

ABNORMAL TONGUES:
STYLE AND SEXUALITY IN MODERN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

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“Abnormal Tongues” is an analysis of the sexual politics of style. Many interpretive strategies of modern Western thought, it contends, are shaped by a poorly understood, yet powerful sexual technology we call “style.” What seems to circulate as a neutral, even scientific term in literary criticism is instead a supple ideological force that saturates academic and popular culture as one of the most powerful, because one of the most subtle, ways we understand how literary expression makes individuals legible to others as “normal” or as “deviant” sexual subjects. The ancient concept of style is transformed by the expert discourses of modernity in order to secure heterosexuality’s authorized use of language through what it figures as its “natural” condition of clarity and to disqualify homosexuality’s use of language as what it terms excessive stylization.

The project examines the major theoretical texts of literary stylistics and psychoanalysis – the two most important modern discourses of style that together

produced its sexualization – focusing on the cases of three important modernist stylists who have each been appropriated by literary criticism as exemplary instances of style’s presumed expression of authorial sexuality. Ernest Hemingway’s reception both as masculine icon and as a simple and direct writer allow him and his partisans to partake of the privilege and acclaim awarded to the heterosexually-inflected notion of clarity. For Henry James and Gertrude Stein the opposite is the case: each has been understood to produce overly stylized writing that is often read as an expression of the author’s shameful homosexuality. Each of these readings is fuelled by a normalizing demand in the modern West to apply to style what Foucault terms “a hermeneutics of desire.” In opposition to this largely unrecognized practice, “Abnormal Tongues” argues that literary criticism needs a new, non-disciplinary understanding of style that will liberate critique from its problematically phobic heritage and de-couple style from the practice of sexual diagnosis.

Chapter I

Introduction: Abnormal Tongues

Nothing is more essential to a society than the *classification* of its languages. To change this classification, to relocate its discourse, is to bring about a revolution.

Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*

Style has always contained within itself a sort of fifth column, the extraordinary sensitivity to shame that is its basic operating equipment.

D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen or, The Secret of Style*

The question then, as now is: *How can you recognize one?* Then as now we were supposed to betray ourselves, give ourselves away. We exhibited symptoms of our condition.

Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*

When French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan finally published his most famous and influential collection *Écrits* in 1966, he began it not as we might expect with a discussion of the unconscious, dreams, Oedipus, or any number of other familiar concepts that populate the landscape of psychoanalysis. Instead, he curiously used the brief overture to the book to issue an unexpected but urgent warning about *style*, a warning that has unfortunately in the decades that followed been largely ignored by literary critics. Taking on a commonly held sentiment, Lacan repeats a familiar dictum only to argue for its glaring fallacy, explaining that: “‘The style is the man himself,’ people repeat without seeing any harm in it, and also without worrying about the fact that man is no longer so sure a reference point.”¹ Lacan’s remark stands as a fine preamble to the present study’s goals, a project that means to contribute to the work Lacan pleads for by overturning both

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 9.

the widespread notion that style is an infallible index of individual essence and also the harm that assumption is capable of causing, particularly to those (especially lesbians and gay men) who have for a long time been vulnerable to the asymmetrical pains inflicted by such an essentialist understanding and its very public revelations. That Lacan inaugurates his germinal text with this protest against the way many routinely understand style should suggest the importance of his point and yet literary critics in particular, those who have been quickest in the world of Anglo-American criticism anyway to incorporate Lacan's ideas into their thinking, have been slow to recognize Lacan's important intervention into the question of style. They have in fact still by and large let stand the problematic idea put forward by a host of modern disciplinary discourses including aesthetics, medicine, criminology, and psychology that style maintains a privileged position as a key marker of personhood – and especially sexual personhood – in the modern West. Taking Lacan's point seriously, I argue that it is crucial that we take another look at the complex institutional and discursive conditions that converge to make us continue to think, in Buffon's famous words, that the style *is* the man, and that we try instead to see style differently as a dense but under-recognized site of ideological struggle that is of central importance not only for literary criticism but also, as the entrance of Lacan and psychoanalysis onto the scene should suggest, for the history of sexuality.

Many twentieth century texts testify to the contemporary urgency of Lacan's neglected injunction. One extraordinarily popular recent film, David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995), provides an instructive example of the surprising relevance of this specialized literary category to our everyday lived experience of the world. In the film, Brad Pitt's Detective David Mills displays an especially astute understanding of the very particularly

sexual way that style marks the modern subject. In one brief scene highlighting Mills' aggressively heterosexual impatience with stylized writing, he reads Dante's *The Divine Comedy* at his partner's suggestion, searching for leads in the bizarre serial murder case he is investigating. Unable to understand and frustrated by the opacity of the text, he explodes: "Fuckin' Dante ... poetry-writing faggot!", a populist remark to which we as audience are prompted both to laugh at as well as laugh with Mills.² Following the outburst he angrily hurls his copy of Dante away as he abandons the difficulty of that "faggoty" text in favor of the welcome, plainspoken accessibility of a newly acquired CliffNotes version. It is Dante's style, his challenging way of writing, and not simply as the quote would suggest a generic dissatisfaction ("poetry"), that seems to infuriate Mills and solicit his disheartened epithets. Dante is a faggot for Mills not just for writing poetry, after all, but for doing it in a style Mills can't for the life of him decipher. That reaction to the impenetrable excess of Dante's style, comic and illustrative of Mills' character as it is, however, is even more significant for displaying a resilient and deeply sedimented popular understanding about literary style and its accepted signification of homosexuality. That Mills responds with frustrated anger to a difficult text comes as no real surprise – without a doubt many readers of Henry James' *The Ambassadors*, for instance, might understandably have felt similar feelings while reading that book. What is perhaps more surprising is that Mills, such a likeable character even to those who might otherwise deplore his not infrequent homophobic outbursts, so readily and so expertly equates Dante's difficult style with homosexuality. That we are led to identify so strongly with the photogenic Pitt and his character's working-class, "common sense" approach to the world only underscores the culturally ingrained nature of his knowing

² *Se7en*. Videocassette. Directed by David Fincher. 1995; New Line Home Video, 1996.

reading of style. I point to this example not simply as a pop culture misunderstanding of literary history – after all, it would be tough I think to point out a text that is more relentlessly un-faggoty than *The Divine Comedy*. Rather, and this is the force of the example, Mills’ reading of Dante is entirely commensurate with the way that modern Western culture has shaped and continues to (even retroactively) understand the concept of literary style. The film gives voice to a convention about style so deeply held that we aren’t even totally conscious of it, namely that *style means homosexuality*.

Coming from such a reliably middlebrow source as *Se7en* makes the cultural position reflected in the film, I think, all the more convincing as a widely held attitude. High-brow or academic criticism, though, has historically had much the same unfortunate disposition toward style as has an uneducated tough guy like Mills. The well respected critic George Steiner, for instance, has recourse in his work to a much wider academic vocabulary and to the precedent of aesthetic philosophy, but ultimately his conclusion about style is rather similar, if etiologically distinct, to the one espoused by Pitt’s filmic alter-ego. In an essay called “Eros and Idiom,” Steiner suggests that “since about 1890 homosexuality has played a vital part in Western culture and, perhaps even more significantly, in the myths and emblematic gestures which that culture has used in order to arrive at self-consciousness.”³ Among the most important of the roles that homosexuality has played in the West, he says, is as a narcissistic counterpoint to realistic modes of representation, the supposedly natural condition of healthy, communal, heterosexual expression. All modern literature that violates the demands of realism, that exceeds it by employing a novel or unusual parlance, is for Steiner fundamentally

³ George Steiner, “Eros and Idiom” in *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 115.

homosexual in its orientation. In other words, Steiner understands homosexuality as the precipitating stimulant of creative style that is so self-absorbed that it divides the individual's disruptively anti-social idiom from that of the community:

So far as much of the best, of the most original in modern art and literature is autistic, i.e. unable or unwilling to look to a reality or 'normality' outside its own chosen rules, so far as much of the modern genius can be understood from the point of view of a sufficiently comprehensive, sophisticated theory of games, there is in it a radical homosexuality. In other words, homosexuality could be construed as a creative rejection of the philosophic and conventional realism, of the *mundanity* and extroversion of classic and nineteenth-century feeling.⁴

The portrait of homosexuality as narcissism that Steiner paints here should be familiar to anyone who has encountered Freud and his disciples. His reading is firmly rooted in the language of individual psychic deviance as in his claim that the difference from the mundane, realistic, or normal, which is to say "style," is spawned by an autistic, inward-looking, in short creatively selfish homosexuality. Moreover, style is especially fraught for him from a materialist perspective because it rejects the productive, linguistically procreative norm of communally established forms of expression in favor of that same self-interested "creative rejection." Homosexuality becomes at once disabled, mad, self-obsessed and anti-social, all in an argument that seems to take itself to be relatively sympathetic to the homosexual condition and appreciative of the creative fruit that condition is understood to yield. Where heterosexuality produces "art and language that are centrally acts of communication, of relationship to the 'outside'," homosexuality "or ... that abstraction of homosexuality which is narcissism" is rendered "unable or unwilling" to speak in that accessible tongue, in essence depriving homosexuals of a voice by reducing their language to the beautiful but impenetrable cries of madmen and

⁴ Ibid., 117.

madwomen.⁵ To put the same thing in Mills' unapologetic vernacular: faggots write with a style "the rest of us" can't understand.

Other critics have searched for a less pathologizing sort of explanation, attributing responsibility for style to homosexuality while tracing its origin not to some innate personal deviance but to social construction instead. Jeffrey Meyers, for example, tries to rehabilitate the work of homosexual writers in *Homosexuality and Literature, 1890-1930* by explaining style as a perfectly understandable defense mechanism employed to covertly communicate the experience of closeted gay existence in the face of overwhelming societal oppression. He reasons that "the obsessive predilections of homosexual novelists are both an obstacle and a stimulus to art, and lead to a creative tension between repression and expression. The novels become a raid on inarticulate feelings, and force the authors to find a language of reticence and evasion, obliqueness and indirection."⁶ Meyers's gay liberationist reading comes from a recuperative perspective, attempting to separate homosexuality from its long history of narcissistic and pathological diagnosis by psychology even as it recapitulates the presumed link between style and homosexuality upon which, as I will show, that psychological reading depends. He therefore unfortunately reinscribes in his reading the familiar terms of secrecy and deception, the idea that homosexual persons are determined to insinuate themselves under false pretenses with coy and skillfully misleading language that obscures a darker purpose. Part of that project, he suggests, is the adaptation to "style," the strategic use of language that subterranean lesbians and gay men had to, in a sense, adapt to and learn in an evolutionary sense in order to survive.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jeffrey Meyers, *Homosexuality and Literature, 1890-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 1.

