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Katerina Kolarova:

***Know Thyself: Write Yourself. Queer Subjects and the Constructions of
Gender and Sexual Identity at the Turn of the 19th Century***

It was in the last decade of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th centuries that new – medical, legal, and more broadly cultural – discourses (as technologies of power) began to classify the modern subject in terms of his/her relationship to both the gender binary and heteronormative sex/uality. In parenthesis, it may be stated already at this point that one of the most exciting aspects of the doctoral thesis under consideration here is its sophisticated approach to the ways in which the categories of gender and sex can be seen as interlocking. At any rate, from these decades onwards, individuals have been expected to “know” and identify themselves as belonging to one gender (of two), and as conforming to, or deviating from, the heterosexual norm of expressing desire. *Know Thyself: Write Yourself*, as the title indicated, traces the acquisition of “self-knowledge”, and processes of self-positioning at the interface of gender and sex/uality, in three autobiographical texts, namely, John Addington Symonds’s *Memoirs*, Katherine Bradley’s and Edith Cooper’s (i. e. “Michael Field’s”) *Work and Days*, and Havelock Ellis’s *My Life*, proceeding from the assumption that it is in autobiographical texts that these processes, that is, the interaction of (changing/changed) concepts of gender and sex/uality with constructions of the self and subjectivity, can be observed. This also suggests, of course, as do words such as “self-positioning” (or, indeed, “self-fashioning”), that autobiographical texts do not mimetically reproduce a pre-existent “truth” about the autobiographical subject, but that this truth – and for that matter, the individual in his or her specific subjectivity – is the result of the autobiographical act, that is, of the performance of writing.

The first three chapters of the thesis situate it – somewhat laboriously at times – in the context of relevant research and are, as it were, predictably, or perhaps inevitably, indebted to Michel Foucault’s monumental *History of Sexuality* and to the work of Judith Butler. How-

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ever, Kolarova is right in asserting that, while the impact of new discursive formations, particularly with regard to medico-juridical discourses, is well documented for the period around 1900, the practices with which the subjects of these discourses negotiated their existence as gendered and sexed individuals have, so far, been largely ignored. Hence, it is the question of how these individuals, while inscribed in – and by – discourses and faced, as stated above, with the imperative of identifying themselves in accordance with the epistemologies and practices of these discourses, can still find ways and means of resisting them, which is of key importance for the analyses of the autobiographical texts in the second half of the thesis. In response to this question, as Kolarova explains, both Foucault and Butler stress that power is not an abstracted, unified, or essentialised force (and for Butler, it does not exist prior to its interaction with the subject); secondly, that the fact that an individual is governed by intersecting kinds of power does not forestall occasions of freedom. In other words, the self can – up to a point – transform itself by creatively employing the patterns of its culture and thus become empowered within the framework of power. In addition, Foucault states that selves are always constructed across a whole range of discourses and practices so that strategies of transformation and subversion may originate from the same site(s) as disciplining ones. As for Butler, possibilities of resistance to normative structures reside in acts of reiteration and citation, which may lead to displacement.

These three chapters on the theoretical framework informing the textual analyses of the remaining part of the thesis document Kolarova's thorough familiarity with contemporary – “state of the art” – theories of sex and gender, as well as her ability to present these theories clearly and to synthesise them so as to fashion them into useful analytical tools. All three chapters – in fact, all the chapters of the thesis – are well organised, with informative introductory and concluding remarks. Hence, for example, the first section concludes with a set of key questions:

- Given that what can, and cannot, be said about one's sex/uality depends on one's specific cultural background, what historically specific discourses are deployed in the autobiographical texts by Symonds, Cooper/Bradley, and Ellis?
- Which tropes do Symonds, Cooper/Bradley, and Ellis employ in their self-writing in order not only to express their subjectivities, but to construct them, and what kind of subject(s) becomes created in the self-constitutive act?
- How (before the background of turn-of-the-century medico-juridical discourses) can a subject rework his or her acquaintance with classificatory categories such as 'homosexual', 'lesbian', or 'invert' be reworked into an account of himself/herself – and, conversely, as ignorance depends upon knowledge, how can he or she employ a professed unfamiliarity with these categories?

