LGBT Literature in Eastern Europe: A View from the West

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Out of Ignorance

Western ignorance of Eastern European cultures is often at its most conspicuous during moments of apparent rapprochement, when the magnanimous westerner decides to show an interest. We might think of Allen Ginsberg in 1965, having just been expelled from Cuba, interacting with the young people of Prague like a bull in a china shop, before the authorities put him on a plane to London. Gay sex was not illegal in Czechoslovakia, but Ginsberg's very public affirmations and recommendations of gay pride, and the openness of his serial sexual encounters with young Czech men, were more or less unthinkable. His biographer Barry Miles concludes the account of this episode: 'Allen played straight into the hands of the Stalinists, who were using any excuse to stem the tide of liberalism. Although Allen was acclaimed for his chutzpah—no one else would have *dared* to behave as he did—for his friends and acquaintances in those countries [Cuba and Czechoslovakia], his visits were not a conspicuous success' (Miles 368). The obliviousness was not all Ginsberg's—neither the organisers of the event in which he was crowned 'King of May', nor the authorities, had anticipated the huge crowds that would turn up—but Ginsberg's arrogance is instructive. Looking eastward from the West, such moments should give us pause. It is, at least, worth noting that, while Czechoslovakia had decriminalised homosexual acts in 1961, many of the United States continued to criminalise them well into the twenty-first century.

If western gay writers often speak about the East from positions of ignorance, that ignorance is not often diminished by the available text books. In my own *History of Gay Literature*, the only Eastern Europeans, apart from Russians and Germans, are Franz Kafka, Max Brod, Tadeusz Borowski and Wiesław Kielar (Woods 1998). Knowing, therefore, that my own work has not been exactly comprehensive in its coverage, I have consulted my reference books in LGBT studies to see how they compared. Of the Eastern European nations, Wayne Dynes' two-volume *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*

(1990) has a separate entry only on 'Russia and USSR', by Simon Karlinsky (1133-1138). Claude J. Summers' *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* (1995) has only an item on 'Russian Literature', also by Simon Karlinsky (611-618), plus shorter items on a few individual writers: Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Kuzmin, Sophia Parnok and Marina Tsvetaeva . Despite its ambition for universal coverage, Louis Crompton's massive book *Homosexuality and Civilization* contains just one sentence on Russia: 'Russia, where male relations seem to have been surprisingly open in the 1600s and 1700s, did not have a sodomy statute until 1832' (321).

Neil Miller's major historical survey, *Out of the Past*, is more forthcoming, but still almost wholly confined to the one nation: it has a chapter called 'Czars and Commissars: Homosexuality in Russia'. Its main subjects, seen within the context of continuous social change, are Gogol, Tchaikovsky, Kuzmin, Eisenstein; and a discrete section on 'Diaghilev, Nijinsky, and the Ballets Russes'. The chapter ends with a brief extract from Vasily Grossman's *Forever Flowing*, on lesbian relationships in the labour camps (199-214). Later, Miller mentions the 1993 decriminalisation of male homosexual acts by Boris Yeltsin's government, and briefly adds: 'The newly independent Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia repealed their sodomy laws as well' (485). Unusually, in addition to the obligatory item on 'Russia', as well as a separate item on 'Russian Literature', George Haggerty's encyclopaedia *Gay Histories and Cultures* has others on 'Czech Republic', 'Slovenia' and 'Yugoslavia'.[1]

Even as recent a volume as *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature* (2014) has only an item on 'Russian Gay and Lesbian Literature', by Brian James Baer. This appears in a section called 'Geographies of Same-Sex Desire in the Modern World', the purpose of which, according to the introduction by the volume's editors, is 'to make manifest' that 'LGBTQI literature … is not some marginal, peculiarly European phenomenon' (McCallum 8). This would suggest that they do not believe Russia is properly in Europe.

