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Reading, Writing and the “Straight White Male”: What Masculinity Studies Does to Literary Analysis

Pierre-Antoine Pellerin

“To be a successful reader in the academy, it was argued, was to learn to read as a straight white male, at the cost of fidelity to one’s actual experience of life.”

Geoff Hall (95)

- 1 Drawing on feminism, gender studies and queer theory, the field of masculinity studies emerged in American academia in the early 1990s, mostly as a reaction against the anti-feminist men’s movements that were then enjoying a significant popularity in the United States. Its avowed goal was to map out in detail the history of a gender that had not received the critical attention necessary to a better understanding of gender relations. As it had been the center, the norm from which all other gender identities had been defined, masculinity had always remained invisible as such, an invisibility that had been central to its successfully maintaining a hegemonic and privileged position. Rooted in the assumption that gender is historically contingent and culturally constructed, scholars in the field set out to refine our understanding of the normative principles, narrative strategies, epistemological categories and power relations which have structured the experience and representation of masculinity. In particular, they insisted on the performative, relational, prosthetic, homosocial and plural dimension of masculine identity. Yet, since masculinity studies has been predominantly concerned with establishing a historiographical account of men as men, its impact on literary studies has remained somewhat limited.
- 2 Reading both male- and female-authored texts from this particular vantage point enables to raise a series of questions that cast literary analysis in a new light. What does it mean to write or read as “a straight white male”? What gendered assumptions are entrenched in our interpretive practices? Haven’t we all, men and women, black

and white, straight and queer, learned to interpret texts as "straight white males"? And what does it mean to read otherwise? What is significantly lacking from contemporary literary analysis is a questioning of the way we continue, as readers of literary works and authors of literary analysis, to heavily rely on definitions of notions like sign, style, trope, genre or narrative that were developed within a critical tradition that was blind to questions of gender and uninformed by queer theory. Especially in France, where the intellectual sway of structuralist thought, the universalist ideals of Republicanism and the post-May 1968 backlash against theory have worked together to maintain women's studies, LGBT studies, gender studies, feminist theory and queer theory in a marginal status, literary analysis has been constituted as an autonomous, self-legitimizing field with specific questions and methods, often at the cost of social or political import and impact. I would suggest that a more refined understanding of masculinity and of the way it has shaped literary epistemology can produce insightful and refreshing readings.

- 3 The point here, therefore, is not to rehash the now formulaic idea that the literary canon is mostly composed of "dead white European men" as the phrase goes (and as true as it may be), or to simply analyze the "representation" of masculinity (though it may prove fruitful), or to be satisfied with just "contextualizing" literary works in a gendered perspective (however useful it may prove), but to underline the importance of disciplinary disaffiliation and deterritorialization in order to question and transform our textual practices as readers, teachers and researchers. Since masculinity studies only exists as a supplement to feminism, gender studies, LGBT studies and queer theory (and a whole series of other disciplines), it participates in further de-compartmentalizing academic fields without ever successfully reclaiming a critical master-narrative. Viewing literary texts through the prism of masculinities (and vice versa) opens up new questions and provides crucial answers which can reinvigorate the field of literary analysis and challenge our most deeply rooted assumptions about reading and writing.

1. Masculinity studies, or reading the norm

- 4 Although it is possible to trace antecedents in the late 1970s and 1980s (Joseph H. Pleck's *The Myth of Masculinity* published in 1981 and Harry Brod's *The Making of Masculinity* in 1987), masculinity studies only emerged as a separate and autonomous field of research in the mid-1990s.¹ It originated first and foremost in American academia, finding few echoes in Europe (with the exception of Scandinavian countries), and it originally was essentially the product of the work of historians, sociologists and psychologists. Since then, various encyclopedias about men have been published; several publications are dedicated to the study of men and masculinity; associations of scholars working on the question have been created around the world; book series have been launched on the subject; and more recently, under the direction of Michael Kimmel, the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities was established at Stony Brook University where the first Master's Degree in Masculinity Studies was launched in September 2016.² In France, with the notable exceptions of Pierre Bourdieu's *La Domination masculine* (1998), Elisabeth Badinter's *XY: de l'identité masculine* (1992) and several sociological studies by Daniel Welzer-Lang, all of which met with extensive and justified criticisms, there was only sporadic academic research on the question until

the mid-2000s, leaving the field of masculinity open to uninformed approaches like Eric Zemmour's *Le Premier sexe* (2006). Though a significant amount of research has been done in France since then, it has overwhelmingly originated from the area of film studies, practitioners of literary analysis remaining largely uninterested in the question.³

- 5 Besides the analysis of what feminist historians and philosophers had already described in so many terms—from “patriarchy” or “phallo(go)centrism” to “masculine domination” and “male hegemony,” here are the interrelated paradigms that have defined the field of masculinity studies:

- *Masculinity is the privilege of invisibility.* By being the center, the norm from which all other identities proceed, masculinity has remained largely invisible as such. Although library shelves are packed with books that narrate the “great deeds” of “great men,” those historical narratives never questioned the way being male has influenced and structured the lives, actions and thoughts of these men. To put it differently, men had no history as men and the aim of critical studies of men and masculinities, therefore, has been “to turn attention to men in a way that renders them and their practices visible, apparent and subject to question, and to undertake this examination with an explicit political intent” (qtd. in Flood 402).
- *Masculinity is a historical construct.* As such, it encompasses a wide array of representations and experiences that differ from one culture, historical period or social class to another. As historian Rotundo puts it, “manhood is not a social edict determined on high and enforced by law. As a human invention, manhood is learned, used, reinforced, and reshaped by individuals in the course of life” (7). In other words, to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir’s famous claim, one is not born a man, but rather becomes a man. Masculinity studies thus argues that the masculine gender has little to do with the male biological sex or with physical phenotypic features, but is essentially the product of cultural codes, social norms and ideological imperatives which vary across time and space.
- *Masculinity is multiple and variable.* Masculinity studies emphasizes the multiplicity of masculine identities at work in any culture, something which was for a long time hidden by the somewhat homogenizing and reductive terms used by 1970s feminist theory like “patriarchy” or “phallocentrism.” It is thus more pertinent to talk of masculinities in the plural form, not only to show how it is shaped by competing or mutually reinforcing identities, but also to account for the dominant position of hegemonic models of masculinity over subaltern, marginalized identities. It thus refines, rather than invalidates, the feminist premise of “masculine domination.”
- *Masculinity is a homosocial enactment.* Besides being constructed in opposition to femininity, masculinity is also to a large extent the result of male bonding, of socialization between men. If one is not born a man, but rather becomes a man, historians of masculinity have tried to analyze the various social processes by which this becoming is achieved, as well as the myths and rituals that regulate it. They have identified how, especially in exclusively male spaces like fraternities, boy gangs, sports teams and gentlemen’s clubs, male-to-male relationships structure masculine identity by encouraging certain behaviors and excluding others. In particular, the suspicion of homosexuality that hovers over those homosocial ties requires homophobia in order to safeguard an otherwise threatened heterosexual identity.
- *Masculinity is a performance.* In keeping with Judith Butler’s influential proposition that “gender is always a doing” (33) rather than a fixed identity and that it is performatively constituted through “a repeated stylization of the body” (44), theories of masculinity have posited that any attempt at grounding masculine identity in biological sex, in Oedipal

anxiety or in trans-historical archetypes amounts to a conceptual fallacy. Masculinity has little to do with the male body and is essentially prosthetic, so much so that it can be said to be "all the more legible when it leaves the white male body" (Halberstam 2) as is the case with "female masculinity"—that is, biological women assuming masculine gender.

- 6 Before we see how those various paradigms can help redraw the contours of literary analysis, a few comments should be made as to the disciplinary status of masculinity studies. Though it has surely participated in the fragmentation of disciplines and the hyperspecialization of academia, masculinity studies cannot really be said to be an autonomous field or to have explored a no-man's-land. Not only has it heavily borrowed from both queer theory and gender studies, but it has always had an uneasy relationship to both feminism (as the awkwardness of the term "pro-feminist" suggests) and to the mythopoetic men's movement (to which it was meant to be a critical reaction). It does not have a methodology of its own, but has relied on the epistemological tools taken from sociology, psychology, historiography, philosophy and various other disciplines. Besides, masculinity studies has experienced many developments since its inception—like boyhood studies or black masculinity studies—further deterritorializing a disciplinary field that has no separate, independent existence.

2. Genre, gender and the fictions of masculinity

- 7 When social historian Arthur Schlesinger published "The Crisis of American Masculinity" in the November 1958 issue of *Esquire*, the idea that men in the United States were going through an identity *malaise* and that society was becoming more and more feminized was far from new and already had a long history.⁴ What is far more interesting is how Schlesinger, though not a literary critic, resorts to literature in his analysis of masculinity and retraces a short genealogy of the virility of the male hero in the American novel—from certainty about what masculinity meant until the Civil War, to the first cracks and doubts in male protagonists at the beginning of the 20th century and the then-contemporary confusion about what made a man:

For a long time, [the American male] seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity. The frontiersmen of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, never had any concern about masculinity; they were men, and it did not occur to them to think twice about it. Even well into the 20th century, the heroes of Dreiser, of Fitzgerald, of Hemingway remain men. But one begins to detect a new theme emerging in some of these authors, especially in Hemingway: the theme of the male hero increasingly preoccupied with proving his virility to himself. And by mid-century, the male role had plainly lost its rugged clarity of outline. (Schlesinger 292)

- 8 Though Schlesinger's wide-ranging meta-narrative approach to the relationship between masculinity and literature in the United States lacks contextual specificity and conceptual accuracy, his intuition that fiction betrays or reformulates the tension between the experience and the ideal of masculinity is highly useful.⁵ What is enabling in this way of understanding the history of literary forms is that it goes beyond simple structural or formal typologies and allows to account for the social norms and gender codes which affect aesthetic categories and determine poetic choices. Yet, genre and gender are bound together in intricate ways that require a refined work of contextualization. Narrative strategies, stylistic choices, rhetorical effects and diegetic

realms reflect generic concerns that are often built on specific assumptions about what a man should be. By bringing attention to masculine identities in its multiple forms, masculinity studies has enabled to draw out an archeology of literary masculinity that goes beyond the relation of binary opposition to a purportedly unified feminine tradition and can account for the ways in which definitions of literary genres are fraught with gender implications.