These three readings, one popular and two critical, represent the three main forms of legibility that have traditionally obtained to style for over a century. To repeat they break down roughly as follows: (1) the tautological, essentialist, even behaviorist common sense view championed by the fictional Mills that homosexuals produce style because that is their innate nature; (2) the psychological view derived from Freud and espoused by Steiner that homosexuals suffer from an unusually narcissistic psyche that drives them to reject established, communal forms of language in favor of private indulgence; (3) the social constructionist view proposed by Meyers that homosexuals are forced to resort to private style by the social disenfranchisement they endure. Each of these readings, which are by no means entirely discrete phenomena, are collective testimony to the widely held, if not always openly acknowledged belief that gay and lesbian people are invariably the possessors and arbiters of style. This project asks how it came to be that style, and literary style in particular, would be regarded as such a site at which deviant sexuality – and consequently the assumption of the unshakeable truth of individual identity – would make itself plainly visible. This question curiously underlies, as we have seen, many of the endeavors of both conservative and progressive literary criticism in which “style” is often taken as a key term for understanding the erotic meanings of literary texts, on the one hand as the unmistakable sign by which to detect a pervert, and on the other hand as a versatile tool for subverting the acceptable forms of literature by “queering” texts through stylistic deviance. How, though, did we reach a point at which we could even conceive of the strange notion that style and sexuality are one?

Abnormal Tongues argues that many of the interpretive strategies of modern Western thought are shaped by a poorly understood yet for that matter no less powerful technology that we call style. What appears to circulate as a morally neutral, quasi-scientific term in literary criticism (and a minor one according to the persistent claim that it is substance, not style, that really matters) is in fact a widely dispersed ideological mechanism that saturates academic and popular culture. I argue that while the concept of style is most commonly deployed in the context of alleged aesthetic disinterest, it is actually one of the most powerful, because one of the most subtle, ways we understand how our expression makes us legible to others as “normal” or as “deviant” sexual subjects. Moreover, because of the role that style assumes in a cluster of modern discourses of personhood, especially criminal, medical, and psychological, it becomes in the course of the nineteenth century synonymous with one emergent deviant type in particular – the homosexual – the personage upon whom style exercises most visibly the full explanatory power of its bizarrely sexual intelligibility. What we traditionally have (mis)understood in literary criticism as an ethically unweighted rhetorical quality is transfigured by the expert discourses of modernity to subtly constrain our modes of articulation with real, material consequences for those who are, in Steiner’s words, “unable or unwilling” to manage their styles in certain culturally sanctioned, yet hazily defined ways.

I. The Origins of Style

While the appreciation of a stylistic component to writing has been conceived since antiquity, the late nineteenth century – the period that according to Foucault gave birth to the homosexual – also gave rise to a totally original, sexualized conceptualization

of literary style. For pre-modern thinkers style was generally believed to be an aspect of a piece of writing that one could objectively describe, an inherent textual fact within writing rather than in the writer who produced it. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, literary criticism had moved away from the taxonomic approach of classical rhetoric – the standard view for centuries in the West – in favor of an intellectual position that understood style as a kind of fingerprint of its author, the unmistakable trace left behind by a unique, and routinely gay psychology. The pre-modern paradigm is perhaps most clearly represented in its root form in the theoretical writings of the ancient world and the later manifestations of that view in the early modern period. Both Plato and Aristotle, for instance, talk about style – *lexis* as they call it – as a manipulable component of speech, a quality residing in the language a speaker or writer chooses to use, and this is the important distinction, rather than originating in the psyche of the speaker himself. One might be better or worse at using the techniques of language depending on training and skill, but ultimately style was understood as an effect of language’s function (knowing the right way to create a certain stylistic effect, for instance, would theoretically be enough to do it given the right talent), and not of some individual quirk or overdetermining psychological influence.⁷ The distinguished eighteenth century writer Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711) would demonstrate this tradition’s longevity by famously calling expression “the dress of thought,” conceiving of style as external ornamentation added onto a stable core of protected internal meaning. What these early examples show is that while style has of course always told us things about the person using it (for the ancients, for example, good

⁷ See, for instance, Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 215-57.

speech often meant good training in the art of rhetoric), it only became possible fairly recently, late in the second half of the nineteenth century as I've said, to tap style as a tool for extrapolating the sexual subjectivity of an individual from her stylistic residue. The consequence of this change has been, as we saw in the case of Detective Mills' reading of Dante, to shift the critic's attention toward style as a mystery to solve, as the traces of an individual psychology bled out into the process by which a subject wields linguistic signs. Style has, in short, become as it never was before a means of interpreting, measuring, and categorizing human sexual subjectivity.

It was Michel Foucault, of course, who advanced the practice of discourse analysis that shows us how to interrogate style as such a nexus of power and knowledge. Foucault shows in *The History of Sexuality*, in one of his most influential accounts, that sodomy has existed throughout human history but that it wasn't until the nineteenth century that sodomy signified in the West a special kind of person with a special style of life.⁸ Following a radical cultural reorganization beginning in what he calls the classical period of the West and reaching its climax in the invention of the homosexual in 1869, sex between two people of the same gender came to signify a unique personage, a particular species of individual to whom this perennial act could be attributed. Style's place in this same normalizing environment is analogous and ideologically adjacent to Foucault's account of the genesis of homosexuality and the birth of the homosexual as species.⁹ At the end of the nineteenth century, style, like sodomy, through what is no

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).

⁹ George Chauncey's *Gay New York* challenges Foucault's definitive dating, arguing quite persuasively that Foucault's dates are tied to an upper middle class medical discourse that does not correspond exactly to the urban subcultures of the early 20th century that followed a somewhat different timeline. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

mere historical coincidence, acquires a systematic role in securing the forces of normalization by providing a new, linguistic yardstick for the assessment of sexual normality. In a truly strange twist, style, for all intents and purposes a non-sexual feature of language, will like sodomy become inextricably associated with a particular discredited species of person – the homosexual. Whereas in the past style was something “neutral,” a morally unmarked clothing for thoughts no more or less indicative of deep subjectivity than a dress, by the late nineteenth century, style signifies unmistakable and undivestible inner perversion.¹⁰ As a consequence, in stark contrast to the popular myth, to be “all style” is in fact not to have no substance at all but to always already have too much substance – and not a good one!

Marking the end of the nineteenth century as a key moment in style’s genealogy is as I’ve said no arbitrary selection. The aesthetic, cultural, and discursive reorganization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as described in detail by Foucault in works like *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality*, crystallize in an unexpected but decidedly sexual direction a notion of style that finds its roots in ancient rhetoric but could only comprehensively operate in a modern, disciplinary society that administers its subjects based on an uncertainly defined, culturally saturating rhetoric of style. The discussion to follow provides a theoretical background for the readings of literary texts in subsequent chapters and therefore it does not aim to be an historically exhaustive account of a concept – style – that has been with

¹⁰ Joseph Litvak makes a similar argument that sophistication and perversion are virtually cognates. He points out that “a glance at the dictionary is all it takes to recall that sophistication in fact means ‘perversion.’” My adoption of this formulation, however, is not meant to restrict my focus – style – only to perversion in general, for I emphasize that style has a deep affinity with one perversion – homosexuality – in particular. Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 3.

us for thousands of years; such a history is unfortunately well beyond my ability to provide.¹¹ While I hope to have sketched out some sense of the historical trajectory of the idea in the broadest of terms, my goal for what follows is to delineate style's progress in the modern era, that is, tracing how we have come to use style – and how style has come to use us – in the last hundred or so years. To put it more simply, this introduction provides a polemical explanation for why style signifies in the sexual way that it does and what interests are served by that uninterrogated signification.

The argument that follows operates simultaneously on two key theoretical levels. First, this is an argument about literary history, one that traces the development of an important and specialized concept in the field – style – in a fairly specific historical moment (and in a very specific moment in the history of sexuality). That moment to some extent parallels the period of literary modernism but should not be construed as precisely coextensive with it. Modernism, both with its emphasis on experimental form and its interest in emergent modes of novel gender and sexual subjectivities, makes the concerns explored in this project most visible by putting them into starkest relief, a fact that explains why I have drawn on so many modernist texts for examples. Within the historical sweep that reaches from the earliest literary text that finds a place here, Henry James's "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" (1884) to the latest, Ernest Hemingway's posthumously published *A Moveable Feast* (1964), the primary emphasis is on a more or less conventionally understood "modernist" period, roughly speaking the 1880s through

¹¹ Some useful collections that address this subject include Seymour Chatman, ed. *Literary Style: A Symposium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); Berel Lang, ed. *The Concept of Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press); John Middleton Murry, *The Problem of Style* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); John Spencer, ed. *Linguistics and Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Jean Jacques Weber, ed. *The Stylistics Reader* (New York: Arnold, 1996);

the 1940s. However we decide to define the limits of modernism, though, the modern regime of style, as the three critical examples I began with suggest, does not by any means begin and end with that aesthetic moment. Not relying on strict literary periodization, *Abnormal Tongues* is also necessarily a discursive analysis, drawing as it does from several disciplines in order to emphasize the broad cultural resonance of what was initially understood by the ancients in the restricted sense of a rhetorical tool. We will see that style is special among the terms of literary criticism because of the remarkable way that its meaning for us has been sharply molded by a cluster of normalizing, expert discourses. What this means is that to understand style one cannot limit oneself to a purely formal and supposedly disinterested literary analysis, as has often been the case with literary criticism, if one wants to understand the multi-faceted influence culture has had on our ideas about style. Moreover, a thorough and comprehensive analysis requires a special understanding of the intellectual debts literary criticism owes in particular to two fields that have done more than any others in providing us with our current understanding of style – stylistics (a branch of linguistics) and psychoanalysis. I argue that these two fields liberally influence(d) and borrow(ed) from one another in a way that has to this point been virtually unrecognized to converge into our modern psychologically inflected, sexually oriented understanding of style.

