



Rachel Cochran

Infection in “The Hour of Freedom”: Containment and Contamination in Philip Kennicott’s “Smuggler”

In “Smuggler: A Memoir of Gay Male Literature” (the subtitle from the essay’s original publication in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, not included in the *Best American Essays* collection), Philip Kennicott explores a particular period in the development of queer literature, during which pervasive stereotypes of gay men created an enclosed space where these male characters could be used and abused by the characters of the novels that contained them and by the writers of these novels themselves (as well as, of course, by the voyeuristic reader). The essay also concerns the narrator’s own curated encounters with this kind of homophobic queer literature. Although these writings drew his interest by nature of being the only space in which homosexual male desire was visible, Kennicott eventually acknowledges the damage they caused to his notions of gay male identity during the period in which he was forming his own. Much of the essay reads like an academic literary study—indeed, the original subtitle helps to prepare the reader to experience a piece of literary scholarship—but it is through his judicious use of personal detail that Kennicott shapes the essay’s form and sharpens its focus. In particular, Kennicott’s rendering of temporal, physical, and narrative space helps collapse together the many strands the text contains.

In “Smuggler,” Kennicott employs memoir as a frame in order to ground criticism: first, the reader witnesses a scene, an inciting incident firmly tethered to a specific physical and temporal space in the narrator’s life. By incorporating his own experiences as a reader, Kennicott shifts focus from the troubling texts themselves to the minds and souls of the young readers they infiltrate, a critical move that a more traditional piece of literary scholarship, in which the scholar’s personal experience of the text is effaced, might reasonably have strained to achieve. On a second, more personal level, I was captivated because

Kennicott's account of this period in his life so closely mirrored my own history in discovering and exploring my queerness through, initially, a furtive encounter with a single book that seemed both to validate and make visible my own same-sex attraction while also sentencing me to a life as lonely as the doomed characters I read of. Like Kennicott, I hungrily followed the signposts from stepping stone to stepping stone, until I had encountered a rich and vibrant tradition of writers, all overeager to exploit the transgressive nature of queerness, yet ultimately crafting narratives that proved how little space existed in the world for people like me. My own experience of this essay allowed me to see the careful decisions of craft the author uses in order to draw in the like-minded reader, his fellow smuggler: first, through the epigraph from Gide (and its use of the term "uranist" (135), one of those pieces of "coded language" the insider would surely know (145)); and second, through the essay's opening scene.

Kennicott begins his essay in a personal rather than academic space—both in terms of register and actual physical setting—by recounting the first same-sex kiss he encountered in literature, one shared between two schoolboys in Herman Hesse's novel *Beneath the Wheel*. Significantly, Kennicott frames his own experience of the text, orienting his reader in the concrete, intimate personal setting as a way of accessing the literary: the narrator, a memory of Kennicott's sixteen-year-old self, sits "on a black chaise longue, upholstered with shiny velour"; he recalls the encounter as taking place "right after dinner, the hour of freedom before I was obliged to begin my homework" (135). In these lines, Kennicott establishes the perfect kairotic space for a young gay man's discovery of Eros: he is alone, at rest (indeed, the chaise longue indicates recumbence, the position of the dreamer and the lover alike); in "the hour of freedom," the narrator is disentangled from the expectations of family that dictate the dinner hour and not yet subjected to the nightly obligations of education that come from his schoolwork. Kennicott thereby first characterizes "the hour of freedom" through litote, by explaining not what the time *is*, but what it is *not*. In doing so, Kennicott pries open a temporal space, charged with possibility, in which the narrator is not

subjected to the expectations of any external forces but can rather focus on the pursuits and passions of the *self*.

The narrator's first encounter with Eros occurs in this space, secret and partitioned off from the other realms of the narrator's life. This framing helps justify the personal pronoun in the essay's opening line: "I remember *my* first kiss with absolute clarity" (135, emphasis mine). The kiss, although enacted by two fictional characters in a text he is reading and not by the narrator himself, in effect belongs to the narrator as much as any more conventional first-kiss narrative does to its teller, occupying as it does the same space as an important personal milestone of coming of age and into an awareness of his own sexuality. Finding himself in a space in which he is free from other demands and pursuits, the narrator reads himself and his own desires into the story, and reciprocally reads the events of the story out into his own experiences: he has not merely encountered the kiss in the text, or imagined it into being, but has actually taken part in it, claimed ownership over it, in a way that will change him.

This personal temporal space in the essay's first paragraph not only serves as the inciting incident for the narrative of sexual/literary self-discovery that follows, but also significantly provides a blueprint for the essay's larger structure and more ambitious argument regarding the damaging conventions so pervasive in the early queer canon. In its configuration of freedom in relationship to temporal space, the essay's opening scene mirrors the other temporal spaces Kennicott will go on to discuss in the essay at large: first, the gap between a literary culture's inclusion of visible (and frequently grim and grotesque) male homosexuality and its much-later acceptance of positive portrayals of same-sex male desire; and second, the gap in the gay male reader's formation of identity (here depicted as Kennicott's own), between first encountering this troubling literary tradition and eventually rejecting its narratives of containment.