- 9 In that perspective, several studies have focused on specific genres such as the crime novel, a genre which includes the *roman noir*, the hard-boiled novel and the detective novel, and encompasses the "highbrow" novels written by Chester Himes, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and Dashiell Hammett and the more popular fiction found in dime novels. In the context of anti-homosexual panic, virulent anti-intellectualism and anti-feminist discourses, the protagonist of crime novels—"the white man wandering the urban streets, threatened and alone"—offers a figure "whose compulsive representation can help to examine the troubled and troubling consolidation of white masculinity in pre-and post-World War II American culture" (Abbott 5). Chandler's defining essay on the genre does not leave any doubt as to the gender or sexual identity of characters like the Continental Op: "He must be a complete man and a common man, yet an unusual man," "a man of honor" who "is neither a eunuch nor a satyr" and who "will take no man's dishonesty, and no man's insolence without due and dispassionate revenge," "a lonely man" whose "pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him" (qtd. in Kimmel, 2006 141). Confronted with stock characters like the *femme fatale* or the "homosexual pervert" and defined in opposition to the emasculating conformity of the "man in the grey-flannel suit," this independent, violent and affectless character is resolutely straight and excessively masculine, as well as systematically white. Popular sub-genres like sports fiction, travel narratives and war accounts, which were the stuff of men's adventure magazines during the heyday of pulp publishing, offer similar narrative codes, stock characters, textual motifs and narrative strategies that reflect the sexual anxiety of their exclusively male readership and of society at large. They all draw a rather strict line between winners and losers, rugged individualists and domesticated family men, real men and wimps, hard-boiled and soft men, straight and queer, brave men and sissies. As such, they produce and reproduce representations about what men are, can be or ought to be.
- 10 Another revealing example of the unlikely connections between literary genre and masculine gender is the opposition that structured novel writing in the late 19th century in the United States with, on the one hand, the cult of virility among self-declared realist writers like Frank Norris, Jack London, Mark Twain and William Dean Howells, and, on the other hand, the local-color regionalism of female writers like Sarah Orne Jewett, Rose Terry Cooke, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman or Constance Fenimore Woolson and its supposedly feminine sentimentality, abstraction and idealism. As Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous description of late 19th-century female novelists as a "damned mob of scribbling women" (304) reminds us, male novelists then feared that women were colonizing the field of novel writing, a loss of privilege that also meant a threatening feminization of their status and identity as practitioners of literature. "Fiction is not an affair of women and aesthetes," Norris writes, before adding that "[o]f all the arts it is the most virile" (1155). Not only was novel writing a man's game in which women had no part, but his conception of the female muse was far removed from any hint of femininity: she was not a "chaste, delicate, super-refined

mademoiselle of delicate roses and 'elegant' attitudinizing, but a robust, red-armed *bonne femme* who rough-shoulders her way among men" (1155), a butch, masculine woman who significantly differs from the *femme fatale* of English Romantic poetry (like John Keats's *Belle Dame sans Merci*). As Michael David Bell puts it in his influential study of American realism, "[t]o claim to be a 'realist,' in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, was among other things to suppress worries about one's sexuality and sexual status and to proclaim oneself a man" (37).

- 11 Like fiction, poetry has also been troubled by gender controversy. Postwar literary communities in the United States are a case in point. Whereas European bohemia of the early 20th century offered women important venues for artistic creation and collaboration, American poetic circles in the 1950s did not provide much recognition or support to women writers who had to define themselves largely within male circles. Allen Ginsberg remarked that "[t]he social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang, not society's perfum'd marriage" (80), opposing the joyful carelessness and freedom of schoolboys and bachelors to the institution of marriage which can only stifle the poet's creativity. Similarly, Robert Duncan referred to the San Francisco Renaissance as "the champions of the boys' team in Poetry," a team that was divided between "star players, bench sitters and water boys", while the only women allowed were Helen Adam as a maternal poetic figure of sorts—"team godmother"—and Joanne Kyger—"[she] could play on the team, but she was a girl" (qtd. in Davidson, 1989 175). Literary communities have indeed been mostly conceived on the model of gentlemen's clubs, most often excluding, or at least belittling, women's literary ambitions. They could be muses, lovers, prostitutes, mother figures, monsters of virtue or of bitchery, but rarely authors in their own right.
- 12 Besides, competing definitions of masculinity were often at stake in poetic debates. For instance, the distinction made by Robert Lowell between two schools of poetry in his 1960 National Book Award acceptance speech is symptomatic of the conflicting tension between two radically diverging perceptions of male authorial identity: on the one hand, the "raw" poetry of Black Mountain, Beat Generation, San Francisco Renaissance and New York School poets—"blood dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience [...] dished up for midnight listeners," "a poetry that can only be declaimed," "a poetry of scandal" (qtd. in Staples 13)—and the "cooked" poetry of the New Formalists like Richard Wilbur, James Merrill, Anthony Hecht and Elizabeth Bishop—"marvelously expert," "laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar," "a poetry that can only be studied," "a poetry of pedantry" (13). The latter is more aristocratic and elitist, civilized and domesticated, influenced by European modernism and denounced as effete intellectualism by its opponents and as downright "castration of the pure masculine urge to freely sing" by Jack Kerouac (1993 56); the former is crude and rugged, spontaneous and primitive, and purports to convey an all-American feeling of energy, freedom and virility. The homosocial nature of literary communities, the correlative marginalization of women and the uncritical celebration of masculine qualities thus provide an interesting background for reading certain literary texts through which writers of both sexes defended their respective poetics and transformed the field of literature. Instead of a grand narrative based on the loss or conquest of the Phallus, one has to follow the local relations of intertextuality and the way writers have revised gender representations. Diane di Prima's "The Practice of Magical Evocation," a sardonic response to Gary Snyder's somewhat misogynist poem "Praise for Sick Women," or Denise Levertov's "Hypocrite Women," an equally scathing poem that