This argument, then, is also necessarily situated within a constellation of psychological and sexological theories that are both produced by and productive of the cultural regulation style helps to perpetuate, a task that stylistics could not have accomplished on its own. My focus on sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, reveals in a way that has not yet been recognized how the expert discourses of modernity

revive and inflect much older rhetorical traditions, dramatized here in the readings of the two most important modern Western discourses of style (stylistics and psychoanalysis). The extended reading of stylistics that constitutes the opening part of the chapter first aims to throw into question the patina of scientific neutrality under which that project usually tends to operate, and instead foregrounds the ideological presuppositions and political implications, especially as they relate to sexuality, that enfold stylistics' entire conceptualization of style. The chapter then concludes with a long engagement with Freud, one of our most influential theorists of style and yet a figure who is not well recognized either for the major role style plays in his thinking or for the major role he plays in our thinking about style. I show how these two grand discourses act together dynamically to renovate the ancient conceit of style and re-animate it in modernity in what proves a disguised but highly phobic and politically tenuous way, a way that literary criticism, if it intends to pursue a progressive and humane political project, must distance itself from in favor of a more self-aware and less deliberately normalizing stance toward style.

II. Style and Truth

Before going any further it is important to establish a working definition of what we mean by the term "style." For the most part literary criticism has relied upon the authority of linguistics to define style in its technical terms. Richard Ohmann, one of the most influential of these linguistically oriented critics, argues that style is at its simplest nothing more than "a way of writing" and that it is a way of writing that presumes only that the words in a given utterance can be expressed in multiple, referentially equivalent ways: either the words themselves (diction) or their arrangement (syntax) could be

different without altering the substance of the utterance.¹² By this logic for style to exist one must be able to say “the same thing” in numerous, stylistically diverse ways. This definition follows Roman Jakobson’s famously authoritative pronouncement that “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination”; in other words, style is constituted by the combination of selections among referentially similar but formally different linguistic alternatives.¹³ As the style of a particular utterance changes because of variation in word choice or order, the substance remains constant, unaltered in its “equivalence” by the vagaries of stylistic fluctuation.

In the history of criticism this way of thinking represents what I call the classical model, in which style is thought to be ornamental, added to the supposedly stable content of a text as in Pope’s formulation of style as dress.¹⁴ The terminology is not meant to suggest that we only find the classical model in very old texts; critics oriented toward linguistics like Jakobson and Ohmann often unsurprisingly utilize this classical method in their work, influenced as it is by so many pre-modern sources. According to Jonathan Culler, though, the defining feature of the classical model regardless of its historical position is its central conceptualization of style as decoration:

Classical rhetoric defines a series of operations which enable one to move from the textual surface, with its metaphors and synecdoches, to the meanings which are essentially references. . . . By performing the translation which rhetoric requires we isolate the ornament which serves as decoration. Indeed, one might say that debates about

¹² Richard Ohmann, “Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style” in *Linguistics and Literary Style*, ed. Donald C. Freeman (New York: Holt, 1970). Reprinted from *Word XX* (1964), 424-439. There are, of course, a number of complexities in this definition that Ohmann does not address. For instance, Ohmann uses the term “substance,” yet never puts pressure on that concept. His tactical use of “substance” avoids the more obviously problematic concept “meaning,” for of course every change in words is a change in meaning.

¹³ Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics” in *The Stylistics Reader*, ed. Jean Jacques Weber (New York: Arnold, 1996), 17.

¹⁴ Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric* is perhaps the clearest example of the classical model of style. The style of a given utterance, for Aristotle, may be more or less persuasive, but style is still conceived as ornament in that text, as packaging for an idea that is not substantively changed by its wrapping. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

rhetoric and the appropriateness of particular expressions in specific genres are possible only because there are various ways of saying the same thing: the figure is an ornament which does not trouble the representational function of language.¹⁵

In the classical model, then, style is perceived as at a distance from substance, a way of expressing a given content that may be more or less aesthetically good or rhetorically effective, but that does not substantively affect the “representational function of language,” resting as it does on the surface of the text as decoration for its deeper meaning. Style’s job is simply to provide the ribbons and bows to the message, to garnish with its figures the provided feast of meaning without disrupting its original flavors.

Although modern criticism has by now largely discredited this strictly ornamental definition of style and its familiar polarization of style and content, it has posed a whole other set of problems by moving style’s origin from language to the language user.¹⁶ Max Nordau’s popular manifesto *Degeneration* (1895) was one early and influential source to publicize this at that time inchoate view, disseminating the notion to a receptive public that all modern art reflects not just the thing depicted in it but rather the artist’s “soul”:

The work of art is never a document in the sense attached by naturalistic cant to this word, i.e., a reliable objective presentation of external facts; but it is always a confession of the author; it betrays, consciously or unconsciously, his way of feeling and thinking; it lays bare his emotions, and shows what ideas fill his consciousness, and are at the disposal of the emotion which strives for expression. It is not a mirror of the world, but a reflection of the soul of the artist.¹⁷

¹⁵ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1975), 135.

¹⁶ Susan Sontag, for example, agrees that “it would be hard to find any reputable literary critics today who would care to be caught defending as *an idea* the old antithesis of style versus content ... everyone is quick to avow that style and content are indissoluble, that the strongly individual style of each important writer is an organic aspect of his work and never something merely ‘decorative.’” Susan Sontag, “On Style” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Noonday Press, 1966), 15.

¹⁷ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), 476.

Nordau's appeal to the soul of the artist embeds style deeply into the author's essence, positioning it as irrefutable proof of his singular nature. Be it "consciously or unconsciously," according to Nordau, the artist always makes a confession in the work of art, at once presenting her "external facts" but also always unburdening her truth. Nordau's project, as Jonathan Freedman has shown, was heavily overdetermined by his attempt to deflect negative stereotypes about Jews (notably urban decadence as a symptom of degeneration) that were in wide circulation at the time, and that he moved to pass these stereotypes off onto other marginalized groups that were easy targets, especially artists and homosexuals.¹⁸ It is easy to dismiss Nordau's theory out of hand because of its motivation but it is more productive to read Nordau's argument as a cultural symptom rather than a cause strictly speaking. Nordau is an important and often cited witness to the birth of the idea that literary texts testify to the state of their creator's inner sexual being. We could debate endlessly how influential Nordau's account actually was on the scientific and popular audiences of his time but what is more valuable is to see this text as reflecting a crucial cultural shift in the reception of literary style, a shift that remains with us today more or less intact. According to Susan Sontag, in fact, it has for a long time been quite fashionable to tell ourselves that style is on the outside and that it's what's inside that counts, but "even if one were to define style as the manner of appearing, this by no means necessarily entails an opposition between a style that one assumes and one's 'true' being. In fact, such a disjunction is extremely rare. In almost every case, our manner of appearing *is* our manner of being. The mask is the face."¹⁹

¹⁸ Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Sontag, "On Style," 17.

Style is not read today nor has it been for over a century as Pope's costume for the self – it has become legible as an expression of the self, as the public exhibition of the soul.

Perhaps the most troubling consequence of this significant literary and cultural shift is the constant threat of biographical scrutiny that writers currently labor under. Every style a writer may use has the potential to carry with it attendant, if undesired, meanings and identities. Roland Barthes is among the first critics to give serious attention to this problematic by interrogating the dangerous political effects that our present, naively insidious understanding of style brings. For Barthes, one of style's most significantly problematic effects is this inescapable power of description, the knowing authority it lends to any reader or critic over any writer:

Under the name of style a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depths of the author's personal and secret mythology, that subnature of expression where the first coition of words and things takes place where once and for all the great verbal themes of his existence come to be installed. Whatever its sophistication, style always has something crude about it: it is a form with no clear destination, the product of a thrust, not an intention, and, as it were, a vertical and lonely dimension of thought. Its frame of reference is biological or biographical, not historical: it is the writer's 'thing,' his glory and his prison, it is his solitude.²⁰

Barthes contests the notion put forward by stylistics that one can still reasonably call style a mere linguistic selection in the classical sense, pointing out the fallacy of the belief that style is just a tool one takes up to use. Instead, every stylistic move a writer makes, no matter its sophistication or naiveté, is bound to reveal unexpected, even boundless depth, biological or biographical, nature or nurture. Likewise, we cannot fall back on style as merely an impersonal indication of a writer's incidental historical position, as reflecting nothing more than a writer's conditions of historical possibility. Style's dangerous crudeness, Barthes argues, is that it compels us to read its expressions of surface as depth;

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 16.

it takes supposedly neutral linguistic material – what we used to call ornament – and allows, even demands, one to infer a personage from it, a personage no doubt whose stylistic signature reveals a very particular sexual self.

Barthes' analysis provides an implicit critique of the psychological style of reasoning that mediates our modern understanding of style.²¹ That psychological approach poses a special challenge because it is, we must admit, virtually impossible to conceive of individual expression in anything but psychological terms. To a great extent the psychological is inseparable from expression since, as Fredric Jameson argues, “the problem of expression is itself closely linked to some conception of the subject as a monad like character, within which things felt are then expressed by projection outward.”²² Such a conception invariably invites us to speculate on the mind – conscious or otherwise – that produced a given expression, that inked a particular stylistic signature. Small wonder, then, that when presented with an aesthetically queer style we would tend to infer, even in the absence of any other evidence, a sexually queer character.

What is so deeply problematic about this trend for progressive literary critics is that as the meaning of style has shifted from the simplistic if comparatively harmless classical understanding of super-added ornament – pure surface – to a mechanism for deciphering the subject's true inner sexual being, it has become a normalizing, hygienic measure against society's most discursively vulnerable. Jameson's often otherwise admirably progressive work also partakes of this disturbing line of thought when he suggests that “modern style is somehow in itself intelligible, above and beyond the

²¹ I adopt the concept of the psychological style of reasoning from Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 125-141.

²² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 15.

limited meaning of the book written in it, and beyond even those precise meanings which the individual sentences that make it up are designed to convey.”²³ Jameson himself cannot account for the holistic intelligibility that style makes available – “somehow in itself” – but his indecision does nothing to shake his own intransigent confidence in his mastery over the meaning of style. We all know what style connotes, he suggests, without our ever having to explain how or why we know it. We don’t quite know how style means what it does but that lack of precise understanding seems not at all to limit what style can tell us about the individual who made it. Style has come a long way from what Jameson describes as “the purely rhetorical standards of elegance and epithet-weighting which dominated periods where all writers basically owed allegiance to a single type of style, setting their variants of it down to ‘temperament.’”²⁴ Rather, in its more recent incarnation style is understood as what Jameson calls an “abnormal tongue,” the expressive mechanism by which the subject makes clear the contours of her or his individual sexual subjecthood.²⁵ Need I stop to point out that Jameson’s metaphor evokes precisely this sexual meaning, enfolding an otherwise asexual formulation in a telling figure that is at once a metaphor for the poetic function (tongue) and a descriptor for a deviant, non-procreative sexual organ?

But what of this will to truth surrounding style? Why does it matter so much that our culture tells us that we can figure out everything (sexual) we need to know about an author by reading his style? Barthes argues that it is especially distressing that an author

²³ Fredric Jameson, *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), vii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ It is important to point out that for Jameson this reading applies only to modernist style. Jameson argues convincingly but not without, I think, some oversimplification, that the triumph of postmodern pastiche eliminates the restrictive individualism of modernist style by releasing the subject from the isolating monadism of the centered subject. Postmodernism is in that sense a positive insofar as it is the end of the bourgeois ego and its modernist imprisonment within alienated “abnormal tongues.” Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 15.

cannot make himself over at will without being captured in the meanings that style's cultural intelligibility enables. As he explains, "what society will not tolerate is that I should be ... *nothing*, or to be more exact, that the *something* that I am should be openly expressed as provisional, revocable, insignificant, inessential, in a word: irrelevant."²⁶ It is forbidden for one's style to be inessential, for a subject to express nothing about his essence through the signs he uses. Culture demands that we be legible, that we be made intelligible through our styles, be they the "natural" heterosexual condition of unstylized realism or our other more revealing, descriptive "abnormal tongues." This mandate is, in turn, particularly troubling for those subjects whose deviant signs leave them open to real violence, those who are most subjected to style's immobilizing gaze. Style, then, is most pressing a political concern for those sexual minorities who are its privileged object – gay men and lesbians – for who else so readily faces the possibility of material violence in response to deviant stylistic practice?

The capacity to incite violence is not usually something we readily associate with a supposedly banal trait like "style," yet Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1939) makes a case for the possibility of precisely such violence in response to expression.²⁷ The novel begins with the assembly of guests to an annual village pageant at the country home of the Oliver family, Pointz Hall. Gathering over refreshments in anticipation of the day's main event, the guests are interrupted when their hostess Isa Oliver accidentally overturns a coffee cup, a faux pas that occasions a speedy response from one overly expressive guest, William Dodge, and a violent mental rebuke from Isa's husband Oliver:

²⁶ Roland Barthes, "Preface" in Renaud Camus, *Tricks*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1981), vii.

²⁷ On the other hand, we might consider the riots that greeted the radical modernist style of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," though it is certainly not totally apparent to me that style alone was responsible for the violence with which that piece was met.

William Dodge caught it as it fell. He held it for a moment. He turned it. From the faint blue mark, as of crossed daggers, in the glaze at the bottom he knew that it was English, made perhaps at Nottingham; date about 1760. His expression, considering the daggers, coming to this conclusion, gave Giles another peg on which to hang his rage as one hangs a coat on a peg, conveniently. A toady; a lickspittle; not a downright plain man of his senses; but a teaser and twitcher; a fingerer of sensations; picking and choosing; dillying and dallying; not a man to have straightforward love for a woman - his head was close to Isa's head - but simply a – At this word, which he could not speak in public, he pursed his lips; and the signet-ring on his little finger looked redder, for the flesh next it whitened as he gripped the arm of his chair.²⁸

Dodge's manner unexpectedly, but not surprisingly, enrages Oliver, for that is style's role in a culture so terrorized by sexual and expressive deviance, which are in this instance, as in many, one and the same. It is Dodge's "expression," after all, that gives him away as "not a downright plain man" but something else, something downright unspeakable.

Presumably, it is Dodge's aesthetic sensibility, his appreciation for and knowledge of English porcelain, that brings down Giles Oliver's wrath. Indeed, the narrator notes that it is "his expression, considering the daggers, coming to this conclusion [that] gave Giles another peg on which to hang his rage." Yet the text emphasizes that it is not just Giles' recognition of Dodge's own recognition of the cup's origin that inspires his revulsion but in particular Dodge's mode of "expression" of that recognition. Dodge notably becomes completely legible in an instant of expression, an otherwise insignificant expression that collapses, for Giles, the other man's whole existence into a category of sexual species. He is "a teaser and twitcher; a fingerer of sensations; picking and choosing; dillying and dallying." A brief glimpse of expression, of style, reveals all that Giles needs to know about Dodge.²⁹ Dodge's essence is collapsed completely into one figure, signifying his disidentification, in Giles's mind, with "a man to have straightforward love for a woman." Style disqualifies, as the example illustrates, any pretence to straightness and

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press), 55.

²⁹ Seymour Chatman lists "heightened expressiveness" as one of many possible meanings of style. Seymour Chatman, "Introduction," in *Literary Style: A Symposium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), xi.

pulls back the curtain on an inner world of duplicity, serpentine hedonism, and “spittle-licking.” And while Dodge may not exactly instantiate literary style in the mode of expression he performs, the consequences, one expects, would likely be the same no matter what specific medium of expression – bodily or literary – Dodge were to use. Woolf’s novel registers Giles Oliver as an ancestor of the critics – Mills, Steiner, Meyers – with whom we began, cultural agents who all know intuitively how to tap into style’s diagnostic potential

III. Intuiting Style

Woolf’s use of the category “expression” emphasizes the way that style circulates as a remarkably supple, even absorbent signifier that nonetheless remains strikingly effective for the purposes of normalization. “A style is a way of writing – that is what the word means,” Ohmann suggests.³⁰ The simplicity of that formulation, however, belies a much more slippery object as Woolf attests. For although Ohmann is able to give such a reassuringly concise description of style, he quickly avers, “that is almost as much as one can say with assurance of the subject, which has been remarkably unencumbered by theoretical insights.”³¹ Why has the concept of style remained such a pervasive yet undertheorized presence if we can say little about it other than that it is “a way of writing?” What gives the concept its enduring appeal if it is such a vague notion? Seymour Chatman, another important mid-20th century pioneer and booster for a more rigorous theorization of style, was ultimately forced to come to terms with the defeat of that enterprise when he wistfully conceded that the dream of a proper science of stylistics

³⁰Richard Ohmann, “Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style,” in *Linguistics and Literary Style*, ed. Donald C. Freeman (New York: Holt, 1970), 259.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 259.

seems permanently dead.³² If the movement to produce a new literary science – stylistics – in the 1960s and 1970s is indeed condemned to the ash-heap of unfulfilled structuralist ambition, where does that leave the object of its inquiry? Open any contemporary work of literary criticism today and you still might find a passing reference or even detailed exegesis of the “style” of a given literary text.³³ If we have no true science or system for understanding the technical operation of style how does it continue to be deployed so frequently and expertly?

One of the claims that this project makes is that style is a porous term, one whose meaning remains stubbornly undecided in the service of producing the normalizing effects of intelligibility. The result of this openness to meaning is that at those most apolitical, scientific, or purely linguistic moments, we are also always talking about style in the most aesthetically and socially embedded, that is in the most political of ways. Countless critics have remarked on the imprecision with which the term “style” is used, yet this very imprecision is perhaps style’s greatest strength. For example, Tzvetan Todorov laments that since “the bibliography of stylistics contains thousands of titles, there is no lack of observed fact; however, the polysemy of concepts, the imprecision of methods, the uncertainty about the very goal of this research hardly make for a prosperous discipline.”³⁴ One might think, based on that description, that to deploy style as a literary category would be a serious mistake indeed, and one not likely to take the

³² Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

³³ Terry Eagleton, for instance, closes his introduction to the history *The English Novel* by re-invoking the concept of style as a kind of catch-all for the epistemological problems that the very idea of the novel presupposes. Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (New York: Blackwell, 2004).

³⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Place of Style in the Structure of the Text,” in *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 29.

critic very far. However, as Chatman illustrates, it is precisely by not naming its object that style is able to have such wide-ranging influence:

“‘Style’ is an ambiguous term. Among other things, it has been used to refer to the idiosyncratic manner of an individual or group; or to a small scale formal property of texts (in the language alone, or additionally in other attendant systems like meter); or to a kind of extra or heightened expressiveness, present in non-literary language as well; or to a decorum based on social or cultural context; or to any one of a number of other concepts.”³⁵

Style’s explanatory power is conceived of as so vast as to exceed description. Not only can style tell us about a textual detail like meter, but it has something to say about non-literary language, social or cultural characteristics, the manner of an individual or group of individuals, as well as “any one of a number of other concepts.” Style’s range *depends upon* the ambiguity of its object, an ambiguity that makes the discourse surrounding style a performative process, a language that creates what it claims simply to describe. It is vital, therefore, to understand not what style *is* but what style *does*. For understanding how style operates by presuming its own unquestioned yet credentialed expertise is especially pressing if, as Sontag argues, “awareness of style as a problematic and isolable element in a work of art has emerged in the audience for art only at certain historical moments – as a front behind which other issues, ultimately ethical and political, are being debated.”³⁶

The ambiguity of style’s object, however, is only one of a pair of factors that enables its awesome explanatory power. Along with that ambiguity comes what Paul Morrison has termed a “quasi-instinctual knowingness,” a general assumption that when it comes to style, we know it when we see it. Ohmann phrases that assumption in terms of a reader’s “intuition.” For him, readers have a loosely structured yet quite reliable

³⁵ Chatman, “Introduction,” in *Literary Style: A Symposium*, xi.

³⁶ Sontag, “On Style,” 18.

intuition for detecting style. As evidence Ohmann cites the reliability of stylistic intuition to be able to hone in on style so as to enable certain people to write stylistic parodies and others to recognize who or what is being parodied. Ohmann's assessment is nonetheless troubling as he concludes that "in a time when linguistic theory and practice have passed through at least one renaissance, the most serviceable studies of style continue to proceed from the critic's naked intuition."³⁷ Again, in spite of Ohmann's cautionary tone, the implication here is that style needs no system, no set of rules to enable one to decipher it. It has become, in the absence of such a system, a generalizable interpretive move of which anyone can partake. Moreover, stylistics is a reading practice that actively resists its own systematization, all the better to enable the democratic triumph of intuitive reading.

