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Queer Love, Literature and Philosophy : On Reading The Argonauts

Aldrin Salskov, Salla

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Salla Aldrin Salskov 

The Swedish School of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

In this article, I suggest Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* challenges “epistemic habits” in contemporary critical thought on gender, politics, sexuality, intimacy, identity, and love. In particular, I focus on how Nelson through descriptions of queer life, love, and kinship articulates moral-existential and queer-philosophical perspectives on everyday life by bringing the “I-You” relationship to the fore of feminist and queer theoretical concerns. By reading Nelson with the philosophy of Wittgenstein, I discuss how love is related to views on language and what it means to say that one can have, as well as lack a faith in words, other people and linguistic meaning. *The Argonauts*, I argue, shows us the importance of acknowledging moral-existential perspectives of gender and identity and their role in I-You relations. The article raises questions of how to understand the relationship between theory, philosophy, and ordinary language in relation to cultural critique and criticism (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 2003). It also discusses love as a perspective one might take and have in life and to other people in general, not exclusively as romantic love, but as a philosophical perspective in thinking about gender, identity, politics, love, and intimacy.

Keywords

epistemic habits, the argonauts, queer feminist criticism, Wittgenstein, love, Maggie Nelson, performativity

Introduction

In this article, I suggest Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* describes “epistemic habits” in contemporary critical thought on gender, politics, sexuality, intimacy, identity, and love. In particular, I focus on how *The Argonauts* (2015) both makes visible and challenges epistemic habits in queer feminist criticism¹, and thus brings our attention to different aspects of political as well as personal

Corresponding author:

Salla Aldrin Salskov, The Swedish School of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Snellmansgatan 12, Helsinki, 00170, Finland.

Email: salla.aldrinsalskov@helsinki.fi

and moral-existential dimensions of reading, writing, and thinking. By reflecting on the role that language plays in our culture and in our criticism of it, Nelson articulates ways in which various epistemic habits can affect our thinking. My understanding of epistemic habits is inspired by what Sara Ahmed has described as routinized theoretical gestures that “become a background, something taken for granted as a common reference point such that it is not noticeable” (Ahmed, 2008: 25), and by Toril Moi’s (1999) concept of *theoreticism*. When speaking of epistemic habits I also have in mind particular theoretical and philosophical forms of understanding, or “discourses,” that are referenced habitually, similar to what Wittgenstein means when he speaks of “pictures holding us captive.” Epistemic habits, as I understand them work, as Stanley Cavell characterizes it: as “unnoticed turns of mind, casts of phrase, which comprise what intellectual historians call “climates of opinion”, or “cultural style” (Cavell, 1979: 175).

I read *The Argonauts* inspired by the questions posed by this special issue, in asking what we can learn from literature and how literature may explore, and express various perspectives on understanding, and thereby can ‘teach’ us something about the world and our role in it. I explore these questions in relation to Nelson’s writing in the context of the legacy of queer and feminist criticism and Wittgensteinian philosophy. Although *The Argonauts* does not situate itself as fiction, I suggest that as a work of literature, it does, in a nuanced way, raise questions of how to understand the relationship between theory, philosophy, and ordinary language, a relationship that has been mainly discussed and defined as a matter of cultural critique and criticism (Butler, 1990; Felski, 2015; Moi, 2017; Sedgwick, 2003b). My analysis leans on and develops a discussion initiated by Moi in the 1990s, when she argued that feminist theory needs to “change its attitude” by letting go of its dominant theoreticist modes of understanding language, meaning, and critique. Theoreticism is a concept she uses to challenge specific understandings and pictures of language and meaning that are metaphysical, abstract, and theoretical in nature and, in particular, alludes to the belief that “theoretical correctness somehow guarantees political correctness” (Moi, 1999: 59, 2017, 14). Moi’s criticism is directed towards the widespread idea in queer feminist thought that theory is politics by other means; that engaging in theoretical work always represents some kind of politics, and that language use is in one way or another an effect of power (Moi, 1999: 76). Instead, Moi argues that “to make other visions possible it is necessary to loosen the grip of the poststructuralist picture of language” (Moi, 2009: 803). I suggest, following Moi (2017), that Wittgenstein’s understanding of philosophy and language, and his imperative that we let go of the pictures that hold us captive, means that reading not only philosophy, but also literature can be understood as a working on oneself and one’s way of seeing things, one’s judgment.

Wittgenstein wrote: “Working in philosophy ... is really more a working on oneself. On one’s own interpretation. On one’s own way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them)” (Wittgenstein, 1980: 16). Philosophy, Wittgenstein writes, is a matter of reaching clarity regarding one’s presuppositions, so that the philosophical problems one might have, disappear. This is why his philosophical approach is sometimes characterized as therapeutic, as its focus lies in “trying to free our thinking from certain intellectual fixations” (Hertzberg, forthcoming).² His emphasis on clarity should be understood as a matter of becoming clear about one’s own thinking and perspectives, not as a grand thesis about philosophy. Wittgenstein’s understanding of philosophy thus has a deeply personal character, leading some of his commentators to suggest that doing philosophy in this Wittgensteinian spirit entails a moral-existential endeavor (Backström, 2011; Nykänen, 2019; Read, 2020; Toivakainen, 2020).