Dictionaries of prominent LGBT individuals are not much more reliable in their coverage. Take three examples published by Routledge at the beginning of this century. In Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon's *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History: From Antiquity to World War II*, out of a total of 489 individuals, there are one Hungarian (Károly Mária Kertbeny), eight Polish (Jósef Czechowicz, Jarosláw Iwaskiewicz, Jan Lechoń, Tamara de Lempicka, Stanisław August II, Karol Szymanowski, Vladislas III of Varna, Stanisław Witkiewicz), thirteen Russian (Serge Diaghilev, Sergei Eisenstein, Erté, Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Kuzmin, Serge Lifar, Vaslav Nijinsky, Sophia Parnok, Vasily Rozanov, Poliksena Solovieva, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Pavel Tchelitchev,

1 Will Petersen & Martin Vodražká, 'Czech Republic' (233-234); Kevin Moss, 'Russia' (755-757); Kevin Moss, 'Russian Literature' (757-759); Zoran Milutinović & Will Petersen, 'Slovenia' (823-824); Zoran Milutinović & Will Petersen, 'Yugoslavia' (964-965).

Marina Tsvetaeva), and one Ukrainian (Ol'ha Kobylians'ka). In the same editors' *Who's Who in Contemporary Gay and Lesbian History: From World War II to the Present Day*, out of a total of 511 individuals, there are four Polish (Jerzy Andrzejewski, Witold Gombrowicz, Grzegorz Musiał, Sławek Sławoska), three Russian (Yevgeny Kharitonov, Valery Pereleshin, Gennady Trifonov), three Slovenian (Bogdan Lešnik, Brane Mozetič, Suzana Tratnik), and one Ukrainian (Roman Viktiuk). In Gabriele Griffin's *Who's Who in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, out of a total of 443 individuals, there are just one Hungarian (Erszébet Galgóczi), and five Russian (Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Kuzmin, Sofia Parnók, Tat'iana L'vovna Shchépkina-Kupérnik, Marina Tsvetaeva).

The one cultural figure who most reliably appears in such encyclopaedias, generally in an item of his own, is Sergei Diaghilev, perhaps the most influential Eastern European homosexual of the last century. Although born not far from St. Petersburg, Diaghilev was often spoken of in the West, perhaps understandably, as if he came from far beyond the Urals. His Ballets Russes capitalised on a Western association of Russia itself with lands east of the Urals and times prior to the Industrial Revolution. Orientalism of this kind was big box office: the exoticism of 'Slavic' looks and styles, Léon Bakst's costumes, Nijinsky's face … And yet, even in the supposedly *Russian* Ballets Russes, Sergei becomes Serge, Mikhael becomes Michel Fokine, Myasin becomes Massine, and so on. The exotic Far East was all very well, but Eastern Europe was expected to westernise.

LGBT Critical Tasks

The simplest part of the job of LGBT literary scholars, and also, perhaps, the most pleasurable, is to read a lot and identify what might be of interest to other LGBT readers. We read with all our queerness sensors on full alert. We develop an ear for a revealing turn of phrase, an eye for a minor character with telling mannerisms, a nose for a suspiciously suppressed fragrance. This is how any of us might first have identified, in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the two officers whom Yashvin sneeringly calls 'the inseparables', and whose fleeting role in the novel seems to be to highlight the relatively safe masculinity of the bond between Yashvin himself and Vronsky (193-194). In Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, while discussing the new governor of a town in Siberia (who, we know from an earlier chapter, was sent there after being accused of the crime in Article 995 of the penal code, a homosexual crime), Mariette says something 'so funny' that Catherine Ivanovna cannot 'control herself for a long time' (283-284, 291-293). We gay readers know the kind of thing that has been said, for we ourselves are still familiar with the hilarity of homophobic gossip. The straight reader may well be oblivious to this.