IV. On Clarity

Just as linguistics presumes a base or essential meaning – content – that can be transformed in a variety of utterances as a prerequisite for style's existence, so too does literary criticism require the myth of a natural, unstylized language – clarity – with which to contrast style's difference. Although critics, as I've said, often assume that style is not infused by the dynamics of power/knowledge, its very constitution depends upon the mechanisms of normalization, requiring as it does the premise of a clear, coherent, and "natural," which is for all intents and purposes normal, way of writing as a necessary point of contrast against which style becomes visible. Barthes points out the necessity of this implicit measure of normality by noting that in the modern era style is always

³⁷ Ohmann's article is actually a fascinating attempt to correct this imbalance by applying the rules of generative grammar in a rigorous way to creating a scientific formulation of style. It is one of the more successful attempts at this sort of project. Ohmann, "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style," 262.

measured on a deceptively innocent scale of norm and deviation, a fact that on closer inspection implicates style deeply in the operations of power/knowledge. Style, he says, “is seen here as an exception (though coded) to a rule; it is the aberration (individual, yet institutional) from a current usage, a usage that is either colloquial (if one defines the norm in terms of the spoken language) or prosaic (if one opposes poetry as ‘the other thing’).”³⁸ No matter if we take the norm to be “colloquial” or “prosaic,” the moment style enters the scene, it is always already as a measure of variation from a given standard of “normal” language; style is at its core the difference from “the way people talk.” Barthes goes so far as to insist that style is nothing but “a distance, a difference,” that it is constituted entirely by its variation from some imagined communal norm.³⁹ A zero degree of style, if we could even imagine such a thing, would be total fidelity to colloquial or prosaic clarity, a daunting if not downright impossible standard indeed. What is even more alarming, however, is that as Barthes reiterates, a model of language based on identifying deviance from a nonexistent but authoritative norm is essentially moral because “there is a reduction from the systematic to the sociological (the code is what is statistically determined by the greatest number of users), and from the sociological to the normal, where social discourse begins.”⁴⁰ Style therefore invites us precipitously not only into the realm of the beautiful but also into the realm of the good.⁴¹ This movement is deeply problematic because of that double move whereby it tells us not

³⁸ Roland Barthes, “Style and Its Image,” in *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. Seymour Chatman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Barthes makes a similar point when he describes how convenient the idea of “good taste” is since it is “a servant shared by ethics and aesthetics, it allows us to have a convenient turnstile connection the Beautiful and the Good, discreetly merged in the form of a simple measure.” Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. Katherine Pilcher Keuneman (London: The Althone Press, 1987), 42.

just that language is different from “current usage” but that that difference is in itself a moral question.

Underlying Barthes’ interrogation of the discourse of style is an acute sensitivity to the way that Saussurian linguistics has been weirdly pressed into the service of normalization. Saussure introduces the famous distinction between *langue*, the total synchronic system of linguistic possibilities that exists at a particular point in time, and *parole*, the individual diachronic speech act that is made possible by the totality of the system *langue*. For Saussure, though, the more important of these two is *langue* because it alone is a complete system of impersonal differences ripe for scientific attention. As Jameson argues, *parole* is mostly irrelevant for Saussure “not only to the degree that it is always, and of necessity, incomplete, but also insofar as it is the locus of individual difference, of individual personality and style.”⁴² Saussure himself states the case in similar terms: “Whereas speech is heterogeneous, language, as defined, is homogeneous.”⁴³ The prevailing view of style mistakenly focuses on *parole*, on individual difference that occurs in time, and wrong-headedly measures it against *langue*, an impersonal system of internal differences that is not really understandable in time. Style is based, then, on a conceptual misunderstanding, a popular reading practice that operates under the sign of a norm – *langue* – that is really no norm at all. We can conceive of *langue* only as an abstraction, as a system that makes possible individual instances of *parole* but which is not itself a gold standard of linguistic clarity against which we can reasonably judge individual utterances to be more or less “clear.” So as Jameson says, the negative result of Saussurean linguistics is that language is no longer

⁴² Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 25.

⁴³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 15.

understood as an object or as a substance “but rather as a value: thus language is a perception of identity. But in language the perception of identity is the same as the perception of difference.”⁴⁴ Of course, the linguistic classification of identity reduced to a perception of difference from normality is very tenuous, tied as it is in our modern era to moral, and more specifically sexual, classification.

This *langue/parole* infected understanding of style problematically operates through the privileging of an unmarked term – colloquial or prosaic clarity – that deceptively rules under the banner of scientific objectivity. In reality, however, that “natural” standard of clarity is no more than a fiction of popular imagination. Barthes points out that criticism, by which he means both academic as well as popular judgment, thrives on a model of what he calls “critical verisimilitude,” a common sense model that violently excludes language (and dissent) that does not meet its imaginary standards of clarity. “Criticism based on verisimilitude,” he says, “is very fond of ‘evident truths.’ These evident truths are, however, essentially normative. By a habitual process of confused logic, the unbelievable proceeds from the forbidden, that is to say from the dangerous: disagreements become divergences, divergences become errors, errors become sins, sins become illnesses, illnesses become monstrosities.”⁴⁵ In other words, even a disinterested judgment of beauty rapidly swings to a moral evaluation. Style is deployed as a subtle moral weapon, protesting all the way as to its own neutrality. It is through reading style while feigning disinterested evaluation, Barthes complains, that one can slip easily from a disagreement over expression into denouncing moral failure and sickness. The association of style and sickness, then, is the shameful fate of those who

⁴⁴ Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, 35.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 35.

do not adhere to the dominant mode of expression, a mode that proudly wears the mask of universal clarity.⁴⁶ One who deviates from the stylistic norm can always proceed from harmless eccentric to unhygienic danger. Style is, therefore, similar to sexuality as Foucault comes to understand it in that for the Foucault of the final volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, the central preoccupation is why sexuality, in particular, as just one of any number of everyday experiences has become a matter of moral and ethical concern.⁴⁷ Barthes' understanding of how culture regulates discourse by moving it into the space of the moral displays an awareness of the functioning of power in many ways similar to Foucault's. That is, why should an utterly banal issue like style take on an ethical or moral meaning and what interests are served by such a process?

That banal question might seem a relatively trivial one in light of some major battles in the history of literary criticism, particularly in the wake of the politicization of literary criticism in the 1980s and 90s. Yet as D.A. Miller points out, power in its most insidious, effective and undetectable form is most often exercised on what he calls "little things," that is, power operates at maximum efficiency, to use Foucault's terms, in a capillary fashion, spreading discipline through society's seemingly unimportant banalities in order to capture us all the better in its cognitive web. "The sheer pettiness of discipline's coercions," Miller says,

Tends to keep them from scrutiny, and the diffusion of discipline's operations precludes locating them in an attackable center. Disciplinary power constitutively mobilizes a

⁴⁶ Barthes pins the blame on the economic ruling class and argues that those with economic power regulate the production of language so as to secure their own political authority. Certainly, however, it is not only the economic ruling class that works to secure the boundaries of clarity but a variety of groups in whose interest in is to secure the linguistic status quo.

⁴⁷ David Halperin usefully glosses Foucault on this issue: "It is not immediately evident that difference in sexual preference are by their very nature more revealing about the temperament of individual human beings, more significant determinants of personal identity, than, for example, differences in dietary preference." David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 26.

tactic of tact: It is the policing power that never passes for such, but is either invisible or visible only under the cover of other, nobler or simply blander intentionalities (to educate, to cure, to produce, to defend).⁴⁸

And so it goes with style. While we view style to be a matter of bland evaluation, as simply a judgment of beauty or taste, in fact the manifest intentionality of such evaluations (to educate, to cultivate, to develop taste) helps power pass for insignificance. Yet as Barthes and Miller are most aware, “power has taken hold where hold seems least given: in the irrelevant.”⁴⁹ In other words, the manifest banality of style’s deployment in Western culture conceals the discursive and material violence against gays and lesbians that style authorizes, harming not only those sexual subjects who are its objects or who are perceived to be its objects but also doing discursive violence to everyone who is unable to step outside its cognitive framework which tells us all exactly what to think when we encounter a producer of excessive style.

Barthes’ initial solution to the problem of power’s hold on the “insignificance” of style is to praise the arrival of what he calls “white writing,” an *écriture* different in kind from normal writing that aspires to a zero degree of style. It seems to me, however, that the Barthes of *Writing Degree Zero* is prematurely conciliatory, a Barthes who surrenders much too quickly to the normalizing forces that saturate the discourse of style. In rushing to embrace a zero degree of writing, writing that claims to banish the personality of the author from the literary signs of her text, Barthes is both giving up the fight and proposing a solution that now seems quite impossible.⁵⁰ White writing is just another self-deluding fantasy since as Sontag points out, “everyone knows or claims to know,

⁴⁸ D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁰ Jameson rightly points out that Barthes’ primary example of white writing, Camus’ *The Stranger*, now seems to us extremely stylized, the very opposite of what Barthes is proposing. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, 159.

there is no neutral, absolutely transparent style.”⁵¹ What we need instead of a different kind of writing is a different kind of critical practice. We need a reading practice that does not flee from style, that does not seek to change the objects of its focus but that re-examines its own dubiously complacent relation to style. What we need is a reformed critical practice that values the eccentricities of individual style but does not reproduce and reinforce the operations of power/knowledge over it. What we need, in short, is to decouple style from normalization while also seeking to understand the powerful influence of readerly desire on how we experience the phenomenon we call style.

At this point, it may be useful to sum up the conclusions so far before moving on to a consideration of the most important discourse – psychoanalysis – that has helped to give rise to these conditions in which style finds itself an active player. We began with the proposition that the concept of style underwent a radical change in the latter half of the 19th century, changing from an understanding in which style is conceived as surplus ornament added onto content to a new model under which style is seen to reveal the subject’s truth. We also saw how style has increased its influence in a wide expanse of culture through a double movement of veiling its object and of making that ambiguous object simultaneously transparent to “common sense.” Common sense, however, proves to be just another instance of the familiar unmarked norm, the provisional term in contrast to which every instance of style is an instance of deviance. Barthes, in particular, shows the insidious way the reign of the linguistic norm is used to discredit those linguistic modes or styles that are not representative of clarity, differentiating one individual from another while insisting in the final reckoning on a moral hierarchy. Style is a tool that, to adopt Foucault’s terminology, “measures in quantitative terms and

⁵¹ Sontag, “On Style,” 16.

hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the ‘nature’ of individuals.”⁵² But by what means precisely does style become linked not only with excess and moral transgression but with sexual deviance? In the remainder of the chapter I discuss the sexual inflection that style has undergone in the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing in particular on psychoanalysis’ powerful intervention into the origin and sexual meaning of style.