Wittgenstein’s view of philosophy, with its focus on clarity and understanding as the aim of philosophizing, rather than knowing and knowledge in a traditional sense, easily appears at odds with the major theoretical movements that have shaped literary studies over the last decades. As Toril Moi notes, “It used to go without saying that the purpose of literary studies was to produce critique, and to do so one had to practice some form of the “hermeneutics of suspicion.”” (Moi,

2017: 175). However, for some time now there has been a shift away from the strong emphasis on deconstruction and suspicious reading modes of earlier decades, towards perspectives, where clarity, common sense, and ordinary language play a different role (Moi, 2017; Felski, 2015; Felski and Anker, 2017). Moi in particular has challenged poststructuralist perspectives by leaning on Wittgenstein and Cavell to suggest alternative yet critical modes of interpretation. What Moi challenges are certain dogmas and fixations concerning what language, critique, or interpretation must look like. In writing that engaging with literature involves risking one's judgment, she emphasizes the value of calling out tendencies toward generalizing explanations and suggests, instead, working with specific examples (Moi, 2017: 194). In this article I suggest, following Moi, that the diagnostic and therapeutic aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy can help illuminate but also dissolve some of the ways in which different theoretical pre-understandings work as epistemic habits and therefore tacitly inform and guide how we read, interpret, and understand literature. Reading Nelson, in the light of Moi and Wittgenstein, and their suggestion to work with examples, I suggest, Nelson in *The Argonauts* makes visible tendencies to theoreticism, not only in academic or philosophical discussions but how theoreticism as a critical attitude can show up within the context of our lives. In my reading I suggest Nelson shows us in *The Argonauts* what it can mean to learn not only from literature but from others, and what it can mean to 'risk' one's judgment.

The Argonauts

The Argonauts combines reflections on queer and feminist theory while also telling the love story of Nelson and her lover, Harry Dodge. It articulates moral-existential and queer-philosophical perspectives on the "messiness" of everyday life, as it narrates Nelson's pregnancy and experience of giving birth side by side with Harry's process of transitioning and taking T (testosterone). The narrative structure is presented in episodic terms – through reflections, in the form of passages. Through themes such as queer lives, love and kinship, step-parenting, marriage, love and loss, relationality and reproduction beyond heteronormative practices, Nelson engages with queer and feminist thought beyond binaries. She actualizes the themes of identification and disidentification through descriptions of situations in everyday life that complicate what it means to identify, with a particular experience, identity, or gender while also highlighting what is at stake in understanding the work of disidentification, how it can work both as a form of cultural criticism but also as a form of self-understanding. In being "a first-person memoir about sodomitical motherhood, domestic normativities, and embodied transformations" (Wiegman, 2018: 209), Robyn Wiegman (2018: 210) suggests that the style of *The Argonauts* "deconstructs the generic conventions around memoir and academic prose but remakes them as well." *The Argonauts* has been described as a "performative assemblage" (Wiegman, 2018: 209), as engaging in "a politics and ethics of vulnerability" (Mitchell, 2018: 194), and in a "deconstructive and reparative ethics" (Wiegman, 2018: 212), as it "combines high theory and the everyday" (Pearl, 2018: 199).

Centering on love as a key thematic in the lives we share with each other, not only as a matter of romantic or sexual love but also as a philosophical perspective, *The Argonauts* brings to the fore how the legacy of the hermeneutics of suspicion that is characteristic of contemporary critical theory easily excludes perspectives that highlight moral-existential concerns in our shared lives. *The Argonauts* also articulates the role that love can play in relation to views on language and in relation to what it means to say that one can have, as well as lack, faith in words, in other people, and in meaning in a broader sense.

In reading *The Argonauts* as literature, autotheory³, and queer feminist criticism (Wiegman, 2014), I suggest it, as much queer feminist writing, presents us with a perspective where the personal and moral-existential aspects of our lives become the point of departure for (queer feminist)

criticism and concerns, which in turn has implications for how we can think about literature as a matter of learning and truth. By bringing the “I-You” relationship (Nykänen, 2000, 2019) to the fore of feminist and queer theoretical concerns, I suggest, *The Argonauts* challenges established “epistemic habits” of queer feminist literary criticism as theorized over the last several decades, in particular in relation to what is often phrased as the performativity of language.

Pictures holding us captive: Epistemic habits and paradoxes at the root of queer feminist criticism

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes (PI § 115): “A picture held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.” This paragraph forms the background for the diagnoses that Moi makes regarding literary theory and the strong hold a suspicious hermeneutics have had intellectual discussions on culture and literature. When Wittgenstein speaks of problems in philosophy as “pictures holding us captive”, he refers to the situation when something keeps us from seeing the root of a problem, question, or theme, or when we do not see a situation in any other way but from a particular perspective. Examples of pictures that have informed feminist and queer theory over the last decades are the Foucauldian axiom that “power is everywhere”, (Foucault, 1978: 93), Joan Scott’s (1991) suggestion that experience is always political, or the idea that using gendered expressions always includes some form of normative claim or always entails a politics of inclusion and exclusion (Butler, 1990). When these theoretical presuppositions become established perspectives on gender, experience, and power, they easily function as “pictures” in the Wittgensteinian sense, as “epistemic habits,” or routinized analytical gestures.

In describing how pictures hold us captive, Wittgenstein also shows how we can free ourselves from them, in other words, how we can think differently (about power, experience, and gendered expressions). This notion of pictures holding us captive is an aspect of his criticism of metaphysical language use and metaphysical thinking leading us astray. He shows how we are led to think in a particular way, and how paradoxes only appear as paradoxes from a particular perspective. (If gender always is related to power, then one will always see anything gendered as a matter of power, and so on; and if marriage is seen as a question of politics and power, one will primarily see marriage in these terms, and so on). Wittgenstein’s philosophy can be characterized as “deconstructive” in the sense of revealing unfounded presuppositions. By showing how a problem in itself is dissolved when we realize that it was a problem of our making, an effect of our tacit way of seeing things, he at the same time diagnoses and provides a remedy for our various epistemic habits. In this sense, his work can be described as intellectually therapeutic.