constitutes a poetic reply to Jack Spicer's celebration of male beauty and love in "For Joe," are two cases in point in that regard (Davidson 1989).

3. Writing masculinity: from the pen(is) to the mask

- 13 In their groundbreaking work on 19th-century female novelists, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar begin their analysis by insisting that "[t]he poet's pen is in some sense (even more figuratively) a penis" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984 4). In their eyes, this means that women who wanted to write had to seize the pen from male authors, adopt the phallic power it confers, before adapting it to their own purposes.⁶ Yet, as Michael Davidson remarked in his influential study of masculinity in American postwar poetry, such a proposition raises a certain number of questions and its theoretical flaws have to be deconstructed in the light of gender and queer theory:

Is *the* penis a penis, and can it stand up, as it were, to the work of masculinity in its multiple forms? Is the possession of biological signs of masculinity the same as being masculine? At what point does the penis become the phallus, a free-floating signifier of authority capable of being possessed by both biological males and females? (Davidson 159)

- 14 This series of questions opens up multiple perspectives of inquiry that do not equate sex, gender and sexuality and can renew our approach to the relationship between masculinity and writing. By drawing out a history of the masculine gender, masculinity studies does not only allow to contextualize the representation of male characters, but also allows to account for the way in which certain stylistic characteristics are perceived, at a certain place and time, in a gendered perspective. The act of writing is not an idiosyncratic expression or a trans-historical artifact that takes place in the intimate space of the author's study room and reflects his inner self or his hidden psyche, but a performative act that takes place on a socio-political stage and constitutes the identity that is said to pre-exist. Masculinity is not a question of sex, of a biological body, of a nature or of an identity that would predate writing or that writing would express or complete. It is performative in the sense that it is articulated, achieved and conveyed through the act of writing itself. There is no "masculine writing" and the pen is not a penis; there are textual effects of gender that result from the stylized reiteration of, and in, writing.
- 15 Several interconnected consequences follow. First, gendered metaphors of style should be deconstructed and seen as what they are—namely, tropes which are given materiality through stylistic devices. Let's take the example of "muscular prose," best embodied by Ernest Hemingway's lean, sparse, unadorned style. It is characterized by the use of few adjectives and tropes, short sentences, simple syntactical structures, asyndetic parataxis and minimal dramatization. What is "masculine" or "muscular" about it remains unclear, though it certainly has to do with the emotional detachment and the sense of restraint that it supposedly conveys. Yet, by virtue of its being associated with Hemingway's heroic masculinity and literary persona, it has represented a model for many writers (one can think of James Baldwin's praise of Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* [1948] and Philip Roth's admiration for Saul Bellow's *Augie March* [1953], both explicitly mentioning their "muscular prose"). Yet, when applied to Willa Cather's novels by a magazine writer in *Vanity Fair* in 1927, it has to be read as a way of legitimizing a female writer for writing "like a man" and entering the "man's game" of novel writing, incidentally reaffirming a long tradition that

associates aesthetic profusion (as well as sentimentality and regionalism) with femininity.⁷ However, terms such as "muscular" are subjective, connoted and potentially reversible. For 1950s poets like Michael McClure, who claimed that his writing obeyed the "muscular principle" which "comes from the body—it is the action of the senses—[...] it is the voice's athletic action on the page and in the world" (vii), muscularity came to be associated with the very opposite qualities, namely dramatization of enunciation, lyricism, polysyndeton, accumulation of adjectives, multiplicity of tropes and an expressionist aesthetic.