Space in Kennicott's essay assumes a physical as well as a temporal character, both of which Kennicott employs to discuss the literary tradition under criticism. The essay's three-part form reflects Kennicott's interaction with this space: in the first section, Kennicott steps into the space, detailing his

initial engagement with this literary tradition (135-139); in the second section, he explores the space itself, testing its boundaries and what it means to be contained within these narratives (139-146); and in the third section, he steps back out of the space, having indicated his misgivings over the major problems that such containment entails (146-149). Containment, in the canon Kennicott discusses, promises both protection and isolation, the opportunity to be one's true self away from the scrutiny of others and, paradoxically, the infinite vulnerability of being shut away from those who might protect you. Kennicott compellingly illuminates the horrors inflicted on Basini, "a gentle and slightly effeminate boy" from Austrian author Robert Musil's 1906 novel *Confusions of Young Törless*, by the titular protagonist (143), rejecting the permissive genre conventions of the day (which speak with delusionally and frighteningly romanticized permissiveness of "[t]he conquest of beautiful boys") and simplifying Törless's crimes according to our contemporary understanding: "To refine his aesthetic sensibility, Törless participated in the rape, torture, humiliation, and emotional abuse of a gay kid" (143). Most significantly, Kennicott argues, this torture occurs:

in a confined space. It is a recurring theme (and perhaps cliché) of many of these novels that homoerotic desire must be bounded within narrow spaces, dark rooms, private attics, as if the breach in conventional morality opened by same-sex desire demands careful, diligent, and architectural containment. (Kennicott 143)

These physically containing rooms are, therefore, sites for violence, spaces of dangerous encounter for the gay male characters that enter into them. By highlighting this trope—and further elucidating it with examples from texts like Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*—Kennicott indicates the danger of enclosure and thematically links it with what he identifies as a language of contamination. Yet he also emphasizes the importance of this containment in the larger growth of queer identity within these narratives: "Often, it is the author's relation to these dark spaces that gives us our only reliable sense of how he envisioned the historical trajectory of being gay. In Cocteau's novel, the room

becomes a ship, or a portal, transporting the youth into the larger world of adult desires” (Kennicott 146). The contained space itself is therefore an impossibly ambivalent one, in which the price of self-awareness is alienation, vulnerability to pain, and—as the essay later explores in greater depth—the near-inescapable fate of contamination. In Kennicott’s words, the books “depicted self-discovery as a cataclysmic severance from society” (137).

Though Kennicott never explicitly names it, these spaces—these containing rooms of secrecy, preservation, and shame in which a truth hides, too dangerous to be expressed—represent, in effect, “the closet,” that pervasive construction of 20th-century queerness that encloses and protects self-discovery while also condemning those within to a half-lived life, one in which the *self* is unwelcome in the subject’s social, familial, and professional realms. Like many present-day queer advocates and thinkers, Kennicott sees the closet as transient, a temporal position in an individual’s life with both a natural beginning (the boy discovers Eros) and a natural end (the man reveals his truth). However, the impetus of Kennicott’s essay comes from its awareness that the closet did not always have an end—indeed, that much of the homoerotic literary tradition presupposes, or is even predicated upon, the permanence of the closet. Kennicott depicts the closeted lives of these novels and their characters as temporally restrictive; the essay indicates examples in texts such as Mann’s *Death in Venice* and Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* in which youth is prized, and agedness reviled, doomed to “[ape] the manners and dress of youth” in a way that is framed as at once uncanny and grotesque (145). This insistence on youth manifests in a textual fetishization of the youthful object, a framing that mimics and even idealizes the dynamics of pederasty (the young man or boy viewed from the perspective of the older, desiring man), which Kennicott links to a mode of colonialism, imbuing the books with a “claustrophobia of desire and subjugation of the other” (142). Subsequently, youth is also voiceless, the fetish object, devoid of agency, autonomy, and voice (142). In this way, the temporal restrictions of the closet force themselves impossibly on the young gay reader, who must remain young if he is to keep from becoming decrepit and reviled as these texts suggest will occur if

he is allowed truly to come of age. To age into manhood is, at best, to anguish, to become brutish and colonizing himself and, at worst, to become hideous, ever reaching backward toward lost youth and beauty. If the seductive power of these texts, Kennicott argues, derives from the feeling of familiarity they create in the young gay reader, then their danger comes from their unabated bleakness, which arrest the reader's self-discovery, shape it with a sense of pessimistic finality. *Yes, there are others like you*, these sirens sing, *and they have all been bitter men, with bitter ends*. These narratives impose a restricting closet on their readers, one that "[leaves] almost no room—no space—for many openly gay readers" (144). Kennicott's emphasis on the lack of room/space in these narratives further highlights the temporal limitations of the closet as a temporally, physically, and narratively containing space: the reader is put in mind of the narrator's description of his first kiss, the bold and scandalizing and immensely personal new sexuality which he discovers in his "hour of freedom." When measured against the temporal impossibility of the closet suggested by these texts, the "hour of freedom" seems lost forever.