Reading *The Argonauts* reminded me of a paradox, or contesting pictures found at the roots of queer feminist criticism, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991) and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), considered to be two foundational works of queer theory. On the one hand, Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* that there is nothing radical about common sense and that “it would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself” (1990/1999: xvii–xix). On the other hand, in Sedgwick’s list of axioms, the first one references something commonsensical, as it reads: “People are different from each other”. Sedgwick further writes that it is “astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact” (Sedgwick, 1991: 22). The role of language, politics, and critical thinking are, by both founding figures of queer theory, situated within ordinary language and outside of it. This tension between ordinary language use and theorizing it has been prevalent in queer and feminist theory (Moi, 1999, 2017; Zerilli 2008). In the introduction to *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*

(Sedgwick, 2003a) suggests that emphasizing the politics and performative effects of language use has become one of the most dominant epistemic habits within queer and feminist theory. The concept of “performativity” (as the term has been understood via Butler and Derrida’s reformulation of Austin’s work), she writes, has become a signpost for situating oneself within an epistemology of antiessentialism:

Let me oversimplify here in positing that both deconstruction and gender theory have invoked Austinian performativity in the service of an epistemological project that can roughly be identified as antiessentialism. Austinian performativity is about how language constructs or affects reality rather than merely describing it. This directly *productive* aspect of language is most telling, for antiessentialist projects [...] Analogously in the area of history, the same antiessentialist projects have foregrounded Foucault’s repeated demonstrations of the *productive* force of both taxonomies and disciplines that have claimed to be simply descriptive and of prohibitions whose apparent effect is simply to negate. That language itself can be productive of reality is a primary ground of antiessentialist inquiry. (Sedgwick, 2003a: 5).

Sedgwick describes how Austin’s performatives in the work of Butler and Derrida, because of their commitment to antiessentialism, go from being a description of instances of *some* language use to *all* language use (Sedgwick, 2003a: 6). She does so by providing her readers with what she calls a caricature of how Butler and Derrida reformulate Austin’s work on performatives:

You could caricature Derrida as responding to Austin’s demonstration of explicit performatives by saying, “But the only really interesting part of it is how all language is performative”: and Judith Butler as adding, “Not only that, but it’s most performative when its performativity is least explicit – indeed, arguably, most of all when it isn’t even embodied in actual words” (Sedgwick, 2003a: 5–6).

Despite her caricature of the voices of Derrida and Butler, Sedgwick captures “a picture” in a Wittgensteinian sense, or the essence of where this form of “Derridean” and “Butlerian” thinking takes us⁴. The way in which the concept of performativity has been used within this Butlerian/Foucauldian/Derridean framework presumes a certain theoretical picture: a reductive and distinct theoretical idea of language and meaning. For Derrida, it is a question of how all language is structured around iteration and difference. For Butler, the performativity of language is what makes meaning possible in the first place. What is interesting here, which Sedgwick doesn’t articulate clearly, is that both Derrida and Butler situate meaning outside of the actual practices of language use and in the realm of the abstract. With this understanding of performativity, theorizing language is reduced to a distinct generalizing gesture of politicizing knowledge and language use. Although Sedgwick only hints at the connection to politics and the political (the uptake of performativity as the politicization of knowledge), I would add that this antiessentialism is a distinctively politicized position; it specifically understands itself as being against a “realist” (naive, essentialist) epistemology, justifying its criticality by referencing the political. Emphasizing performativity then means, following Sedgwick’s diagnostic approach, that one subscribes to a specific understanding of the relation between knowledge and power (Foucault), together with the idea that language use is political. These are pictures in the Wittgensteinian sense that have had a strong hold on feminist and queer theorizing during the last decades, and ones that also have affected how to think about the relation between the critic (“us”) and her objects (“the world”). Roughly, this is also a thematic that Nelson takes on, while challenging it in *The Argonauts*.

Reading *The Argonauts*

In a special section of the journal *Angelaki*, on Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Jackie Stacey asks what it takes to be a "good enough" reader of the book and confesses to have felt ambiguous about reading it, feeling "a rising, perverse resistance to joining the fandom" (Stacey, 2018, p. 205). I, too, was skeptical when picking up the book, suspecting I'd be reading a particular kind of autotheory – a memoir inspired by critical queer and feminist theory trying to make art out of theory, performing its own "smartness", with an author demonstrating her cleverness and mastering her object in an ironical and self-reflexive mode. Instead, I was met with a kind of thinking that was surprisingly open in its attitude and investigating style, in a book rooted in the context of everyday life, reflecting on insights in critical theory or deconstructive philosophies, posing questions, seeking and trying out answers, rather than stating theses about the nature of ideology, the compulsory heterosexual matrix of a two-gender system, or the ambivalence about motherhood. Nelson presents us with ambiguities regarding same-sex marriage, and "perversities" or gender reassignment surgeries, but not in a rhetorical way, or in a skeptical spirit that already from the outset intellectualizes the objects of its own inquiry. Rather, she describes the ambivalences and paradoxes of these phenomena as they show up in I-You relations and everyday life.