IV. Psychologizing Style

Criticism’s reliable figuration of style as sexual deviance and moral failure falls squarely under what Arnold Davidson terms the “psychiatric style of reasoning.”⁵³ This psychiatric style of reasoning, what others including Foucault have often called simply “the psychological,” positions sexuality as the cornerstone of understanding of the subject and creates a new “conceptual space” dedicated to an intellectual project dedicated to classifying and explaining perversion. Within that epistemological orientation, arising as it does in the latter part of the 19th century, one discourse in particular – psychoanalysis – participates most relentlessly in the interweaving of style and perversion, ultimately going on to inject its psychiatric prerogatives into a wide range of discourses including, of course, stylistics.

Whatever our personal opinions about the efficacy of psychoanalytic therapy or the value of psychoanalytic hermeneutics, it is ultimately impossible to understand 20th century criticism without accounting for the influence Freud has had in shaping our

⁵² Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 182.

⁵³ Arnold Davidson, “Styles of Reasoning: From the History of Art to the Epistemology of Science” in *The Emergence of Sexuality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 125-141.

culture-wide psychiatric style of interpretation.⁵⁴ Joan Copjec is right to insist, therefore, that “psychoanalysis is the mother tongue of our modernity and that the important issues of our time are scarcely articulable outside the concepts it has forged.”⁵⁵ Our most pressing concerns and critical preoccupations cannot but be engaged in the vernacular of psychoanalysis, so deeply has it infiltrated our very ways of knowing and being. Though we may critique the often troubling effects of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic endeavor, we cannot fail to account for the profound conceptual shift psychoanalysis has been instrumental in producing and, as Freud says, “employ the currency that is in use in the country one is exploring – in our case a neurotic currency.”⁵⁶ So ingrained is psychoanalysis in our modes of thinking that we must meet psychoanalysis on its own terms, we must use our culture’s neurotic currency (psychoanalysis itself) if we have any hope of understanding how we create and understand our cultural artifacts.

The psychiatric shift is especially hard to detect because psychoanalysis has become so powerful under the sign of its own weakening. As a discourse that is continually under attack from all sides, psychoanalysis would seem to be a battered and bruised epistemological system. However, “the historical good fortunes of psychoanalysis,” as Paul Morrison writes, “are in no way contingent on anyone’s

⁵⁴ Frederick Crews, to cite one polemical alternative to this viewpoint, has launched a series of scathing attacks on Freud and on psychoanalytic criticism in general. For Crews, psychoanalysis is a bankrupt system built on false premises and tautological formulations, a practice we need not to perpetuate but to actively resist. Crews, I think, misses the point in that he views psychoanalysis as just one, albeit particularly powerful, way of thinking and knowing, whereas I contend that psychoanalytic knowing is an inescapable part of the way we experience and process the world. In other words, rather than being a hermeneutic practice we “choose,” psychoanalysis is a cultural practice we inherit. See Frederick Crews, *The Memory Wars: Freud’s Legacy in Dispute* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995).

⁵⁵ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 10.

⁵⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Formulations of the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 12:225.

conscious commitment to it.”⁵⁷ Psychoanalysis has become all the more effective an interpretive enterprise precisely because we need no longer subscribe in any official way to its orthodoxy for it to sustain its hold over our imaginations – better, in fact, for psychoanalysis that we do not. For in that case “what begins as a therapeutic practice is quickly liberated from the specific context of its exercise; what emerges is a general hermeneutic only tenuously bound to its theoretical premises; what triumphs is a ubiquitous, exculpatory, and quasi-instinctual form of sexual knowingness.”⁵⁸ If psychoanalysis is in fact the mother tongue of our modernity, Morrison suggests that it is a tongue spoken not just in the high-minded sense that Copjec means, as a language that reveals to us the deepest theoretical insights about our modern condition, but that it is all the more importantly also a common tongue, a *vulgar argot* that we all even unknowingly speak. Psychoanalysis “becomes all the more powerful for its vulgarization,” all the more powerful for the way it saturates every aspect of culture, the way it has made vulgar Freudians of us all.⁵⁹ The psychoanalytic perspective requires not at all that any individual choose it; instead psychoanalysis is an ambient phenomenon, infecting, as Freud himself prophesied, Western thought and its modes of intelligibility.⁶⁰

Psychoanalysis is, as I’ve been arguing, especially important for our present purposes in that it is a discourse that helps create and that depends upon the two constructions at the heart of this project: homosexuality and style. Psychoanalytic theory is a laboratory, then, that in a double move, both constitutes how we understand the two

⁵⁷ Paul Morrison, *The Explanation for Everything* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ In a comment that has seemed uncannily prophetic for many of his readers, Freud is alleged to have remarked to Karl Jung (upon arriving in America in 1909 to deliver his lectures at Clark University), that “they don’t know that we are bringing the plague.” The semantic richness of that remark forewarns of the incredible endurance of psychoanalytic thought to this day.

categories – style and homosexuality – and collides the two, associating them so that each becomes a symptom of the other. These two central psychoanalytic concepts also share the role of what Diana Fuss has called “an indispensable interior exclusion,” an exclusion that constitutes the authoritative, unmarked norms from which style and homosexuality are excluded.⁶¹ Freud, as we know, provides the model for culturally sanctioned forms of articulation entirely through his analysis of the illegitimate modes. He pieced together the operations of the normal mind only by listening to the speech of the ill: the hysteric, the obsessional, the madman, the homosexual. Freud’s psychology, and by extension modernity as an effect of his writings, is therefore built on top of a norm (call it colloquial or prosaic, heterosexual or genital) whose contours are visible only *negatively*, known through its difference from those abnormalities that it is not. The norm is that way of speaking, as Barthes suggests, that coincides with an undefined, in some fundamental way non-existent, yet generally accepted mode of representation we call “clarity.”⁶² Yet as he points out, “universality, which is nothing but *current usage*, is faked.”⁶³ Universality is a fake, a fraud, but a fraud that is nonetheless extremely powerful in its regulatory force. The style-less, heterosexual norm is a fantasy to which we cling, a fantasy that depends for its very life on creating those “others,” those with style, those perverts who in turn verify its illusory straightness.⁶⁴ Clarity, like

⁶¹ Diana Fuss, “Inside/Out” in *Inside/Out* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3.

⁶² Marcus makes a similar point when he claims that “in the course of psychoanalytic treatment, nothing less than ‘reality’ itself is made, constructed, or reconstructed. A complete story - ‘intelligible, consistent, and unbroken,’ is the theoretical, created end story.” He goes on to call this story “a fictional construction which is to us in the form of the truth, and as the form of the truth.” Steven Marcus, *Freud and the Culture of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1984), 61.

⁶³ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 49.

⁶⁴ “The notion of a style-less, transparent art,” Sontag writes, “is one of the most tenacious fantasies of modern culture. Artists and critics pretend to believe that it is no more possible to get the artifice out of art than it is for a person to lose his personality. Yet the aspiration lingers.” Sontag, “On Style,” 17.

heterosexuality, is the culturally privileged yet dependent term; its immanence is fraudulent.

To point out that Freud's model of stylistic clarity is a fake would seem to undermine psychoanalysis's powerful conception of style. That this fake exists precisely as an unmarked, unrepresented standard, however, is what makes it so effective a regulatory device. As Morrison reminds us, "exclusion from representation is conventionally held to be the unhappy fate of the socially marginal or the sexually aberrant. Exemption from representation, Foucault counters, is the singular privilege of the normative."⁶⁵ Psychoanalysis' standard of clarity, its zero degree of stylistic aberrance, is a normative standard precisely because the norm is itself exempted from representation. Like heterosexuality, the clearly told story is the one that both need not and dare not speak its name. Since Freud argues most famously in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that the mere fact of civilization makes all of us at least partly neurotic, there can never be anyone, it follows, whose narrative does not contain even a hint of symptomatic style. To try to give representation to the standard of clarity is impossible since a neurotic civilization is by definition incapable of producing a "healthy," clear narrative in the first place. Instead it is by keeping quiet, remaining unseen as an intuitive ideal towards which each of us can advance only asymptotically that the norm secures its regulatory efficacy.

The regulatory force of the stylistic norm (zero degree: clarity) nonetheless requires not only a theoretical norm but more importantly the abject case in order to

⁶⁵ Morrison, *The Explanation for Everything*, 2.

constitute the order that limit makes possible.⁶⁶ The abject is, as Fuss explains, “an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such.”⁶⁷ For if homosexuality, as I argue, is conceptually linked to those cases of stylistic excess that we find, for example in Freud’s case histories, then homosexuality constitutes the idea of style as perversion. No mere symptom of the essence of homosexuality that lies beneath, style is involved in a mutually constitutive relationship with homosexuality, according to Freud. The two are twin axes of deviance that in turn produce their “negative” counterparts. Style is not only the opposite of clarity but it is structured as well by the homo/hetero divide. In the absence of the stylistically “normal” that psychoanalysis cannot but omit, thrives the hyperbolically represented, omnipresent homosexual style that allows us to conceive of language everywhere as normal or as perverse. While Freud reports an abundance of sick style that appears to be abjected from representation as that which obscures what it is meant to represent, homosexual style is what makes all style legible *as* style, that is as difference, in the first place by representing what is supposed to be outside of representation.