The closet of the literary canon itself, according to Kennicott, represents significant dangers for the occupant. In particular, Kennicott codes his discussion of this closet as one of infection, what he terms a "canon of illness and enclosure" (144). Just as "[s]ickness, of course, is ever-present throughout almost all of these novels" (143)—Kennicott cites examples from Mann, Gide, and Cocteau in establishing this point—so too does the author characterize the reader's encounter with these pervasive narratives as a brand of infection. The space of this literary closet leaves the occupant (the reader to whom these messages have been smuggled) vulnerable to infection, not of actual illness but of pernicious ideas about their own identities and the unpleasant, tortured, solitary, sickened fates these narratives suggest are, if not inevitable, then at least commonly attendant to the reader's sexuality. Taken in this light, Kennicott's section on the texts' signposting—how one of these novels leads the reader by way of signposts such as back-cover blurbs, advertisements, "introductions, afterwords, footnotes" and so on, leading to an interconnected web of similar works (139)—reads like the plot of the movie *Contagion*, the rapid spread of

a virulent strand of self-loathing. “[W]hat seemed a gift at the time,” Kennicott writes, “was in fact more toxic than a youth of that era could ever have anticipated” (139). By employing the language of infection, contamination, and poisoning to refer not only to the themes of these novels but also to the experience of the young gay male’s encounter with them, Kennicott illustrates how the temporal closet, far from being an “hour of freedom,” ultimately proves to constrain and even permanently alter the reader’s experience of his own sexual and personal identity.

If these narratives—and the restrictive closet they impose upon character and reader alike—constitute a form of illness, what, then, is the cure? The three-part structure of “Smuggler” argues against the ineffable power of the closet to contain and sicken its occupant, suggesting a means of emergence and resistance. Having conceived of the need for—and even the potential, if perilous, delights of—the closet in the first numbered section, then proceeding to step into and explore the closet as a damaging oubliette in the second, Kennicott writes in his third section of his own escape. He contrasts that initial memory of his first kiss with his comparatively hazy recollections of this period of emergence; incapable of tracing a specific, singular moment of change, the narrator instead cites the dates he habitually wrote inside the front cover of each book he finished reading—dates that suggest that around the age of twenty-one his “passion for dark tales of unrequited desire, sexual manipulation, and destructive Nietzschean paroxysms of self-transcendence peaked then flagged” (146). The author juxtaposes this timeline of flagging interest—what might be considered, to borrow Kennicott’s language of illness, as a sort of convalescence—with the story of his own coming out, a coming out that is “prompted by a complete loss of hope that a long and unrequited love for a classmate might be returned” (146). Significantly, Kennicott carefully and in great detail paints the classmate as appealingly similar to Hans from Herman Hesse’s *Beneath the Wheel*, one of the two participants in the narrator’s first-kiss sequence. The narrator’s investment in these constraining, infectious narratives brought to a frustrating end, linked with his own personal coming out, “[sours him] on the literature of longing, torment, and convoluted desire” and instead leaves

him free to “the challenge and excitement of negotiating a genuine erotic life” (147). The content and form of the essay’s tripartite structure therefore suggest that the closet of this particular literary canon is illusory in its imposed constraints, and that to see through the illusion necessitates a rejection of the containment and contamination these narratives would have readers believe are the necessary reality of the gay male.

Ultimately, the essay’s frame and form, when taken together, do not only construct the closet, but also seek to dismantle it. By the essay’s end, Kennicott seems to advocate for a timeline of personal development that does not avoid the literary closet, but rather exposes it, avenging the damage it has done by bringing what has been hidden to light. Yet Kennicott cannot merely condemn these stories, for all the damage they do. Indeed, in the essay’s final paragraph, he admits that he hopes these writers and their bodies of work do not become obscure, finding value in “the many poignant epitaphs they contain, grave markers for the men who were used, abused, and banished from their pages” (149). In the final sentence, he lists those who can be listed, the names of the boys and the men they hopelessly loved: “Let me write them down in my notebook, so I don’t forget their names: Hans, who loved Hermann; Basini, who loved Törless; the Page of Herodias, who loved the Young Syrian; Giovanni, who loved David; and the all rest, unnamed, often with no voice, but not forgotten” (Kennicott 149). Thus does Kennicott prise open the closet door and allow the reader to see into what has previously remained unseen and unspoken, unseeable and unspeakable. Kennicott’s hope for a contemporary and future gay canon therefore depends upon a cultivated, informed empathy for the victims, fictional and otherwise, of this tradition of containment and contamination. It may no longer be necessary, or even commonplace, for a young queer reader to pass (as I did, and as Kennicott’s narrator does) through this particular closet in order to locate their literary selves: but it may, the essay’s final paragraphs suggest, provide grounding, context, and even a sort of belated justice to acknowledge those who suffered most in their dark, interior chambers.