Hearing of lesbian or gay authors on our own tantalising grapevine, we trawl their works for lesbian or gay texts. Conversely, having stumbled across lesbian- or gay-seeming texts, we scrutinise the biographical details for lesbian or gay authors. We reassess,

in the light of liberationist principles, LGBT texts which were previously undervalued or ignored. We identify past representations of what we now call LGBT people and take what we can learn from them about their social contexts. We perform queerings, or queer readings, of canonical texts, thereby estranging them, making them new in the light of our fresh understanding of sexual identities and their modes of speech. We are alert to the eccentricities of spinsters and bachelors. We appreciate the charms of masculine women and feminine men. We perform close readings of the gravestones of pairs of friends. To sum up, we insert ourselves into histories in which we had never been thought present; we *re*insert ourselves in histories from which we had been erased.

Since the history of homosexuality is also that of homophobia, we identify, and read critically, homophobic texts. We seek out past scandals because we know they will give us glimpses of our own history. The transcripts of prosecutions for obscenity may give us our only insight into censored texts. We pay close attention to complaints about a certain, unacceptable kind of independence among women; the court reports of nocturnal activities in parks; medical records of outbreaks of particular types of sexually transmitted disease; outbursts of religious and/or nationalist fervour directed against any form of unconventional behaviour … Social attitudes become audible in the tones of voice of press reports—even in their punctuation, as when a trans individual's self-presented sex is put in inverted commas: 'man'/'woman'. We are alert to the ways in which official records and press reports misrepresent everyday life. Moments when trans individuals become visible in the historical record arise when they get involved with public institutions—hospitals, army barracks, prisons—rather than when going about their ordinary routines in public and private spaces. Some, indeed, have been outed by death.

The Hidden and the Lost

Many LGBT scholars are engaged in tasks that can be grouped in the category of 'recovery research'—that is, quasi-archaeological tasks of recovering texts which have become lost or been hidden. In the opening sentence of the 'Editor's Preface' to his anthology *Out of the Blue*, Kevin Moss writes: 'Given the pervasive sexophobia in Soviet culture, it is no wonder gay people and gay literature appeared to be completely absent' (*Out of the Blue* 9). Hence his book's subtitle, *Russia's* Hidden *Gay Literature*. He is referring not only to the difficulty of seeing gay literature within the USSR itself, but also to the suppression of 'gay evidence' in pre-Soviet Russian literature. The hiding may be done by gay authors themselves, to get around censorship or to avoid scandal and worse. In some cases, their work is not published at all, or not within the USSR; in others, gay content is sublimated, either consciously or unconsciously—to be revealed in later analysis by gay readers and critics. Generation after generation of lesbian writers have vanished into the black hole of a presumption of 'innocence'—that is, of sexlessness. Even more than

in the case of men, the lives of woman-loving women have demanded a detailed and nuanced mapping of the borderlands between friendship and love. Collectively, we deny that there could ever be a clear boundary between the two. It can be open to question, whether certain literary techniques, styles or mannerisms are modes of concealment or revelation. This question might apply, for instance, to Camp; or to strategies of metaphorical complexity or obscurity.

As well as the 'hidden' there is the lost—literature that has been erased by homosexual history in particular (the burning of papers by one's family might be the most common modes of erasure, but who knows how many authors have destroyed their own work, who knows how much work remained unwritten?). And there is literature that has been erased by the convulsions of wider historical forces. For instance, we lack Nikolai Klyuev's unpublished writings, which he had left with his ex-lover Nikolai Arkhipov when he was sent into exile in Siberia, but which were lost when Arkhipov, in turn, was arrested and exiled. We lack Karol Szymanowski's novel *The Ephebe*, the manuscript of which was destroyed during the German bombing of Warsaw in 1939.

All too aware of the past disappearances of texts, we may also be sensitive to the possibility that our own work, our scholarship, may itself vanish or *be* vanished. We all find ourselves, to a greater or lesser extent, involved in a struggle against censorship—the threat that even our own voices will be silenced, will become lost. This struggle takes place not only in the broader, public arena, but also within our own academic institutions, and perhaps within our own families. There may even still be an inner censor, discouraging us from within. In terms of public life, the history of censorship differs profoundly from nation to nation, political context to political context, religious context to religious context, and so on; and it may be, precisely, when addressing our own local variations on these matters, that we are ourselves most at risk of being gagged.

