itself, riveted to itself and rent apart by its furious yearning, that distracted voice unifies the poem in speaking of the experience of desire. Yet the two strands are conceptually entwined; the poem's understandings of desire and immortality are inseparable. More than that: the two preoccupations of the poem,

Queer Atavism and Pater's Aesthetic Sensibility

"Hippolytus Veiled" and "The Child in the House"

In Giorgio Agamben's reading of Herman Melville's "Bartleby," I noted earlier, the scrivener who would prefer not to contests "the retroactive unrealizability of potentiality,"¹ the inevitability, as one might also phrase it, of history; in the terms Agamben takes from Walter Benjamin, Bartleby brings out the capacity of "remembrance" to "redeem" the past: "remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again" (267). Such a redemption—what Daniel Heller-Roazen calls "to read what was never written"²—offers an apt description of the paradoxical form of revival that characterizes both Walter Pater's historiography and his model of aesthetic sensibility. *Queer* is the term, to my mind, for both, less because they are attended by an explicit same-sex eroticism (to perceive that eroticism, it suffices to attend to the explicit statements of the texts, and this chapter, therefore, will largely take it for granted) than because historical transmission and aesthetic perception are, in Pater's account, out of phase with themselves.³ The past for Pater, writes Carolyn Williams, "is dead and buried" and "can only be revived after a period of loss and forgetting"; likewise, "the governing fiction of development must be interrupted for knowledge to be formed."⁴ In Pater, as in the other writers discussed in this study, literary history is embodied by a series of objects that—over and over again—fail to be transmitted, and aesthetic consciousness often seems to consist in the increasingly refined (and pleasurable) ways that consciousness can be experienced in its failure to coincide with itself. Read together for the exploration of queer transmission, Pater's short texts "Hippolytus Veiled: A Study from Euripides" and "The Child in the House" point to a potentiality that structures both historical recovery and aesthetic *Bildung* in Pater.

"Centuries of zealous archaeology notwithstanding," begins "Hippoly-

“That Strange Mimicry of Life by the Living”

Queer Reading in Oscar Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”

The charting of what Leo Bersani calls the “metaphysical sociability” that traverses the contemplation of ideal forms in Plato’s *Symposium* led us to perceive ways in which the curiously messy narrative of that dialogue makes the vagaries of transmission central to a theory in which desire for a particular boy would seem to vanish into the contemplation of beauty as idea—beauty purified of any accidental qualities, beauty that is nothing other than beauty itself.¹ Foregrounding that process of transmission, the staging of the dialogue acts out some of the consequences of its understanding of love as a form of mediation. Transmission becomes queer not only because Socrates favors the cultivation of ideas over the creation of actual babies and links that cultivation to male intergenerational eros, but also because the text makes clear that, for us, knowledge is indistinguishable from the medium that conveys it. That makes for a paradoxically queer form of transmission, and the fact that knowledge, at one point in Diotima’s speech, takes the form of a creative forgetting is perhaps not unrelated to the persistence of the boy’s beauty—the beauty of Agathon or Alcibiades, Charmides or Phaedrus—within the ostensibly transcendent form of contemplation that would negate his particularity in the perception of beauty “as such.” Not coincidentally (articulating as it does one strand of eroticized aesthetics that finds its source in Plato’s dialogue), Oscar Wilde’s remarkable story “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” spells out the paradoxical erotics of the disappearance of particular beautiful bodies and explores what it means to say that their beauty “lives on” in art. In so doing, it meditates on “queer reading”—on what it means to “recognize” desires in art, or even to be called to a particular desire by a passionate experience of aesthetic apprehension—and links queer reading to literary history. The boy disappears in the passage from embodied perception to ideal forms; he disappears, too, through the passage of time. Vanished as

Erotic Bafflement and the Lesson of Oscar Wilde

De Profundis

Do you really think that at any period in our friendship you were worthy of the love I showed you, or that for a single moment I thought you were? I knew you were not. But Love does not traffic in a marketplace, nor use a huckster's scales. Its joy, like the joy of the intellect, is to feel itself alive. The aim of Love is to love: no more, and no less.

—Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

How splendid it would be if it were true, if shame felt this exquisite, if one's own abjection could be the occasion for a song like Wilde's. Some personal destitutions remain stubbornly unremediable, and yet Wilde's text makes me dream that to formulate my inadequacy to his upbraiding address might begin to describe the erotic appeal of "art for art's sake." How splendid that would be. Chapter 5 suggested that Wilde's "Portrait of Mr. W.H." offers a complex meditation on absorption—as a cipher of the paradoxical afterlife lived "in" the work of art, of the strange identifications excited by the vanishing of human presence in the austere form of art. In contemporary readers—often, though not exclusively, queer ones—Wilde himself, of course, inspires an investment not entirely dissimilar to Erskine's and Cyril's investment in Shakespeare and his beloved boy, and it is difficult not to view the fate of those passionate readers (as, perhaps, the fate of Dorian Gray himself), as uncannily presentiments of Wilde's own martyrdom. The complex ramifications of the way his sordid tragedy helped codify twentieth-century homosexual identity (so that his name could enable generations of gay readers to discover a name for their own desires) have been explored by astute readers such as Ed Cohen, Linda Dowling, Lee Edelman, Neil Bartlett, Ellis Hanson, Wayne Koestenbaum,

Lessons of the Master

Henry James's Queer Pedagogy

Even the disciple has his uses. He stands behind one's throne, and at the moment of one's triumph whispers in one's ear that, after all, one is immortal.

—Oscar Wilde, "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated"

"You make me very miserable," Paul ecstatically breathed.