I was thrilled to see that the book actually delivered what most critiques had promised it would. I identified with it. Not because it provided me with queer-theoretical axioms, or Foucauldian and Butlerian insights (although it does that, too), but because it roots the political, ethical, and existential urgency of queer feminist thought not in abstract theories about performativity and the instability or constitutive failure of meaning, but in political and moral-existential concerns. An example of this combination of the political, personal, and existential can be seen in the long-standing trouble that feminism and queer theory have had with marriage, which Nelson captures in a scene where Maggie and Harry have decided to get married in the midst of California's so-called Proposition 8, or "Prop 8" campaign. Nelson describes how they pass churches and suburban houses supporting Prop 8 with variations of signs declaring "ONE MAN + ONE WOMAN: HOW GOD WANTS IT." Nelson writes: "Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable) or reinforce it (unforgivable)" (2015: 28). This "homonormative" scene of getting married is expressive of the ambivalence that comes with marriage as they getting married both challenges and reinforces the meaning of a "dominant" order, depending on one's perspective and political imaginaries. What Nelson doesn't elaborate on in this passage, but what is related to the political ambivalence as to whether marriage is "killed" or reinforced as an institution by the two of them tying the knot, is the fact that marriage can also be seen as an act and expression of love. One might argue that love in one sense is the reason for various political visions of marriage (killing or reinforcing it), and that love, in another sense, entails a dimension of meaning that is strictly personal in character and relates to the role "You" have for Me (that Harry has for Maggie). In this second sense of it being an act of love, marriage in the scene above does not primarily reinforce or kill an institution (although it might do that, too) but testifies to the meaning of an I-You relation, or the meaning "You" can come to have for me in the light of love, which does not depend on politics or a legal institution. These different dimensions of the meaning marriage may have are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and may coexist as different and ambivalent approaches one might have on marriage. Heather Love notes, that "Marriage and the family are flexible institutions, able to incorporate but also neutralize many kinds of difference" (Love, 2019: 258). The role that marriage can have, and what the act of getting married might testify to, opens up an array of ambivalences, and one might rightfully ask what makes legal marriage an expression of love, as there is nothing in the act of legal marriage that can guarantee the love that the marriage might be an expression of. However, the political meaning that

an institution such as marriage as a collective matter can have become also a personal matter of thinking about what role marriage might have or can come to have in one's life, as this is a question that no one else can figure out for me. The political dimension of marriage and love concerns collective visions of equality, justice, and change, whereas marriage as an act of love in the light of an I-You relation might require another kind of reflection; where love itself, despite "politics", can be seen as the meaning of, or reason for, entering marriage in the first place. In this sense, love comes, grammatically speaking, before politics (Strandberg 2019). It is only if marriage is reduced to the political meanings of it that one may be suspicious of it ever being an "apt" expression of love.

Are words "Good Enough"?

Nelson elaborates on what it means for something to be "good enough", in relation to Donald Winnicott's writing on parenting and being a "good enough mother", but particularly also in relation to words, language, and meaning. Pictures of language are central to *The Argonauts*, which on the first page opens by referencing some of Wittgenstein's famous thoughts about the question of what can be expressed in language and how, which Nelson formulates as a question of whether and when "words are good enough." By engaging with various writers in the tradition of queer, feminist, and critical theory (Roland Barthes, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, and many others), Nelson ruminates on the role language plays in various encounters with both works of philosophy or "high theory", as well as in encounters with others in our everyday lives. On the very first pages, different and conflicting accounts of language and meaning (Wittgenstein and Deleuze) are presented through glimpses of a conversation about language. Nelson writes that she has spent a lifetime devoted to the Wittgensteinian idea that "the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! in the expressed" and that this paradox is quite literally why she writes (Nelson 2015: 3). This picture is contrasted with, as Robyn Wiegman describes it, Nelson's description of her partner Harry's "counter belief in language as a primal scene of violence" (Wiegman 2018: 2010). Nelson writes:

[...] you had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice. Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again [...] I insisted that words did more than nominate. I read aloud to you the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*, *Slab*, I shouted, *slab!*" (Nelson, 2015: 4).

In this quote, Nelson references Wittgenstein's criticism of the picture of language as referring to things in the world, insisting "that words did more than nominate." Nelson also describes an attitude to language that indicates that words are always destined to fail us, or that language in itself is somehow lacking, "the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow." A recurring phrase throughout the book, phrased slightly different on different occasions, is "words are good enough." One could describe Nelson contrasting pictures of language, not in the Derridean or Butlerian sense described by Sedgwick – already skeptical from the outset, situating meaning in the abstract – but as a struggle, in the context of lived life, where the question of having or lacking faith in language can be rephrased as a struggle with meaning in an existential sense. Nelson returns to Wittgenstein a page later, writing: "I stopped smugly repeating *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can everything be thought" (Nelson, 2015: 5).

A few lines later Nelson continues with a description of her love pronouncement, now "feral with vulnerability".

A day or two after my love pronouncement, now feral with vulnerability, I sent you the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase “I love you” is like “the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name”. Just as the *Argo’s* parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase “I love you”, its meaning must be renewed by each use, as the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new.

I thought the passage was romantic. You read it as a possible retraction. In retrospect, I guess it was both (Nelson 2015: 5–6).

This passage by Nelson on Barthes is ambiguous, because the reason that Nelson is “feral with vulnerability” is that there is only one response to a confession of love: “If her confession of love is really a confession of love, however, and I respond by saying I am very flattered, that will break her heart. The only response to another’s confession of love that is not heart-rending for her is ‘I love you too’, and nothing can compensate for its absence” (Backström, 2007: 57). This has less to do with the possibilities of language use and meaning in a general sense than with the role love has between and I and a You. The role of love between two persons is thus not a matter of language use in isolation, but rather of their ability to love. Here the point is not that the difficulty of finding words lies in our language, but that what is at stake is vulnerability in oneself and in one’s relation to the other, and, as Nelson also indicates, (and as we have learned from psychoanalysis) the nuances in our expressions are what reveals their true meaning. Words carry meaning when uttered between people, but easily become performative or “a possible retraction” when deliberated on within the sphere of the “intellectual” or the “critical-theoretical”, or when sent as Nelson describes, as a passage from a book, open to interpretation.⁵