Overlapping Cultures

West and East alike, we deal with many similar themes, tropes, structures. Such similarities need to be acknowledged, and perhaps questioned—but not assumed. For instance, in public discourse, the modern city is often represented as an anti-human space, isolating and alienating. But to many LGBT individuals, they are places in which to disappear from certain kinds of close scrutiny. In the possibility they offer of anonymity, they may offer a level of reassurance that was previously available only in the closet. Mikhail Kuzmin's 1903 novel *Wings* begins as many later gay novels do, with a journey from the provinces to just such a place, the metropolis. A wide-eyed young person arrives in the city and is taken under the wing of a more experienced older person, crucially not a family member, who will serve as a guide into an adult life in a queer subculture, often connected to a wider community of artists and intellectuals. One of the fascinating tasks

of the LGBT critic is to compare different versions of such narratives as they emerge from distinct historical moments within very different cultures. Compare the beginning of *Wings* with that of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* of 1978 …

So we must remember that our cultures overlap, West and East, even as we resist the temptation to assume they are identical. Take a key moment in British gay culture, in some ways *the* key moment, the trial and conviction of Oscar Wilde in 1895. Evgenii Bershtein has argued that 'Wilde's biographical legend shaped the formation of sexual identities and ideologies in *fin-de-siècle* Russia' (Bershtein 285). He is thinking of Mikhail Kuzmin and Vyacheslav Ivanov. The reporting of the Wilde scandal, and the subsequent reception of his works, have operated as a useful barometer in the climates of homophobia worldwide. As was the case, also, in Latin America, the reporting of Wilde's trials gave a rare opportunity for public discussion of homosexuality, albeit within a context of criminality and scandal; and the figure of Wilde himself became an icon of the outcast aesthete, a model worth following, if you had the courage. For homosexual men, and to an extent for lesbian women too, Wilde was both a model and a warning. After the publication of *Wings*, Mikhail Kuzmin was sometimes known as 'the Russian Oscar Wilde' or 'the northern Wilde'. But he himself eventually rejected the Wilde myth in favour of something more positive. In his diary entry for 6 June 1906, Kuzmin called Wilde 'that snob, that hypocrite, that bad writer and faint-hearted man, who besmirched that for which he was put on trial' (Malmstad 105).

When news of Wilde's conviction was met with hostility to him in the Czech press, the journal *Moderní revue*, whose literary editor was Jiří Karásek, defended Wilde in a way that was taken to be a broader defence of homosexuality itself. The journal's subsequent development of a specifically Czech brand of Decadence was as strongly influenced by Wilde as by French Modernism. Moreover, as Zdeněk Beran puts it, 'The controversy surrounding Wilde's imprisonment became an impulse for introducing his works to Czech readers'—an impulse acted on by *Moderní revue*. Issue 3 was initially planned to be wholly dedicated to Wilde, and not just for his sake. Karásek said 'This whole number of the *Moderní revue* is the first defence in Czech literature of the problem of the sexually inverted'. Wilde's name 'never disappeared from the pages of the magazine', Beran writes: 'His iconic status among the Decadents who gathered around the *Moderní revue* was indisputable' (259, 260).

Speaking of productions of Wilde's plays in Hungary in the first decade of the twentieth century, Mária Kurdi has argued that 'Wilde's work tended to be either condemned for its moral dangers or admired for its daring originality. This division reflected the clash of opinions on the national stage' (247). That is, opposed attitudes to Wilde's plays reflected a broader debate between conservative and progressive attitudes to Western Modernism. Later, in Nazi Germany, shorn of their social critique, his comedies were played as frothy romances like operettas. In the Soviet Union, they could be

performed as critiques of the British class system, with their decadent individualism downplayed: Wilde could be read as a critic of capitalism.