Communication full of style, Freud tells us, is communication that violates the rules of clarity as we find them in the case history, the autobiography, the 19th century novel. (Imagine the slap in the face of the autobiography in which the author dares to not tell you a coherent version of his life!). In the Dora case, Freud explains that the start of

⁶⁶ Lee Edelman argues along similar lines that homosexuality, far from being expunged from representation is a position that legitimizes the entire order of sexuality. Linking homosexuality to Derrida’s concept of “writing” as that position of excessiveness or supplement that paradoxically secures the system of representation that so violently represses and excludes it (as the Western tradition does in favor of speech over and against writing), Edelman proposes that “gay” is the signifier that exceeds and yet constitutes the sexual order as such. Lee Edelman, *Homographesis* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁶⁷ Fuss, “Inside/Out,” 3.

analysis is always to ask “the patient to give me the whole story of his life and illness, but even so the information I receive is never enough to let me see my way about the case. The first account may be compared to an unnavigable river whose stream is at one moment choked by masses of rock and at another divided and lost among shallows and sandbanks.”⁶⁸ At analysis’s beginning, the unhealthy patient cannot produce a clear account of her own life; clarity escapes her attempt to master it. Instead she relates an incomplete story, one fragmented by the idiosyncrasies of the psyche. Another way of putting it: the analysand’s style, her particular expression, hinders her ability to be clear. Catherine Clément, in fact, describes the unconscious’s greatest strength as its talent for creating style: “the unconscious is such a brilliant writer: it comes up with wonderful slips, endlessly makes up puns; it is an inexhaustible source of linguistic inventions. The unconscious metaphorizes, metonymizes, rhetoricizes like mad, innovates, invents neologisms.”⁶⁹ The unconscious, in short, *stylizes* speech. So though the patient “can, indeed, give the physician plenty of coherent information about this or that period of their illness ... it is sure to be followed by another period in which their communications run dry, leaving gaps unfilled, and riddles unanswered.”⁷⁰ The very way that the patient gives voice to her story - her style - thus both hinders clear transmission and yet makes perfectly clear the existence of sickness in its symptomatic “gaps unfilled, riddles unanswered.” A motto for psychoanalysis: where excessive style is, there too something is awry. Freud puts style at the center of analytic practice when he sums up the problem of analysis as “the patient’s inability to give an ordered history of their life in so far as it

⁶⁸ Sigmund Freud, “An Analysis of a Fragment of a Case of Hysteria,” in *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 10.

⁶⁹ Catherine Clément, *The Weary Sons of Freud*, trans. Nicole Ball (New York: Verso, 1987), 36.

⁷⁰ Freud, “An Analysis of a Fragment of a Case of Hysteria,” 10.

coincides with the history of their illness.”⁷¹ That problem is not one that completely obstructs a reader’s access to the analysand’s history, however; style makes clear that she’s got something to hide.

Central to psychoanalysis’ understanding of representation is the belief that style displays a shameful truth that it both confesses and resists confessing (through the defenses, for example). Style covers over the social humiliation of inner deviance even as it makes the story of that deviance painfully clear. Style refuses to argue, as Miller says, and therefore it is stuck in the position of having “almost nothing to say for itself.”⁷² That almost nothing to say, however, is all the evidence we need to know that beneath style’s clever tricks lies a deeply shameful existence. Style is a defense, Miller suggests, against the shame that comes with that identity’s unmasking; it is a technology for what Miller calls “shame management.”⁷³ But that technology is faulty because it is one that cannot but bear the signs of the spoiled identity within.⁷⁴ As always, though, style confesses a deeper truth. It is, as Miller says, engaged in the “unremitting labor of managing and masking this encryption” of its own shame, a task at which it is ultimately bound to fail.⁷⁵

The apparently self-evident truth of psychoanalysis’ understanding of style (of course, why *shouldn’t* we be suspicious of the shifty character who cannot even give us an understandable explanation of his life?) tells us much about how style has historically been used and continues to be used to deny certain subjects an equal claim to humanity

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 38.

⁷³ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁴ The concept of a “spoiled identity” comes from Erving Goffman, who proposes that term as the label for a subject spoiled by the effects of stigma. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

⁷⁵ Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*, 48.

based on a normalizing linguistic standard, a standard that is as we have seen handcuffed to sexuality.⁷⁶ Underlying Freud's formulation in the Dora case is the assumption that every human life has a legible story, that every individual existence is at least potentially clear, and that every life story is assimilable to a single model of narrative coherence.⁷⁷ For those subjects who do not meet the demands of this norm, Freud suggests psychic disturbance, caused as always by sexuality and legible in the patient's expression. "Freud proceeds to specify," Steven Marcus observes, precisely "what it is that is wrong with the stories his patients tell him. The difficulties are in the first instance formal shortcomings of *narrative*."⁷⁸ The problem we encounter in the sick person is not simply a problem of narrative, though, not just that the sick person cannot tell a story, but rather a problem of the expression of that narrative, what we have been calling its style. Marcus rightly observes that clarity and coherence are requisite for mental health and that anything less is unnatural:

Freud is implying that a coherent story is in some manner connected with mental health (at the very least, with the absence of hysteria), and this in turn implies assumptions of the broadest and deepest kind about both the nature of coherence and the form and structure of human life. On this reading, human life is, ideally, a connected and coherent story, with all the details in explanatory place, and with everything (or as close to everything as is practically possible) accounted for, in its proper causal or other sequence. And inversely, illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story of an inadequate narrative account of oneself.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Martin Duberman, for instance, describes his own experience as a young, gay man as being filled with a shame that "we would never, it seemed, have 'complete' lives; we would always be some ungrown, truncated version of humanity." Martin Duberman, *Cures* (New York: Dutton, 1991).

⁷⁷ Paul de Man, speaking in different terms, argues that thinking of our experience in narrative terms is in some sense a primary human way of organizing our existence. He contends that "it is very difficult not to conceive the pattern of one's past and future existence as in accordance with temporal and spatial schemes that belong to fictional narratives and not to the world." In that sense, de Man reifies the Freudian understanding of what it means to live a truly human life, a life that is retrospective and is organized primarily by narrative. Paul De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 11.

⁷⁸ Marcus, *Freud and the Culture of Psychoanalysis*, 60.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

On this reading, to have lived a truly healthy human life one must overcome the idiosyncrasies of style, and produce a clear, understandable, retrospective story about how one has come to be the person one is. Truly these are “assumptions of the broadest and deepest kind” about what it means to share a common humanity.

What should be clear by now is that what at first glance looks to be an objective aesthetic category proves to have much wider ramifications. Marcus’ reading eloquently shows that a simple “linguistic” problem like style’s disruption of the coherence of narrative actually has the effect of delimiting the field of the human and of the abject. Douglas Crimp reminds us that “humanity is not a universal and natural condition of being but a contingent and cultural construction of historical, social, linguistic, and psychic forces.”⁸⁰ Psychoanalysis as a historical, social, linguistic and psychic force has been particularly effective in the case of style in producing a standard that divides the abnormal from the normal. What psychoanalysis invents and installs in culture is the belief that there is a “normal” way of telling a story, free from the vicissitudes of individual style, even if we never find an example of a normal story in all of Freud. Even if he insists time and again that we are all to a greater or lesser degree neurotic and therefore all possessed of at least some style, Freud’s insistence does little to mitigate the cultural normalization of which style is one particularly subtle part. In such a normalizing culture, style makes us understand all too much

In the Dora case, however, Freud never explicitly pins the mark of sickness on style. It is instead in those texts where issues of language and representation stand at the center of his understanding of subjectivity, those texts not coincidentally that Lacan will

⁸⁰ Douglas Crimp, “Melancholia and Moralism,” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 201.

return to time and time again, that Freud begins to elaborate a more clearly stylistic understanding of the psyche. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, we encounter an encyclopedia of linguistic symptomatology: parapraxes, jokes, puns, deviant syntax, as well as their closely related somatic iterations. Psychoanalysis provides here a medical model of narrative in which the symptoms of sexual perversion are stylistic. Freud may not discuss style in precisely these same terms but his grouping of these symptomatic (I would say stylistic insofar as they are unique, strange, individual ways of uttering a given content) expressions suggests that an acute sensitivity to style is at the heart of the analyst's reading practice. The analyst's very purpose is to tune herself to the "jumble" of style and help the patient to steer that jumble closer to, as Clément describes it, "nothing but traditional story-telling, with all the loose ends tied up, at best slickly arranged. Old style."⁸¹

Freud's most concentrated meditation on style comes not in his discussions of neurotic speech but rather in the joke book, that seemingly divergent text that attempts to explain the phenomenon of joking in psychoanalytic terms. From Freud's perspective, however, the joke book is no trivial matter; in it he interrogates at length the linguistic transformations the unconscious utilizes in order to make objectionable material acceptable to consciousness. Although he takes on an unusual topic, Freud carefully argues for the relatedness of all mental processes, putting the psychological discoveries gained through his interrogation of joking (a "remote field") at the center of mental life.

The joke, like the dream, makes it possible for the individual to express what cannot be expressed – material barred from consciousness. By condensing its linguistic

⁸¹ Ibid., 39.

material, say for instance in a pun or double entendre, the joke circumvents the obstacle to its expression, for example, the pressures of institutions, individuals, morality or religion. The joke technique, more specifically, gives novelty to language in order to express through condensation two thoughts in a single form. In other words, as in a dream or slip of the tongue, a single expression conveys plural meanings. The joke works by finding:

The one word which covers the two thoughts. Indeed, it must often first transform one of the thoughts into an unusual form which will provide a basis for its combination with the second thought. Would it not have been simpler, easier, and, in fact, more economical to have expressed the two thoughts as they happened to come, even if this involved no common form of expression?⁸²

In place of the straightforward utterance of the two thoughts, forbidden in their connection with each other, the unconscious substitutes an economically disadvantageous but psychically advantageous stylization of the material. What Freud's formulation assumes, it follows, is that there is a clear, unambiguous way to communicate the two thoughts, albeit one that the conscious mind cannot face. The mechanisms of the unconscious, however, distort that clear expression by giving it style and making it sayable. That stylization is, in fact, precisely what makes a joke a joke:

A joke is not anything that resides in its thought, we must look for it [what makes a joke] in the form, in the wording in which it is expressed. We have only to study the peculiarity of its form of expression to grasp what may be termed the verbal or expressive technique.⁸³

In essence, the medium of the joke is the message; peculiarity of expression is the joke's hallmark.