Throughout the book, Nelson switches between accounts of language where words are good enough, and where words are not good enough, (“but corrosive to all that is good”), and clarity as the aim of philosophical reflection is questioned as a possible goal in philosophy. The conversation about whether words are good enough, however, is a conversation between two people exposing their vulnerabilities and their commitments to each other – not in relation to an abstract theory or idea about language and what words can mean. The role theories of language can have in reflecting on love is not a given, but turning to theory, ruminating on love and language can be performative, and become a way of deflecting from love’s true calling. The dialectic between suspicion and reparation, famously discussed by Sedgwick in her essay on “Paranoid and Reparative” reading, is present in Nelson’s writing, but not as a question that turns on the politics or radicality of things. Rather, the dialectic between reparative and suspicious perspectives reveal the kind of struggle that emerges because of the meaning things have for us, sometimes independently of their politics or radicality, although sometimes also precisely because of that. Of course we can speak about what makes us speechless or deflect from our realities without it having anything to do with philosophy or philosophizing. The attitude of suspicion or an orientation towards reparation is often framed in terms of, or justified in relation to its “politics”. “Perhaps it’s the word *radical* that needs rethinking. But what could we angle ourselves towards instead, or in addition? Openness?” Nelson writes, asking “Is it good enough, strong enough?” (Nelson, 2015, 33). Perhaps it is openness we turn away from when we turn to theory and philosophy, hoping the radical insights are to be found there. As Heather Love notes, “Nelson turns her attention to how the internal complexity and richness of queer experience is lost in taking the figure of queer radicalism for the reality” (Love, 2019, 262). If we understand philosophy as a form of love, it can be a way of attending to what is real in our lives, an openness towards things in our life, as they are, where their meaning does not turn on their radicality. In fact, attending to what is real in our lives is related to dissolving the pictures that hold

us captive, and in this sense Wittgenstein's philosophy "...is a reminder that only when we release ourselves from certain preconceived pictures of what language is, and how it relates to the world, is it possible for us to see both language and our life as they are" (Kronqvist, 2008: 218).

Gender and Identity; or, "You" and "I"

The theme of gender and identity in relation to language and understanding, and to an I-You relation, surfaces repeatedly throughout *The Argonauts*. Queer perspectives on gender and identity are described in showing how "gender" and "identity" are culturally loaded and coded concepts, and how we in various ways identify and disidentify with them. This occurs in scenes where Nelson confesses, that she has become "a quick study in pronoun avoidance" (Nelson, 2015:8) and that she fears making mistakes by using the wrong pronoun, or feels awkward, or ashamed, on behalf of a waiter or airline steward, when they can't get Harry's pronouns right, or when she is insecure in not quite understanding a particular discourse around gender, sexuality, and identity, for example what it means to say that "to be femme is to give honor where there has been shame" (Nelson, 2015: 39).⁶

You showed me an essay about butches and femmes that contained the line "to be femme is to give honor where there has been shame." You were trying to tell me something, give me information I might need. I don't think the line is where you meant for me to stick – you may not even have noticed it – but there I stuck, [...] I also felt mixed up: I had never conceived of myself as femme; I knew I had a habit of giving too much; I was frightened by the word *honor*. How could I tell you all that and stay inside our bubble, giggling on the red couch?

I told you I wanted to live in a world in which the antidote to shame is not honor, but honesty. You said I misunderstood what you meant by honor. We haven't yet stopped trying to explain to each other what these words mean to us; perhaps we never will (Nelson, 2015: 39–40).

These instances of insecurity or difficulty should not be understood reductively, as mere questions about using the right words, or about trusting or distrusting language in general. Nor do they concern knowing or performing the right political gestures. Rather, these are instances of uncertainties rooted in love and the desire of wanting to get things right for *you*. What it means to be "femme" or "butch" is here portrayed as a kind of secret code used to express same-sex desire, a code Nelson has difficulties in capturing, perhaps because she has never "conceived of herself as femme" – but also because the concept of honor seems to distance rather than bring closer the two lovers. "Honor", perhaps suggests a performative account of desire, in the sense that desire is conditioned by a dialectic of shame and honor, where the two are always dependent on each other. The contrast to a performative account of desire is the one that is open in its attitude, where shame and honor are expressive of attitudes that close, rather than open up desire. Focusing on shame and honor as specific to a relation indicates that there is something specific to be delivered, rather than love and desire, as openness towards the other that has no form. On the other hand, one might suggest that "to be femme is to give honor where there has been shame," specifically mean that one understands the dynamics or role that shame might play in same-sex desire or in a butch identity. In other words, "to be femme" might not have to do with honor or sex at all, but rather with understanding the other person, or the role shame and honor might have in particular cultures of gender and sexuality. The line that Nelson elaborates on might also suggest that there are other ways of thinking and talking about desire and having sex (passivity, receptivity, activity, penetration, and so on) than those found in culturally dominant heterosexual scripts.

The conversation about what it is they are talking about suggests that there might be different forms of being queer, or of engaging in queer sex – that these are not only political, but personal and existential questions as well. What is important, Nelson seems to suggest is that I understand (what is important to) You, while acknowledging that what it means to be queer or to engage in queer sex are intimate questions related to complex cultural meanings to navigate. In other words, the political and moral-existential dimension of the passage on butches and femmes points to different aspects of what honor and shame can come to mean, personally and politically. It is of political importance, and a political task, to challenge a culture that fosters shame in relation to particular gendered and sexual expressions. But it is a moral-existential question to see and understand how shame and honor, or honesty, can come to play a role in one’s own life and in that of another, and to also challenge the role they might come to have as perspectives in life. The role shame, honor or honesty comes to have in a relationship depends on how the persons in the relationships understand each other. In another section, Nelson describes another kind of insecurity, also in relation to Harry – in this case in relation to his decision to undergo top surgery and “take T”.

What if, once you made these big external changes you still felt just as ill at ease in your body, in the world? As if I didn’t know that in the field of gender, there is no charting where the external and the internal begin and end –

Exasperated, you finally said, *You think I’m not worried too? Of course I am worried. What I don’t need is your worry on top of mine. I need your support.* I get it, give it (Nelson, 2015: 64).