- 16 The second consequence is that the connection between writing and masculinity is historically contingent and pragmatically constituted. Writing does not take place *ex nihilo*, but is intricately woven with a network of social, cultural and aesthetic norms which precede and exceed the writing subject. Authorial identity does not emerge on the corner of a blank page, but on the public stage of literature. The author is well aware that his identity is going to be perceived through the reader's eye and inferred from the stylistic characteristics of his prose. In the context of post-World War II anti-homosexual paranoia in the United States for instance, a period that witnessed the emergence of endless talk about a perceived "crisis of masculinity," the suspicion of effeminacy loomed large over the literary scene. Considering the close ties that bind one's writing to one's literary persona, building a resolutely masculine identity meant writing in a way that denoted manly skills. Especially in first-person narratives and poetry, stylistic virtuosity became a way of conveying virility. Writing about what one had experienced was a guarantee of authentic authorship, a badge of honor, as if "real men" wrote about "real life" in "real prose." Writing, in that context, had to convey the sense of danger and implied taking risks, and this is how we should read the popularity of a certain brand of realism in the postwar era. Hemingway's fascination for bullfighting and his vision of the bullfighter as the epitomic model for the writer—because "bullfighting is the only art in which the artist is in danger of death and in which the degree of brilliance in the performance is left to the fighter's honor" (Hemingway, 2000 80)—participates in his attempt to build a virile literary persona. Likewise, Kerouac's comparing himself to an athlete or his writing to running a sprint, a football game or boxing match, is revealing in a context in which Americans were thought to be too "soft" by President John F. Kennedy himself. For Kerouac, writing had to convey the sense of speed and movement that stirred the writer at the typewriter, as well as the sweat, tears and blood that it had cost him to write *On the Road* in three weeks and *The Subterraneans* in three days. In his eyes, this physical feat made him a literary hero of masculinity and attested to his belonging to the hard-boiled tradition of American novelists.
- 17 Thirdly, considering that the pen is not a penis, figuratively or otherwise, results in recognizing that masculinity is not the exclusive preserve of males. The performance of masculinity has to be read as a series of prosthetic effects, of cultural markers without which masculinity becomes undecipherable. In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam brilliantly demonstrates how masculinity should not be reduced to biological men and was all the more legible when it was not attached to the white male body. The "inverts" who people the narrative of modernist women writers like Virginia Woolf or John Radclyffe Hall are examples of women who lived "their lives as, if not men, wholly masculine beings, [...] did effectively change sex inasmuch as they passed as men, took wives as men, and lived as men," and "satisfied their desire for masculine identification through various degrees of cross-dressing and various degrees of overt masculine

presentation" (Halberstam 87). In *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Stephen—a young woman named with a boy's name, who dresses like a man and falls in love with a woman named Angela—and the eponymous protagonist in *Orlando* (1928)—a young nobleman who wakes up a woman and dresses alternatively as both man and woman—are well-known instances of literary performances of gender which raise essential questions as to the nature of masculinity.

- 18 Finally, performative approaches to masculinity in literature are helpful in so far as they enable to identify narrative masquerades and the staging of the writing self—the props, the masks and the postures that convey the sense of a properly masculine performance. One revealing example in that regard is the gendered use made by white male authors of African-American vernacular English, cultural codes and myths. This tendency to borrow elements from black culture for purposes that vary from comic parody—as in blackface minstrelsy—to serious pastiche—in jazz-influenced poetry for example—has been a constant feature of American culture. Passing for black was often a way to make up for what was perceived as the lack of vigor and potency of white middle-class culture. Many writers saw black culture as the expression of a primitivist ethos that denoted a libidinal energy and a virile strength in which they could drape themselves in order to stand out from the conformity of their social class and liberate themselves from their cultural milieu, often indulging in downright racial stereotyping. Norman Mailer's notorious essay "The White Negro" (1957), in which the American novelist celebrates a new breed of white men who have "absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro" and go out at night "with a black man's code to fit their facts" is a revealing literary example of white-to-black passing and the racial clichés that inevitably arise in such a performance: "in the worst of perversion, promiscuity, pimping, drug addiction, rape, razor-slash, bottle-break, what-have-you, the Negro discovered and elaborated a morality of the bottom" (341, 348). Beat Generation writers' endorsement of bebop jazz as developed by Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and Dizzie Gillespie must be read in this way. Although these writers' desire to put on a black mask most certainly participates in an attempt to transgress the codes of a segregated society and to betray one's cultural heritage, this cultural re-appropriation also expresses a desire to gain visibility and adopt the supposed virility of African-Americans at the cost of racist stereotypes. When the narrator of *On the Road* walks the streets of a black neighborhood in Denver, "wishing [he] were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy [...], wishing [he] could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (Kerouac, 1998 169-170), he unwillingly expresses how the revitalizing of white middle-class masculinity through racial passing only idealizes the living conditions and overlooks the political situation of African-Americans.

4. Beyond Oedipus: desire and masculinity in narrative

- 19 Before the emergence of masculinity studies, masculine identity was often understood through the prism of psychoanalysis. Analyses focused on the Phallus as the master signifier of masculinity and the Oedipus myth as its main structuring narrative. From Vladimir Propp (1968) to Jurij Lotman (1979), Marthe Robert (1980) and Roland Barthes (1977), the Oedipus complex has played a central role in early analyses of masculinity in narratives. In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984), queer theorist Teresa de

Lauretis herself conceives of desire in narrative structure as essentially male since its object is woman, an active/passive configuration of gender roles which, according to her, raises problems of identification for female readers. Like a specter, Oedipus is summoned again and again by literary theorists and functions like the return of the repressed—the Law, Authority, the Other, the Name of the Father, castration. Consequently, in this theoretical context, writing, like desire, is always viewed as patricidal (or incestuous), a transgression of the Law, a rebellion against tradition; and as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argued in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), projecting the familial neurotic triangular logics of “Daddy-Mommy-Me” onto social functions, cultural logics or legal fictions does not essentially affect the psychoanalytical perception of the male subject who remains caught in the same dialectics—father and son, law and transgression, *jouissance* and symptom.