Nation, Language, Cosmopolitanism

Similarly, as Kārlis Vērdiņš has shown, Latvian media responses to the Eulenberg scandal in Germany (1907-1908) were largely determined by attitudes to German power rather than to homosexuality itself. Indeed, the relationship with Germany could be said to have prevented a potentially illuminating public discussion of homosexuality by pre-determining the story as being about decadence and effeminacy in the German aristocracy. There is good evidence that articles in the Latvian press not only accepted but actually demanded censorship of the topic. Intimations of German homosexuality were repeatedly published in Latvian papers during times of tension between Latvians and Baltic Germans. Similar hints were dropped at the outbreak of the First World War. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the association of Germany and homosexuality was duly applied to the rise of Nazism (Vērdiņš 123-133).

The Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness noted, in 1925, that Reykjavik had finally acquired all the trappings of modernity: 'not only a university and a movie theatre, but also football and homosexuality' (Jóhannesson 100). Homosexuality was a modern topic, and, up to a point, the willingness to discuss it was a sign of a modern society. But such discussions were generally more acceptable if they referred to somewhere else. Just as, in France and then Britain, 'buggers' were thought to come from Bulgaria, as often as not, homosexuality has raised questions of nationality and nationalism.[2] Magnus Hirschfeld, the great pioneer of sexology, lectured in Riga on 18 May 1926, and then again on 27 and 29 April 1929. His lectures were important enough to be raised in the press, but, as Ineta Lipša comments:

> The press did not reflect the views of Hirschfeld in the Latvian context; it did not indicate how his views were perceived by medical doctors and lawyers in Latvia, and did not attempt to establish whether there was a homosexual subculture in Riga, whether a homosexual community was developing or whether it had any leaders whose views might be worth ascertaining. Thus, in reporting on the views of Hirschfeld that homosexuality should be decriminalized, the press gave the impression that they bore no relation to the reality of life in Latvia. (Lipša 150)

There was indeed a queer subculture in Riga, sometimes known as the Black Carnation Club. But if you read the press reports you could be forgiven for thinking Hirschfeld

2 '*Bougre* derived from the Latin *Bulgarus*, meaning native of Bulgaria, where the Manichean and Albigensian heresies were known to flourish. The term Bulgar or *Boulgre*, contracted to *bougre*, was gradually applied to all heretics, and from being an abusive term term for heresy in general *bougrerie* (buggery) became the common appelation for the supposed sexual habits of heretics and usurers' (Hyde 49).

was an anthropologist, returned from an expedition to the other side of the world, rather than a politically engaged scientist with a recommendation of law reform specifically relevant to the population of Riga; indeed, to the people in the room.

The central character of Jiří Karásek's 1900 novel *A Gothic Soul* is led by his sense of difference to question his national status. His spiritual and sexual impotence, both, have their root in a troubled sense of what it means to be Czech. He is culturally normative in his broader cosmopolitanism: 'He thought in German and French. He was interested in the French and German peoples. He felt, breathed, and lived in German and French.' Although he recognises that this is a pose, when he emerges from a long reverie to hear Czech being spoken in the streets around him, he is indeed alienated from the speakers and what they are saying: 'There was no one he could love. Everything left him indifferent. He stared at everything apathetically'. When he encounters one of his mesmerisingly glamorous Doppelgangers, all the bells of Prague, identified one by one, begin to ring in celebratory ecstasy. It is as if male love were being welcomed home (Karásek 53, 56, 59-64). But he does not recant his cosmopolitanism; and besides, he is left all alone when the bells fall silent.