Nelson goes on to describe how her “fears were unwarranted” and writes about the difficulty of navigating an understanding of gender in times where trans discourses are expanding and gaining cultural visibility, but where particular “epistemic habits” also have formed in conceptualizing what it means to “be trans”:

How to explain – “trans” may work well enough as shorthand, but the quickly developing mainstream narrative it evokes (“born in the wrong body”, necessitating an orthopedic pilgrimage between two fixed destinations) is useless for some – but partially or even profoundly useful for others? That for some, “transitioning” may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others – like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T – it doesn’t? (Nelson, 2015: 65).

Nelson further writes that sometimes “the shit stays messy”, that for some the irresolution (of not coming to terms with one’s gender) “is OK” and desirable, whereas for others it “stays a source of conflict or grief” (Nelson, 2015: 66). *The Argonauts*, as many commentators have noted, engages with “the paradoxes of identity”. Gayle Salamon (2016) notes in a review of the book that Nelson is neither identitarian nor anti-identitarian, as she complicates the question of identity by refusing to politicize it. To me, this is one of the strengths of the book.

However, Nelson also falls into generalizing descriptions that might seem less complicated than they in fact are, concluding that what we need to do when people talk about their genders and sexualities is to listen to what they say and “to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours” (Nelson, 2015: 66). Listening attentively is of course a prerequisite for real understanding. In a time where the discourses on gender and sexual identities have become diverse, the question of what it means to “have” or “be” a gender requires philosophical reflection. What it means to treat someone “accordingly” is anything but clear. How people feel about their gender or sexuality is as ridden with tension, unclarity and uncertainties as anything else in life. To

listen to people's feelings about their gender and sexuality should not be in conflict with the kind of honesty Nelson speaks of in relation to butches, shame, and honor.

How to critically think about the role gender or identity can have in one's life is also captured in the following section, where Nelson seems to indicate a criticism of the kind of identity politics that believes in naming as the key to recognising the rights of a particular gender:

Words change depending on who speaks them: there is no cure. The answer isn't just to introduce new words (*boi, cisgendered, andro-fag*) and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper, *You're just a hole, letting me fill you up*. Like when I say *husband* (Nelson, 2015: 9).

Nelson's first two sentences can be read as a Wittgensteinian remark regarding the fact that the meaning of words is in their use, and that use is changeable: "For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word "meaning" – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (PI: 43). One can easily think of a few examples to illustrate the point. Take "woman". We can speak of *femmes, dykes, butches, females, bois, transwomen, lesbians, daughters, sisters, queers, ladies, grandmas*. All play in one way or another on the word woman, without entailing or referencing a particular meaning of woman. These words can also all be used in a denigrating or affirming manner, depending on the context, and can also be used in a performative, political, personal, or nonperformative way, as Nelson herself alludes to. One of the temptations Wittgenstein diagnoses is our tendency to think of words as having a particular meaning, "[a]s if meaning were an aura the word brings along with it and retains in every kind of use" (§117). This thought, that the word has an aura of meaning it is stuck with, can be compared with the way in which the idea of citational practices is expressed in gender theory. There, the idea is that every time we use a word, we implicitly refer to the "aura of meaning" it carries, and thus involuntarily risk reifying a politics of inclusion and exclusion or particular (often gendered) meanings of that word.⁷ The idea that a word carries this kind of aura of meaning is articulated together with the idea of language as a matter of power, as repressive and enabling, when concepts are debated, changed, criticized, and censored in contemporary cultural criticism. In this picture, both words and language as well as language use(r)s are seen as (always) corrupted, as untrustworthy.

When Nelson speaks of how we introduce "new words (*boi, cisgendered, andro-fag*) and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here)", she suggests that new words won't provide answers to the kinds of problems we have with labels, categories, and particular hegemonic gendered and sexual expressions. Nelson is attentive to the role "power and pragmatism" play when we discuss language use, choice of words, and concepts. She acknowledges that new words are sometimes needed, and that it can be meaningful and even pragmatic to introduce them. (The example of "they/them" as a gender-neutral pronoun comes to mind as an example). Nelson is, however, also attentive to the constitutive openness of language and the multiple contexts in which words have meaning.

There is truth in Nelson writing "there is no cure". However, the kind of uncertainty she is referring to here is not the same as presupposing uncertainty of meaning or language use as such. "There is no cure" is Nelson's way of articulating the fact that using language can never be a matter of a "safe space" – there is no one answer, theory, or perspective that can "secure" meaning for us (similarly, nothing can "guarantee" love). In this sense Derrida is correct in speaking of the open-endedness of language use and of meaning – "the wings with which each word can fly" as Nelson

puts it. Nelson's remark can be read as a remark regarding the fact that our language use and culture are not static, and that certain words, remarks, and expressions have a different meaning depending on who utters them where and when. We cannot, as it were, prescribe rules on language use and then rely on the rules to secure meaning for us. There may always be ambiguity. The only "cure" is to reflect on or ask what someone means when they say what they say. The "cure" is realizing that the expectation that words in themselves can stand for a particular meaning – in isolation from who says them – is a picture we need to let go of. However, ambiguity, ambivalences, and the fact that we might not always say what we mean, or mean what we say, are aspects of what it means to be a subject, and a speaker of language, but they also open up the possibility for openness and interpretation, and self-understanding.

Nelson underlines the ambiguity and openness spoken of earlier when she writes: "One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper, *You're just a hole, letting me fill you up*. Like when I say *husband*." The last two sentences can easily be read as an expression of a patriarchal perspective. Saying that she is "just a hole" alludes to psychoanalytic theory, where woman is seen as lack, she "is just a hole" (Gallop, 1982: 22). "Letting me fill you up" can be read as alluding to what Rosi Braidotti describes as the heteronormativity of "the biblical style penetration ... of sperm-carrying penis into the vagina" (Braidotti, 2002: 46).