- 20 The point here is not simply to rehearse an age-old argument against psychoanalysis *per se*, though it has undeniably tended to reduce gender identity to sexual difference, a binary distribution which stems from the double bind of incest and patricide in the Oedipal triangle. The main concern is that psychoanalytically-influenced literary critiques often tended to lay male novelists, poets and playwrights on the analyst’s sofa, presenting their texts as personal confessions or family narratives in which they could detect the symptomatic expressions of repressed primal scenes and unconscious desires. Particularly in the cases of autobiographies and of first-person narratives, the net result of such an approach was to transform authors into little boys expressing the regressive desire to return to the maternal realm and condemned to repeat immature acts of transgression against paternal authority or great precursors. As Alice Ferrebe noted in her thorough analysis of masculinity in late 20th-century British literature, “[i]dentification with this constantly alienated and superior attitude—reading male-authored texts as listening to little boys bolstering their egos—is [...] problematic for a contemporary reader” (5). This tendency to infantilize authors and readers not only prevents literary critics from taking certain literary works seriously, but more importantly, it treats non-normative expressions of masculinity as boyish (for they fail to accept the castration inherent to adult masculinity) and thus tacitly reproduces heteronormative accounts of gender.⁸ For instance, though Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) could be considered as one of the first full-length literary study of masculinity, in particular for its groundbreaking analysis of male bonding in Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), it fails insofar as it relies on uncritical definitions of masculinity and homosexuality inherited from Jungian archetypes. This leads Fiedler to frame American literature within the confines of regression and immaturity, regarding it as children’s literature that avoids the representation of sexuality.
- 21 Masculinity studies, following the findings of queer theory in that regard, has revised this perception and shown the theoretical deficiencies on which it is founded. In her crucial study of male homosocial desire in British literature, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick based her analysis on René Girard’s mimetic (rather than Oedipal) approach to desire to show that, “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power” (Sedgwick, 1985 26). She goes on to explain how this structural congruence can take the form of “ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the

two" (26). What emerges from her work is the double-bind of masculine identity—the way male writers and characters have had to navigate between prescribed forms of homosocial bonding and proscribed forms of homosexual desire: "For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being 'interested in men'" (89). In this perspective, several plays in the vein initiated by William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), in which male characters' measures of success are either a marriage in which one is not cuckolded, or how many husbands one has cuckolded, come out as works about male subjects' struggle for mastery against other men, rather than for female objects of desire. Besides, if same-sex desire has historically been the love that dares not speak its name, one shall maybe lend a careful ear to oblique, indirect expressions of same-sex desire. William Shakespeare's Sonnet XVII (1609), Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) are well-known instances that call for other works to be read in that perspective.

- 22 What follows from this is a renewed understanding of the textual function of homophobia which, like homosexuality, has often been the object of an Oedipal reading that has obscured its working in fiction. In what has become one of the most influential articles written about masculinity, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," Michael Kimmel explains how homophobia is not so much the fear of homosexual men as the etymology of the word seems to suggest, but "the fear of being perceived as gay," a feeling that leads men to exaggerate all the traditional codes of masculinity (from sexual predation to physical violence or emotional containment) for fear of being perceived (and shamed and marginalized) as "soft" men, "sissies," or "faggots": "[m]asculinity has become a relentless test by which we prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves, that we have successfully mastered the part" (Kimmel, 2005 41). Interpreting signs of homophobia as symptoms of an author's repressed same-sex desire and transforming him into a closeted or repressed homosexual opens speculations that do not carry very far and only reveals open secrets that one already knew about all along, most often by resorting to biographical data that supposedly support the uncovering of an Oedipal logic.
- 23 In contrast with those paranoid readings, homophobia as Kimmel defines it allows to account for its narrative function—regulating the spectrum of male-to-male relationships by reinforcing fraternal feelings of virile comradeship while condemning homoerotic feelings, particularly in historical contexts which saw the rise of discourses about the so-called "crisis of masculinity." Homophobia serves the function of purging male friendship, bachelorhood and attachment to mother figures of any suspicion of homosexuality: Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965) are well-known examples of narratives which present protagonists whose uneasy relationship to women (ranging from pornography, prostitution to excessive maternal attachment, chastity or wife-killing) and homosocial environment require explicit homophobia to save them from being identified as homosexuals. Jake Barnes, the protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), who, like many of Hemingway's characters, lives in a world of "men without women" to borrow the title of one of the author's collections of short stories, can only confess his failure to embody heroic masculinity—"it is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing" (Hemingway, 2006 42)—by asserting at the same time a homophobic vision of the world: "Somehow they [gay men] always made