Karol Szymanowski was able to reconcile nationalist pride, as a Polish patriot, with the ideal of 'pan-Europeanism', which had developed especially around his love of Italy, and of Sicily in particular. But gay men and lesbians have rarely been trusted in this regard. The same questions kept coming up: does the homosexual's cosmopolitanism transcend and overrule any patriotic allegiance? Are such people more likely to serve each other's interests, across national boundaries, than those of their own compatriots? Blacklists of homosexuals were often compiled as pre-emptive lists of potential spies. Is the 'Homintern' a threat to the home or homeland? (Woods, *Homintern* 1-30).

Of course, cosmopolitanism, so often associated with homosexuality, both as one of its virtues and one of its sources of risk, tends to be routed through Western cities (privileging the already privileged cultural centres); and the cosmopolitanism of such Eastern cities as St. Petersburg and Budapest and Prague tends to be measured by the extent to which they look westward. How much of our supposed internationalism is truly international? For instance, is Camp the international language of queer style that is often claimed of it; or is it an instrument of cultural imperialism, designed to coerce us all into over-praising American musical theatre? If it is, how did this happen?

'Catching Up' with the West

The situation in the East is often construed, in the West, as one of having to 'catch up' with the more advanced and progressive West. We have tended to remember Soviet dismissal of homosexuality as an import from the 'decadent' West, and similar Soviet denials during the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Even in the face of ample evidence

(for instance) that various Eastern European nations decriminalised male homosexual acts earlier than ours did,[3] we in the West tend to overstate the extent to which our own societies have modernised, and to forget how recently all our own official discourses were strongly homophobic. We in the West—in the USA, in the UK, in the European Union—have often preached to Eastern European countries about the need to achieve LGBT equality, even while struggling to achieve it ourselves. In the USA, same-sex sexual activity was illegal in fourteen states until as late as 2003. In the UK the ages of consent were not equalised until 2001, and marriage equality was not achieved until 2013. Britain's discriminatory law Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was not fully repealed until 2003, after several failed attempts. Russia's gay propaganda ban, imposed in 2013, seems to have been modelled on Section 28. Indeed, Britain has form in this respect: one of its most lasting exports to its empire was its homophobic laws, which gay movements across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean are still struggling to reform.

This theme of catching-up is most awkwardly embodied in one event in the early 1930s, a visit of Marina Tsvetaeva to the Paris salon of Natalie Barney. One of the heroic figures of queer Modernism, Barney prided herself on her cosmopolitanism: 'I was an international person myself … and as I had a nice house I thought I should help other international people meet. The other literary Salons weren't international'. One of her guests said, 'The universe came here … from San Francisco to Japan, from Lima to Moscow, from London to Rome' (Rodriguez 180, 183). However, visitors tended to be accepted, or not, on distinctly Parisian terms. When Marina Tsvetaeva read the French translation of her poem 'The Swain' ('Mólodets') at Natalie Barney's salon, the occasion was not a success: wrong text, wrong clothes, wrong impression. In Simon Karlinsky's account of the occasion:

> The reading ended in a complete fiasco: the listeners had no idea of what it was Tsvetaeva was trying to do. In addition to the complexity of Tsvetaeva's style, the theme of the poem—a woman sacrificing herself, her mother and her child, for the sake of a vampire she loves—could not have been very congenial to the predominantly lesbian audience. (Karlinsky 1986, 208)

Tsvetaeva and Barney represented versions of lesbianism that were chronologically out of step with each other: the Russian had brought into a self-preeningly Modernist setting the residue of *fin de siècle* Decadence. Karlinsky adds: 'It boggles the mind to imagine Tsvetaeva—impoverished, shabbily dressed and totally unknown except to Russians—at one of those gatherings' (209). She was thought to be wallowing in the

3 Not that such apparently crucial historical moments in the public history of sexuality are necessarily crucial moments in the history of literature. As Jan Seidl has pointed out, 'Generally speaking […], the decriminalization of homosexuality in Czechoslovakia [in 1961] did not have an impact on the ways it was thematized in art. In works intended for publication references to homosexuality were still impossible, and authors who wanted to talk about it still had to resort to various indirect strategies' (Seidl 190).