When giving a talk where I quoted this section by Nelson, a woman remarked that the sentence "Like when you whisper, *You're just a hole, letting me fill you up*" reminded her of a scene in Lars von Trier's film *Nymphomaniac* where she said a similar phrase was uttered in a scene that, to her, was a disturbing display of sadomasochism. The phrase, in this reading, is reminiscent of pornographic, depersonalized language use, where the point is to objectify, dominate, and in a specifically *performative* way express "desire". In cases where both the "active, penetrator" and "the passive, penetrated" are roles being played out, these words and expressions can be seen as expressive of an impersonal relation and thus impersonal "discursive" language use. If sexuality is driven by something else than it being a response to another person – that is, "if one's own sexual desire is deformed by destructiveness, the other's destructiveness will turn one on insofar as it answers to one's own, fits one's fantasy" (Backström, 2014: 50) – it is driven by something else than love⁸. In such a case, the utterance might not have anything to do with love at all, but if we read sexuality as an expression of, or response to love, as what makes sexuality "human; as emotionally and existentially charged, as terribly difficult, as filled with promises of enjoyment and joy, and with endless pain and humiliation" (Backström, 2014: 48), the meaning these words have are equally filled with the possibility of love, enjoyment and joy as with humiliation and pain. These are possibilities in reality, in our relations to other people, not only intellectualized accounts of what "sexuality" can manifest politically, philosophically or culturally.

In the love story described in *The Argonauts*, "Like when you whisper, *You're just a hole, letting me fill you up*" can be interpreted as a description of a sex scene, an expression of love, intimacy, desire and playfulness, and as a glimpse into a conversation between two lovers, expressing specifically the kind of honesty Nelson speaks of in the passage on butches and femmes. In this sense, the meaning of the phrase is precisely a contrast to a performative expression of desire, sex or honor. Similarly with the word "husband". Queer and feminist criticisms of marriage as an institutionalized form of compulsory heterosexuality might suggest that the word "husband" is an expression of a historical, oppressive social order and therefore always in this sense a "tainted" word. One can interpret the idea that "husband" always alludes to a patriarchal meaning as an expression of the idea Wittgenstein criticizes when he writes (2009, § 117): "As if the meaning were an aura the word brings along with it and retains in every kind of use". If we let go of this idea, the meanings of these kinds of phrases and words need not necessarily reference a patriarchal meaning

or use. “Husband” might be patriarchal, *but there is no necessity here*. The use of the word husband can just as well be ironic, playful, or truthful, as it can be patriarchal. When Nelson says *husband* to Harry, it can be a way of recognizing him as “my loved one”. It can also be read as an ironic or playful commentary on the importance that marriage has as a political institution in society. These different uses are not necessarily contradictory and can occur simultaneously. What this multiplicity in use indicates, rather, is the personal and moral aspect of what is at stake in talking to someone in these different cases, and an understanding each other and what is being said. *We* must consider what meaning we see in words, expressions, and sentences, and in the contexts in which they are uttered, and we must consider what meaning they can have in various relations.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have suggested that Wittgenstein’s understanding of philosophy is helpful in considering the “pedagogical” aspects that literature *can* have as a means to deepen and further our understanding of ourselves and others, and in showing the complexity of meaning that questions of gender, love and language can have in life. Reading *The Argonauts* with Wittgenstein’s understanding of philosophy as work on oneself and as reaching for clarity, I suggest, can illuminate pedagogical-philosophical aspects of Nelson’s work that can teach us something about literature and philosophy, but especially about our own role in thinking about language, literature and philosophy. Wittgenstein’s emphasis on our personal involvement in any philosophizing as well as his emphasis on philosophy as a dialogical activity has bearings on how we can think about the role that literature plays in deepening our understanding of ourselves and others. This approach reveals the deeply moral-existential dimensions of reading literature, or the stakes involved in questions of identification and disidentification, when we engage with the descriptions, characters, and works of art that literature in its multiple forms and variations presents us with.

The examples provided by Nelson that I have engaged with suggest that sentences and language use can be performative and nonperformative, alluding to both collective and personal uses of language, like when one expresses a political criticism or a vision that has a deep ethical significance. The examples above provide different descriptions of possible meanings that sentences can have, depending on the context in which they are uttered. This is the variation in meaning that Wittgenstein suggests we need to be open to, when he says that “for a *large* class of cases [...] the meaning of a word is its use” (2009, § 43). As Moi notes, Wittgenstein says that philosophy can neither ground nor justify the actual use of language (Moi, 2017: 157). What philosophy can do is describe and make sense of the language use we engage in. It can make us understand what *kinds* of questions we are faced with and how we can think about them.

When Maggie is talking to Harry, we can read it as an expression of love and desire. The struggle Maggie and Harry have with words, language, and love is presented through conversations between two lovers who are also engaging with theories of language, gender, identification, subjectivity and vulnerability. *The Argonauts* might suggest that the difficulty of thinking about gender, language and love, or the difficulty of loving, is a philosophical matter. At the same time, one might argue that the difficulties we may face in love, and in relation to gender and identity are precisely not a matter of theory or philosophy, but a struggle with ourselves, others and our way of seeing things. What it means to understand the other is not a matter of language or words only but a question of becoming clear of whether the other means what she says (Nykänen, 2019). In this sense, understanding the other is a moral-existential aspect of the “I-You relation.”

Nelson thematizes suspicion and reparation, not as a theoretical insights about language and the world but rather as attitudes in life, as a moral-existential concern regarding what things mean for us.