me angry. I know they are supposed to be amusing, and you should be tolerant, but I wanted to swing on one, any one, anything to shatter that superior, simpering composure" (28). Besides, in the case of autobiographical narratives, one should pay attention to the way the author's anxiety about being perceived as homosexual often contaminates the narrative. Kerouac's well-known fear of being identified as gay—"Posterity will laugh at me if it thinks I was queer [...] I am *not* a fool! A queer! I am not! He-he! Understand?" (Kerouac, 1995 167)—has to be read in parallel with his deleting from the published version of the novel the scene in which the narrator watches the hero of *On the Road* prostituting himself with a gay man, a scene that appears unedited in the original scroll published in 2007. Yet, rather than serving an account of Kerouac's homophobia which would present him as a closeted homosexual pathologically attached to his mother, this act of self-censorship ought to be seen in the historical context of the persecution of homosexuals in the 1950s (which historian David K. Johnston terms the "lavender scare") and the anti-homosexual paranoia that haunted poets, novelists and playwrights in the early 1950s (see Johnson 2004).

Conclusion: Is there a theory in this class?

- 24 De-compartmentalizing academic fields is not only desirable to improve and refine one's respective disciplinary practices—in France, Anglophone studies are typically divided between "linguistique," "civilisation," "littérature" and "traductologie." Within the field of literary studies in France, for instance, it has become a vital necessity to make a stronger case in favor of grounding the analysis of style, narrative and genre in questions of race, class, gender and cultural identity. In particular, the current development and partial success of gender studies in the different established disciplines tends to both disrupt epistemological frontiers and lead to unlikely and often fruitful connections and tensions. Since the sphere of literature is not separate from the world outside literature (if such a distinction can actually be made), it is urgent that French academics such as myself consider our interpretive practices and their cultural assumptions, in particular the supposed scientific objectivity of structuralist approaches and the universalist ideals inherent to France's particular brand of republicanism (see Scott 2005).
- 25 Literary studies used to play a central role in intellectual and scientific debates in France. The fact that language was its raw material and that writing was its organizing principle seemed to naturally grant it a privileged position in the comprehension of human life. It attracted students and researchers from other disciplines who looked at literary analysis as a model for reformulating disciplinary practices and methods. Later, those thinkers whom American colleagues call post-structuralists and often group together under the label "French Theory" could not devise a philosophical system that did not make room for literature. In this context, to say that literary studies has lost its power of attraction is an understatement. Though critical theory has been legitimately criticized for the way in which it has occasionally supplanted the analysis of literary texts and led to normative readings—one thinks of Stanley Fish's critique *Is There a Text in this Class?* (1980)—, it has also instilled a lively atmosphere of emulation and creativity which François Cusset aptly described in *French Theory* (2003).
- 26 The point, though, is not to lament over the glory days of literary theory in France, nor to apologize for its supposed excesses on the other side of the Atlantic, but to find new

ways of reading that can help us account for the world in which we live. For a long time, literature has been read as if it were essentially concerned with itself. Form was the main concern and object of literary analysis, reinforcing in the process the autonomous and differential status of the field. Since literary studies needed to be legitimated as a scientific enterprise, it drew precise boundaries and set up specific methodologies that have then limited its scope and influence. If we have all learnt to read as "straight white males," then maybe reading otherwise means rethinking the epistemological and hermeneutic tools we have been using. However useful and precise, these tools make us blind to larger and more crucial questions, especially in the classroom. Saying that form is content or that the world itself is a matter of formal organization is not enough. Metaphors, narratives, characters, styles and genres tell us about individual and collective identity at least as much as they tell us about literature and aesthetics. Ecopoetics and ecocriticism, care and disability studies, queer theory and gender studies are just a few examples of lines of inquiry which have already played a central role in reconnecting everyday life with the world of literature. Thanks to their close ties with English-speaking academia, English language departments in France are arguably well positioned to bridge this gap and revive the sense that literature is crucial to us all.

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NOTES

1. The mid-1990s saw the almost simultaneous publication of *Manliness and Civilization* (1996) by Gail Bederman, *Masculinities* (1995) by R. W. Connell, Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America* (1996), Anthony E. Rotundo's *American Manhood* (1993) and Michael Messner's *Politics of Masculinities* (1997).
2. Among the encyclopedias, see for instance Flood (2007), Carroll (2003), and Kimmel and Aronson (2004). Academic journals include the *Journal of Men's Studies* (since 1992), the *Journal of Men and Masculinities* (since 1998) and *Norma: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* (since 2006). The American Men's Studies Association and the Nordic Association for Research on Men and Masculinities are two examples of active scholarly societies. As for book series, the Sage Series on 'Men and Masculinities' and Palgrave's Series on 'Global Masculinities' have played a decisive role in publishing research in this area.
3. See for instance Fergusson (2009). It should also be noted that an international conference entitled "Performing the Invisible: Masculinities in the English-Speaking World" was organized at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 on September 25-26, 2010, following a two-year research project on masculinity which brought together young researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds, including literary studies.
4. This recurrent discourse is symptomatic of the cyclic fear that masculinity is in danger of decline. The fact that a distinguished intellectual like Schlesinger took up the question is yet another proof of the deep roots of this thesis in the minds of Americans and, in particular, among the American elite. According to Schlesinger, gender roles have been blurred, both at home and in public life. The American male has become feminized and domesticated, performing "female" duties like changing diapers or cooking meals, thus transforming himself into "a substitute for wife and mother" (Schlesinger 292). Women, by contrast, are described as the "new rulers," as an "aggressive force" or a "conquering army" (293), a military simile which presents men as victims of emasculating women.