unhealthy miasma of vampirism by an audience who were more used to the imagery of liberated and liberating Amazons. She had no experience of the smart conversation of the salon. She was treated as a throw-back, and as such more or less ignored. Yet her poem had raised an issue of genuine, practical concern to her, as a lover of both women and men, who was also a mother. She wrote a 'Letter to an Amazon', addressed to Natalie Barney, in which she argued that a woman would have to make a choice between lesbianism and motherhood. Even a lesbian couple whose love lasts until death is surrounded by a void, that of childlessness. 'Only for this and for no other reason are they a race of the damned' (211).

Where Now?

In an essay on the year 1991 for the US gay magazine *The Advocate*'s history of the gay and lesbian movement, *Long Road to Freedom* (1994), Masha Gessen speaks of going back to Russia for that country's first gay and lesbian conference and film festival, of which she was a co-ordinator. She adds: '*The Advocate* had launched an international section that year. This was one of the many signs that the international gay and lesbian movement, until then largely limited to Western Europe [and the USA, of course], was expanding. Now it would include the countries of the collapsing Eastern bloc and the Americas' (Gessen 375). The idea is that Western-style 'pride' will be a suitable model for progress in both Latin America and Eastern Europe. (But note that Gessen does not go so far as to mention Africa or Asia.) All it would take would be time. In other words—although Gessen does not put it quite so crudely—'they' would catch up with 'us'.[4]

The transitional post-1989 period saw commentators in the West attempting to discern what had already changed in the East, and to predict what else might change there. Was the situation getting better or worse for LGBT people? Consider the example of Russia. With Gorbachev in mind, Simon Karlinsky ended his item on 'Russia and U.S.S.R.' in the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (1990): 'As the historical record shows, Russia's past gives indications both of hope and despair' (1138). With Yeltsin in mind, he ended his 'Introduction' to the anthology *Out of the Blue* (1997): 'Despite the present chaotic conditions in Russia, the recent decriminalization of [male] homosexuality by Boris Yeltsin's government suggests that the future of Russian gay literature might well turn out to be promising' (25). Kevin Moss ended his item on 'Russian Literature' in *Gay Histories and Cultures* (2000) with a tentative prediction: 'Thus far little writing has been

4 Other than in Gessen's essay, *The Advocate*'s history has hardly any references to East Europe. Its listings of events include, for September 1990: '*The Advocate* reported that nearly 900 cases of AIDS were diagnosed in Romania following the ouster [*sic*] of Nicolae Ceausescu, who had denied the existence of HIV in his country' (360); and, for December 1990: 'The unified German government abolished Paragraph 175, a 118-year-old law banning homosexuality' (361). Romania does not appear in the book's index, and neither do other East European countries, Russia apart.

published chronicling the recent boom in gay life in Russia, but such work may well appear in the coming years' (759). And Brian James Baer began the closing paragraph of his account of 'Russian Gay and Lesbian Literature' in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature* (2014): 'Despite the general homophobia, gay and lesbian literature in today's Russia is alive and well' (Baer 436). Observing at a distance from both Russia and these commentators, it was hard for the general reader to imagine the complex realities behind such valiant but necessarily fragmentary and uncertain summaries. More detailed and settled information might take some time, and would have to come from those on the spot.

Certain authoritative publications, though, have to take a stand against time and fix themselves as representations of the point that has been reached. In this context, it is worth returning in more detail to the most recent of the reference books I have been referring to, *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, which quite reasonably flaunts the authority of the *Cambridge History of …* series to which it belongs, a library of 350 volumes in ten disciplines. At just under 750 pages in length, this volume consists of forty essays, including the editors' introduction. A blurb prior to the title page (and on the flyleaf) announces its aspiration to present 'a global history of the field' and 'an unprecedented summation of critical knowledge on gay and lesbian literature that also addresses the impact of gay and lesbian literature on cognate fields such as comparative literature and postcolonial studies'. Offering 'new critical approaches', it 'will not only engage readers in contemporary debates but also serve as a definitive reference for gay and lesbian literature for years to come'. As a summation of prior critical knowledge, the book fails conspicuously. It ignores or overlooks many important previous works of lesbian and gay scholarship. I trust it is not too narcissistic to mention, as a characteristic example, that my own substantial *History of Gay Literature* is not even listed in any of the volume's forty bibliographies, let alone engaged with. There are other, no less perplexing omissions.