- And, finally, “[h]ow does the heteronormative matrix affect the techniques that allow individuals do transform themselves by regulating their bodies, their thoughts, and their conduct, so as to achieve a certain amount of happiness, and self-containment?” [50]

The three analytical chapters of the thesis are closely linked to the preceding theoretical sections, and, of course, to the theoretical framework of *Know Thyself: Write Yourself* as a whole, so that they are both informed by this framework, and serve to modify (or, as it were, “fine-tune”) it. The three autobiographical texts are very carefully embedded in the discursive context of their time, taking in such contemporary events as the Oscar Wilde trials (Ch. V) or debates on the “Marriage Question” (Ch. VI). These texts are all by – or, in the case of Havelock Ellis, about – individuals whom their period would have called ‘inverts’, that is, would have seen as deviating from the heterosexual norm (and perhaps as violating the strictures of gender binarisms as well): John Addington Symonds, in his *Memoirs*, tries to come to terms with his same-sex desires; the joint journals of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper both reflect their same-sex desire, and provide a space for it; and finally, the autobiographical project of Havelock Ellis’s *My Life* coincides – and perhaps collides – with his biography of his ‘lesbian’ wife Edith.

In a way, it seems appropriate to first discuss the most recent of these texts in that Ellis, as one of the most prominent sexologists of his time, may be said to be one of the foremost representatives of the (technologies of) powers that be. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that his narrative of the sexual history of his ‘lesbian’ wife resembles sexological case studies of the ‘sexually inverted’ woman, used, in the autobiographical trajectory of the text, to establish an epistemic hierarchy and to emphasise Ellis’s own heterosexual masculinity along strictly the binary lines of the knowing vs. the known, the naming vs. the named, the active vs. the passive, the ‘normal’ vs. the ‘abnormal’, or the ‘healthy’ vs. the ‘unhealthy’. Even so, Kolarova argues that the “troubling ghost” of Edith Ellis can never be fully contained:

The repetitive proclamations of ‘I know’ only further emphasise the difficulty of conjoining the contradictory elements of *Edith’s* representation within the text. The utterances of ‘I know’ perform an ‘interpretative foreclosure’ eliminating possible interpretations and readings of the narrative and establish it as a virtually – if illusionary [sic] – ‘closed text’. On [the] face of this tension inscribed in the text, I consider Ellis’s auto/biography a valuable example of both the imperative to produce a fiction of a coherent gender identity and simultaneously the virtual impossibility to effectively do so. [177]

Moving backward from the final chapter of the thesis, it can now be seen how the very indeterminacy of Ellis’s *My Life*, the fact that it does not only demonstrate “the imperative to pro-

duce a fiction of a coherent gender identity and simultaneously the virtual impossibility to effectively do so”, may work in favour of those subjects who do not, like Ellis, merely want to heed the imperative, but who, finding themselves unable to do so, look for ways of expressing their desires in the face of, or against it. In the case of Symonds, the thesis identifies strategies of shame, in the case of Cooper and Bradley, strategies of silence, arguing, for the latter, that silences can be deployed for queer desires and bonding. As to Symonds, his feelings of shame initiate his painful recognition of his lack of conformity to heterosexual masculinity and masculine selfhood, but also cause him to question presumptions about both masculinity and ‘normal’, that is, heterosexual, sexuality. Symonds’s *Memoirs*, in particular, also serve as an interesting example of an editorial practice which reiterates, and re-inscribes, those very classifications which Symonds was forced to, as it were literally, ‘subject’ himself to. The three texts are well chosen so as to complement one another, so that, for instance, a comparison between Symonds’s *Memoirs* and Cooper/Bradley’s *Work and Days* indicates that some discourses which are available to men who want to express same-sex desires are not available to women in the same situation, while the juxtaposition of Symonds’s and Ellis’s autobiographical writings on the one hand, and Cooper/Bradley’s on the other illustrate the genderedness of constructions of the modern subject as atomistic and autonomous: Cooper and Bradley clearly conceive of their selves/themselves as relational, that is, as situated at the interface of a whole network of complex personal relationships.

Of the three analytical chapters of *Know Thyself: Write Yourself*, the one on Symonds’s *Memoirs* is perhaps the least impressive, mainly because it discusses the text on a fairly abstract level and is thus less informative about its strategies of self-fashioning than the chapters on *Work and Days* and *My Life* are on the texts under consideration there. On the whole, however, there can be no doubt that Kolarova’s thesis is an important contribution to ongoing debates about the three texts, and their four authors. More importantly, perhaps, it shows how sophisticated theories of gender and sex/uality can be used to produce detailed, non-homogenising readings of literary texts, thus testifying to the fact that we, as readers, like the individuals we read about, can (at least to a certain extent) resist the technologies of power by which we are made into readers in the first place. The thesis employs a precise terminology which rarely descends into mere jargon, and it is presented in a clean text with only a few, very minor flaws in its English (mainly related to the use of pronouns, as in the quotation given on the preceding page). In conclusion, I should like to recommend, emphatically, its admission to the defence, and ultimately, its acceptance as a doctoral thesis by the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University.