—Henry James, "The Lesson of the Master"

It is a striking aspect of Henry James's fiction that no one ever learns anything—or, more precisely, no one is represented learning. Initiation is often a central concern, but its centrality in any given text seems in direct relation to the tendency of the initiation itself to fade from view. Repeatedly, development—of consciousness, of knowledge—is shown to be incompatible with the narrative of development. *What Maisie Knew* is perhaps the text that gives this structure its fullest expression, but it is also there, for instance, in the logic of childhood innocence in *The Turn of the Screw*: the children are angels or they are demons. The middle reaches between those extremes are foreclosed not just by the governess's prurient delusions but by the structure of knowledge itself. In the famous moments of realization—one thinks of Maggie Verver, Isabel Archer, Lambert Strether, or, in a potentially delusional mode, even Miles and Flora's governess—what comes to be known is that one already knew, where *what* one already knew pales in importance next to the recognition of delayed recognition. Consciousness is ever belated in relation to itself; this is perhaps the shared theme of James's late fiction. As a recurrent concern, the

The Beast's Storied End

It is striking that the two best readings of Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle*—by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Leo Bersani—find reason to regret its ending, viewing it as a failure of lucidity or nerve on the part of its author.¹ For both, too, what is regrettable about the end is the sudden convergence of author and character, which invests John Marcher with narrative authority or consigns the previously distanced narrator to the particular perplexities of that most perplexed of characters. “James’s bravura in manipulating point of view,” Sedgwick writes, “lets him dissociate himself critically from John Marcher’s selfishness—from the sense that there is no possibility of subjectivity other than Marcher’s own—but lets him leave in place of that selfishness finally an askesis, a particular humility of point of view as being *limited* to Marcher’s” (Sedgwick, “The Beast in the Closet,” 199). At the end, however, Marcher and James, in Sedgwick’s view, unite in giving voice to May Bartram’s unexpressed desires: “For this single, this conclusive, this formally privileged moment in the story—this resolution over the dead body of May Bartram—James and Marcher are presented as coming together, Marcher’s revelation underwritten by James’s rhetorical authority, and James’s epistemological askesis gorged, for once, beyond recognition, by Marcher’s compulsive, ego-projective certainties” (200). The underwriting of Marcher’s “realization” with “narrative/authorial prescription” (199) means that the story does not merely depict the ravages of homosexual panic on a thereby representative character; it enacts the knowingness—the enforced and enforcing self-ignorance—that Sedgwick diagnoses as the mechanism of male homophobia. If, in the last scene, Marcher becomes “the irredeemably self-ignorant man who embodies and enforces heterosexual compulsion” (210), then the “rhetorical clinch” (199) Sedgwick also finds there has dire consequences for the story, for the genitive in her subtitle—“James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic”—might be read to diagnose a writing that does not so much depict panic as enact it. Presuming to give voice to another’s desire—Marcher and James

“My Spirit’s Posthumeity” and the Sleeper’s Outflung Hand

Queer Transmission in *Absalom, Absalom!*

. . . I said to the mountain,
what becomes of things:
well, the mountain said, one
mourns the dead but who
can mourn those the dead mourned;

—A. R. Ammons, “Continuing”

*The ivory body of the Bithynian slave rots in the green ooze of the Nile,
and on the yellow hills of the Cerameicus is strewn the dust of the young
Athenian; but Antinous lives in sculpture, and Charmides in philosophy.*

—Oscar Wilde, “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.”

Literary tradition raises the question of survival and of the artifacts whose possible preservation means that they belong to a time beyond that of any human being. To live “in sculpture” or “in philosophy” is therefore an equivocal proposition; such a sublimation cannot leave one as one “is,” and, for Wilde, immortality (in the paradox Dorian Gray embodies) is achieved through one’s vanishing, just as the continuity of culture is secured, in Pater’s renaissance, through a series of discontinuities. Art makes present not the moment but its vanishing; “humanism” gives us to see the perpetual fading away of the human.¹ I propose to read William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* in this perhaps unlikely context; its link to Pater and Wilde—and, beyond that, to a long tradition of queer aesthetics—goes far beyond the tableau of Charles Bon’s mistress visiting his grave: “It must

“Vanished but Not Gone, Fixed and Held in the Annealing Dust”

Initiations and Endings in *Go Down, Moses*

William Faulkner has not, to my knowledge, been claimed as part of any gay or queer tradition; his name has perhaps never appeared on any list of a queer canon stretching from Socrates and Plato to Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe to Pater and Wilde to Woolf and Stein to Proust and Jean Genet. That fact may be attributable to our anecdotal knowledge of Faulkner's life—reinforced by a lingering sense that queer texts are written by queer persons, or that literature expresses the life of the author by mirroring some putatively primary, extraliterary experience—or to a more or less sophisticated sense that Faulkner (with Joyce, against Woolf and Proust) represents butch (male) modernism. That he is not often read in relation to queerness attests more to the resilience of homophobic modes of reading than to any unresponsiveness on the part of his texts to queer reading—even when that is understood to mean merely an openness to registering homoeroticism. As with *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and indeed almost all of Faulkner's texts, to perceive the homoerotic thematics of *Go Down, Moses*, it suffices simply to pay attention. Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy are less glamorous than Quentin and Shreve, but their relationship is even more explicitly a same-sex marriage. Cultured gay Victorians were, it has often been remarked, confronted with the daily paradox that their society's most esteemed form of knowledge—Greek philosophy and culture—contained explicit celebrations of the homosexual desire whose very existence, if they were to accede to the highest realms of cultural privilege, they had to deny. Then, as now, to be the guardian of cultural tradition is more or less fundamentally not to read it. It would be wishful to imagine that literary or cultural knowledge had even remotely the cachet in contemporary American life that it did for the Victorians; to