As I have mentioned, the book's East European coverage amounts to an essay on Russian literature. It is hard to tell whether the editors had deliberately decided to await further information (not that they mention any such approach) or that, again, Eastern Europe had merely been overlooked. However, one of the reasons for the book's thin coverage of the region, rather than passive negligence, appears to be that its editors have been actively directing their attention elsewhere. Most of the conspicuously fresh research in the book is developed around questions of non-white ethnicities and post-colonial cultures. Its coverage of people of colour is varied and innovative: Part III ('Enlightenment Cultures') has an essay on 'African American Writing Until 1930'. Part IV ('Queer Modernisms') has a history of the literature of woman-loving women in the Caribbean. Part V ('Geographies of Same-Sex Desire in the Modern World') has essays on African literatures, queer politics in South Asia and its diaspora, 'Female

Same-Sex Subjectivities in Contemporary Chinese-Language Contexts', Mesoamerican myth-making, Native American literatures and 'African American and African Diasporic Writing'. This reflects the major broadening of the focus of Western queer studies that has taken place in the last couple of decades, perhaps initiated by the adjustments, in the 1990s, of studies in the AIDS epidemic, representations of which had initially focussed so intensely on the experience of white gay men. If we take this book as being representative of current trends in queer studies in the Western academy, we may, after all, find that we can speak of Eastern Europe as having been left behind, or perhaps, simply, as having been forgotten in a globalising urge that has proven somewhat less than global. Postcolonial theory is likely to be a crucial repositioning factor—a crucial weapon, if you will—not only with regard to the direct or indirect influence of the Soviet Union on the past and present in Eastern Europe, but also when it comes to placing Eastern European LGBT studies in relation to the power dynamics of the discipline's development in the West.

Where are we now? In order to conclude with a question-mark rather than a full stop, I take guidance from a useful passage in Vitaly Chernetsky's paper on Ukrainian queer culture at the conference *Queer Narratives in European Cultures*, held at the University of Latvia, Riga, in June 2015. He asks a series of questions, among which are the following: 'What are the specific challenges of the unique overlap of the post-Soviet and post-colonial condition for the development of queer cultures in recent years? How do these challenges affect the ties of a formerly colonized nation with the former colonial power, as well as hopes for European integration? […] How can imperialist practices be avoided in the interaction between globalized queer culture and the local/national context?' (Chernetsky 207). We might add to this the related question of how such practices can be avoided in the interaction between the English language, in which globalised queer culture tends to be shaped and transmitted, and the local/national language(s).

Where are we now? I have other questions to ask, more sentimental, perhaps, because emotionally concerned with the lives and books of LGBT individuals. Is Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' still to be found in the back pockets of teenagers in Yerevan? How would a play about lesbian lovers be received in Chişinău? Do bookish gay boys still read Gennady Trifonov to each other in the cafés of Tbilisi? What can we learn from the accumulated wisdom, or even the mistakes, in the diaries and letters of an elderly gay couple from the suburbs of Astrakhan? What do we know of lesbian poets in Baku? Do we look further eastward, and southward, with fellow-feeling or in a spirit of incomprehension and anxiety? Do we welcome, and if so *how* do we welcome, the queerness of migrants, and of migration itself? How do we adjust our own identities and dreams to the developing world order? It is because I speak from a position of relative ignorance in these matters that I feel able to conclude with the optimism of unanswered questions.

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