Nelson's writing and her depiction of what a struggle of having or lacking faith in words or other people can mean in a life challenges the theoreticism of much of contemporary critical theory. Nelson shows how concepts such as subversion and performativity are rooted in the everyday – and pushes this insight to open up, question, and dissolve some of the dominating epistemic habits in queer and feminist theory, habits that urge us to make politics out of everything, and struggle to articulate any account of meaning beyond the concept of power.

Theory is not only “political” but can come to have a bearing on the personal and deepen our understanding of both ourselves and others, as much as it can distort it. The question of when and if words are “good enough” or if words corrupt and destroy what is good is not only a matter of what language is, or a matter of a politics of performativity, but of what *we* make of it. To deepen our understanding is conceptually related to questions of truth and reality, not in the epistemic sense of defending or defining truths of what constitutes reality, but rather in a moral sense of whether we are truthful and real in our own ways of thinking and interpreting how we see and understand things, as “truthful thoughts are only possible as part of a truthful life” (Strandberg, 2019: 139). This is why not only engaging with philosophy, but also literature is, in a sense, a work on oneself, and how (truthfully) one sees things.

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ORCID iD

Salla Aldrin Salskov  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5854-0363>

Notes

1. I draw on Robyn Wiegman's (2014) notion of queer feminist criticism as scholarship that “partakes in defining and analyzing the affective in temporal terms and vice versa, producing as much as contesting the atmospheres that reside in cultural domains and the critical worlds we build from and around them” (Wiegman, 2014: 6).
2. I follow this understanding of Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy as therapeutic. There is an ongoing debate regarding different interpretations of Wittgenstein's method as being “standard,” “resolute,” “therapeutic,” or “liberating” (Read, 2020), and several names are connected to the “resolute” or “therapeutic” reading of Wittgenstein (for an overview, see Bronzo, 2012). It is not, however, this interpretative work that I have in mind when I speak of his method as therapeutic, but the emphasis on his way of speaking of methods as *therapies*, and philosophy as an activity that aims for clarity in understanding one's own and others' thinking. I further draw on interpretations of Wittgenstein's language philosophy as having a dialogical and ethical dimension in that it centers on an I-You understanding, and on being intersubjective and relational, as elaborated by Backström (2007), 2011; Nykänen (2019); Toivakainen (2020); see also

- Read (2020). This dialogical understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy focuses not only on whether language use is in order, but whether our understanding of each other is in order, and points to ambivalences in understanding, and in *us*.
3. *The Argonauts* has been called genre-bending in combining personal reflections with theoretical writing. Autotheory is a term Nelson credits to Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie* in an interview with Micah McCrary (McCrary and Nelson, 2015).
 4. I want to note that I am discussing *pictures* that Sedgwick draws of how particular epistemic habits of thinking about language and meaning have formed within antiessentialist epistemologies, inspired by what is understood as "Butlerian" and "Derridean" interpretations of Austin's work. The precise ways in which these pictures emerge in the writing of Butler and Derrida are a study of its own, that is, however, the topic of a possible other paper.
 5. To send a passage from a book a few days after a love pronouncement, as Nelson did, whose meaning is ambiguous as a confession of love can be interpreted in various ways: as an expression of an intellectualistic understanding of love, as a fear of being rejected, as lack of courage, or as an expression of vulnerability. Speaking to the other and of love by using sophisticated words might also be seen as a need to act cool in the face of the vulnerability that a confession of love necessarily entails, and in front of the other. As an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript pointed out, defense against vulnerability bears similarities to the ways in which literary theory has played a defensive role with regard to vulnerability in reading literature, as Rita Felski (2015) has argued, not letting the text catch one off-guard, or surprise or move the reader, as the reader is already vigilantly countering any effects the text might have on them.
 6. The line occurs in Mykel Johnson's essay "Butchy femme" in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, edited by Joan Nestle (1992). It is also quoted in Ann Cvetkovich's essay in *Butch-Femme: Theories of Lesbian Gender*. "Femme, taken from the French for 'woman,' its pronunciation anglicized, has been used in the lesbian context since the 1940s, when it became a common term in working-class U.S. bar culture to describe feminine women who desired and partnered with other – usually masculine – women, known as butches" (Kennedy and Davis, 1993) (accessed 8.10.2020, <https://feralfeminisms.com/playing-femme/>). Stone butches, again, were known to be "untouchable", related to the vulnerability of being "fucked" or receiving sexual attention (Cvetkovich, 1995: 127).
 7. As Linda Zerilli notes regarding the debates over the word "woman": "Third wave debates over the category of women more or less focused on the problem of exclusion: every theoretical and political claim to the category brings with it a normative conception of women that excludes those who do not conform (Zerilli, 2008: 28).
 8. It should be noted that love here refers to a perspective one might take and have in life and to other people in general, not exclusively to romantic love. "For love is not an 'attitude' which is possible to take up towards some 'objects' and not others; drawing a boundary for whom I will be loving towards is a threat also to those within it, and therefore unloving *tout court*" (Strandberg 2019, 137–138, cf. Strandberg 2011: ch. 8).

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Salla Aldrin Salskov is a philosopher and gender studies scholar, currently working as a project researcher at The Swedish School of Social Sciences, at the University of Helsinki. She has published on savior narratives, homonationalism and racialization, polarization, intersectionality, language philosophy and ethics, epistemic habits and queerfeminist criticism. Her work is inspired by Wittgensteinian language and moral philosophy more broadly. Her work has been published in *Sexualities*, *NORA-Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *NORMA: International Journal of Masculinity Studies*, and *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*. She is one of the editors of a special issue on feminist epistemic habits and critique in *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, and of *Ethical Inquiries After Wittgenstein*, Springer (forthcoming).