5. First, his choice of Cooper's Natty Bumppo as a starting point is rather problematic, the protagonist of the *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841) being what David Leverenz calls the first embodiment of the "Last Real Man in America," which is far from being representative of the American colonists of the second half of the 18th century. Also, putting in perspective Natty Bumppo and, say, Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby*, 1925), or Hemingway's Jake Barnes (*The Sun Also Rises*, 1926), leads Schlesinger to draw a questionable picture of literary masculinity. Besides, one should not forget that novels like *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and their rugged, manly characters, merely reflect the fantasies of a Paris-based author who belonged to the Manhattan elite, an irony which was not lost on D. H. Lawrence who described Cooper as "a gentleman in the worst sense of the word" (52).

6. In their following work, *No Man's Land*, the two feminist critics actually presented the literary field as a battleground where both "sexes" had fought a war for hegemony, from Mid-Victorian writers "dramatiz[ing] a defeat of the female" to slowly "envision[ing] the possibility of women's triumph," a tendency which culminated in the modernist era, when "both sexes by and large agreed that women were winning," before "postmodernist male and female writers, working in the 1940s and 1950s, reimagined masculine victory" (Gilbert and Gubar 1991: 5).

7. The article about Willa Cather published in the July 1927 issue of *Vanity Fair* is entitled "An American Pioneer—Willa Cather" (30). James Baldwin's comment about Norman Mailer's prose in *The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore* is from "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" (228), an essay published in *Nobody Knows my Name*. Philip Roth characterizes Saul Bellow's *Augie March* as "nervous muscular prose" (Roth 1977: 43).

8. The Oedipus complex has indeed played a central role in psychoanalytical accounts of homosexuality, often depicting same-sex desire as an immature and regressive libidinal impulse, which Guy Hocquenghem aptly named the "oedipianization of the homosexual." After originally presenting homosexuality as the expression of the constitutive bisexuality of men and women, then connecting it to narcissism later in his career, Sigmund Freud finally accounted for same-sex desire through the Oedipal logic, a theory that was widely disseminated by popular psychology: unable to give up the mother as a love object, to identify with the father-rival and to substitute another woman of his choice, the now homosexual male seeks other men as his love object. By reducing it to an arrest in the child's sexual development, this etiology of homosexuality ineluctably leads to pathologizing same-sex desire as "abnormal."

ABSTRACTS

This article aims at mapping out some of the ways in which masculinity studies has recently renewed the critical approach to certain literary texts. It argues that this fairly new disciplinary field has helped to de-territorialize literary inquiry and challenges deep-rooted assumptions about reading and writing. Essentialist notions like "masculine writing," bodily analogies between the pen and the phallus, and psychoanalytical tools such as the Oedipus myth have tended to obfuscate the multitude of masculine identities at work in literature. Combined with the textual and performative approach developed by queer theorists, the work done by historians of masculinity enables, for instance, to shed light on the pressures that burdened authorial identity in a context of homophobia like the Cold War period in the United States, to delineate the ways in which the constitutive homosociality of poetic circles in the 1950s fashioned their aesthetic norms and practices, and to deconstruct the narrative codes and the

fictions of masculinity which structured certain literary genres like the crime novel and the adventure novel.

Cet article se propose d'examiner la façon dont les études sur la masculinité ont récemment permis de renouveler l'approche de certains textes littéraires. Il défend l'idée que ce champ disciplinaire relativement nouveau a permis de déterritorialiser l'épistémologie littéraire et d'interroger certains présupposés qui structurent l'approche critique de l'écriture et de la lecture. Qu'il s'agisse de notions essentialistes telles que « l'écriture masculine », des analogies corporelles entre stylo et phallus ou de certains outils psychanalytiques comme le mythe d'Œdipe, l'analyse littéraire du genre est parfois restée aveugle à la multiplicité d'identités masculines à l'œuvre en littérature. Conjugué à l'approche textuelle et performative formulée par les théoriciens queer, le travail des historiens de la masculinité permet par exemple de rendre visible les pressions qui s'exercent sur l'identité auctoriale dans un contexte d'homophobie généralisée comme celui de la Guerre froide aux Etats-Unis, de comprendre comment l'homosocialité constitutive des cercles poétiques des années 1950 façonne leurs normes et leurs pratiques esthétiques et de déconstruire les codes narratifs et les fictions du masculin qui structurent certains genres littéraires comme le roman noir et le roman d'aventure.

INDEX

Keywords: masculinity, critical theory, literary analysis, homosociality, homophobia, queer theory, Oedipus, writing, narrative

Mots-clés: masculinité, théorie critique, literary analysis, homosocialité, homophobie, théorie queer, Œdipe, écriture, récit

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