If it is true as Freud claims that the joke technique is analogous to the other mental processes, then the conclusions he draws about formal expression should apply as

⁸² Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 49.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16.

well to other indexes of unconscious operation: symptoms, dreams, and especially the speech of the neurotic. For if we re-consider what Freud has to say in the Dora case about speaking to neurotics, it should be clear that the “peculiarity of its form of expression” is the unconscious’ means of communicating forbidden or repressed material in an acceptable way, in Dora’s case, her unconscious desire for the lecherous Herr K. Just as the unconscious stylizes the joke, so too does the unconscious stylize the neurotic’s language. If the constitutive feature of the joke is peculiarity of form, that is to say style, then so too is it the constitutive feature of pathological language, language as an effect of sexual deviance.

What is perhaps most peculiar about Freud’s understanding of style is the way in which he seems at once to want to generalize style as an effect of sublimation that is common to all people, as in the mechanism of humor or the joke, and the way he also cordons style off as a special domain of homosexuality. Clément argues that “the historical roots of psychoanalysis lie in certain forms of homosexuality: Dora, Schreber, the hysterics. Psychoanalysis began with inversion.”⁸⁴ It makes sense then that Freud should remain beholden to a line of thinking that returns as though compelled to inversion as the root from which style as a symptom of paraphillia springs. For Freud and to an even greater degree his disciples, what functions as an elaborate balancing act cannot ultimately be sustained and collapses finally and seemingly irrevocably into a state in which style and homosexuality become crossed in such a way as to make them virtually indistinguishable from each other. Freud often remarks, we may recall, on the artistic and humanitarian sensitivity that homosexual men in particular are thought to

⁸⁴ Catherine Clément, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 83.

share. Yet that casual stereotyping flowers in Western thought after Freud such that what seemed to be mere cultural superstition in the closing years of the 19th century (as we will see vividly in our analysis of the work of Henry James in chapter three) takes on medico-scientific certainty in the 20th century under the auspices of psychoanalytic expertise.⁸⁵ Simon Watney identifies this trend in Freud, signaling out Freud's belief that "the constitution of people suffering from inversion – the homosexuals – is, indeed, often distinguished by their sexual instinct's possessing a special aptitude for cultural sublimation."⁸⁶ In this remark Watney points out "the emergence of the homosexual as aesthete, his sensibilities sanctioned by his sexual object-choice."⁸⁷ Yet what we also find is the scientific systematization of the notion embraced and extended by stylistics – the notion analyzed at length earlier – that style as a "special aptitude" is always an easily legible index of one's sexual disposition. A highly developed sense of literary style is no mere compensation for those "suffering from inversion" as Freud suggests in numerous places. Rather, as psychoanalysis and the culture it has so heavily influenced conceive it, style is as unmistakable an indicator as any of conscious or unconscious homosexual object-choice.

If it is true that psychoanalysis scientifically certifies the understanding of homosexuals as those with style it is not just psychoanalysis alone that establishes this cultural assumption more broadly. As Lee Edelman points out, the construction of homosexuality is as much dependent on psychoanalysis as it is on rhetoric, and an

⁸⁵ Sandor Ferenczi concurs: "coprophilia and pleasure in smell are deeply repressed with them [male homosexuals], often to the point of aestheticism; there is a fondness for perfumes, and as a sublimation an enthusiasm for art." Sandor Ferenczi, "The Nosology of Male Homosexuality," in *First Contributions to Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Ernest Jones (London: Hogarth Press, 1952), 258.

⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 18.

⁸⁷ Simon Watney, "Psychoanalysis, Sexuality and AIDS," in *Coming On Strong*, eds. Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 27.

effective political critique requires us to attend both to the psychological and rhetorical construction of homosexuality, that is, the psychological input of psychoanalysis and the rhetorical input of stylistics. As Edelman argues, “when homosexuality is no longer understood as a discrete set of acts but as an ‘indiscrete anatomy,’ we are in the presence of a powerful tropological imperative that needs to produce a visible emblem or metaphor for the ‘singular’ nature that now defines or identifies a specifically homosexual type of person.”⁸⁸ That requirement of visibility subjects homosexuality and those perceived to be homosexual to the ceaseless demand of what Edelman calls “inherent Textuality,” that they be made to be “bodies that might well bear a ‘hallmark’ that could, and must, be read.”⁸⁹ In other words, style is one means by which the twin projects of cultural rhetoric and cultural psychology combine to textualize the homosexual, to trap it as that which always signifies in excess of itself in opposition to the untextualization – “exemption from representation” as Morrison styles it – of heterosexuality. The political exigency of such a process is to create an environment in which

Homosexuality has thus been able to reinforce the status of its own authority as “natural” (i.e., unmarked, authentic, and non-representational) by defining the straight body against the “threat” of an “unnatural” homosexuality – a “threat” the more effectively mobilized by generating concern about homosexuality’s unnerving (and strategically manipulable) capacity to “pass,” to remain invisible, in order to call into being a variety of disciplinary “knowledges” through which homosexuality might be recognized, exposed, and ultimately rendered, more ominously, invisible once more.⁹⁰

Heterosexist discourse thus effectively stylizes homosexuality, depicts it as excessively expressive, in order to discredit any possibility of oppositional speech by making homosexuality “invisible once more,” to the juggernaut of heterosexual supremacy.

⁸⁸ Edelman, *Homographesis*, 8.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Harold Beaver in his seminal article “Homosexual Signs (In Memory of Roland Barthes)” anticipates Edelman’s incisive claims to homosexual textuality as he details the specific way in which stylistics and psychoanalysis collude to shape style as the specific province of queers. As Beaver says, explaining the more short-sighted claims of George Steiner, it is because of the prominence of homosexuality and style both as descriptive categories in Freud’s thinking that the two so repeatedly come to signify together in Western thought and the reason they so often seem to be together at the center of our cultural galaxy:

Like jokers, dreamers, poets, and neurotics, homosexuals too (we have seen) are producers of signs. As Tzvetan Todorov has argued, it is the so-called deviants, above all, who are the agents of culture, actively extending the rhetoric of sign systems. They are the purveyors of change. Though relegated to the borderlands and sick ghettos of bourgeois culture (with other scapegoats and victims), the homosexual’s role, far from parasitic, is central: as index of a cultural complexity and self-awareness (in all symbolic activities, including language) that floods traditional discourse with irrational needs and desires. It was precisely through his investigation of dreams and jokes as archetypes of condensation and displacement that Freud rediscovered the symbolic and rhetorical structures of language in general.⁹¹

Beaver captures perfectly the prevailing mood represented in no less historically significant a figure than Todorov that homosexual deviants are the agents of linguistic change, a point that makes queers into avant garde figures who shake up or “flood” traditional discourse with their “irrational needs and desires.” And while that may, depending upon one’s point of view and political inclinations sound like a good thing, it also explains the terrifying linguistic threat that queers pose to heteronormative culture, a threat that they will, as their old scientific classification implies, invert the order of traditional discourse and subvert the values upon which marriage, family, nation, capitalism, and any number of other heteronormative institutions are thought to be built.

⁹¹ Harold Beaver, “Homosexual Signs (In Memory of Roland Barthes),” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 168.

For that reason alone we could expect the swift response of culture to that perceived threat, moving rapidly to contain its contagion in the “borderlands and sick ghettos” from which it is safely removed from the homogenized traditional discourse of the West. Read together, style and homosexuality are defused, even castrated and rendered powerless as the objects rather than the subjects of knowledge, dynamic cultural agents that are both frantically restrained by heteronormative discourse. However much lip service we pay to style (or even to homosexuality for that matter) as a sophisticated way of being, as Joseph Litvak makes clear, “the negative meaning *persists within* the positive, with the result that even the most celebratory invocations of sophistication as worldliness remain haunted by the guilty sense of sophistication as a deviation from, even a crime against, nature.”⁹² Style, like sophistication, transgresses as a crime against nature by threatening to linguistically transform culture – the supposedly dependent overlay of the natural – through its own irrational, narcissistic and self-serving desire.

What is the alternative to reading style as a marker of interiority, as a sign of what lies beneath? Certainly I’ve argued that in our culture it is impossible to be, as they say, all style and no substance, and that it should be otherwise. In the following chapter I will outline a different critical approach, one that values the difference that is conceived of as inherent to style while at the same time not reducing style to depth or falling victim to the seductions of normalization. It is a reading practice that values the idiosyncrasy of expression and yet allows for style to be a site of play, of freedom, of pleasure and even of cultural transformation. In short, in what is to come I offer an oppositional way of reading style that challenges the prevailing understanding of style as a signifier of desire and instead makes of it a category more free from the phobic restraints of normativity.

⁹² Litvak, *Strange Gourments*, 4.

Chapter II

Lacan and the Subject of Style

At the very least, popular notions of homosexual identity and homosexual orientation today tend to insist on the *conjunction* of sexual morphology and sexual subjectivity: they presume a convergence in the sexual actor of a deviant personal style with a deviant erotic desire.

David Halperin, "Forgetting Foucault"

We know full well that the "creative mind" is always under "the jurisdiction of the police" and that the purpose of such policing is to protect the constitutive boundaries of the face by which the social order figures itself to itself; one might say that this policing bespeaks the extent to which the symbolic order is mobilized to defend an imaginary self-image against those forces that are seen as threatening to unmask it as always *only* imaginary.

Lee Edelman, *Homographesis*

As I argued in the last chapter, both popular and critical opinions about style as a key marker of homosexuality have the psychoanalytic tradition and its understanding of the symptomatology of language to thank for giving scientific authority to what was at least at first only a vaguely defined stereotype. If that is the case then one of the most important tasks for reformulating our culture's understanding of style to produce a more progressive literary criticism is how we can set about refiguring our relationship to what psychoanalysis has to say about style and to try to see how psychoanalysis's understanding of style is actually a lot more complex than what has trickled into popular ideas about style. The work of this chapter is to complicate the too simple understanding that much of stylistic criticism has of style and sexual identity in order to show that certain branches of psychoanalytic thinking at least diverge dramatically from stylistic

criticism's notion that one can indeed infer a lot about a person's sexual identity from her or his style.

It is crucial for us, first of all, to launch a counter-strike against the dominant line of thought that has for so long conjoined style and the presumption of the self-indulgent linguistic excess of homosexual narcissism. After all, Freud – to say nothing of his followers – was not the least bit shy about touting the claim that style gives away, marks the incriminating spot, of a homosexual disposition, a theory advanced prominently both in the Dora case as well as in the monograph on Leonardo da Vinci; nor did he show much apparent restraint in disseminating the widely embraced notion – a notion that he himself was unable to theorize completely even in the long essay “On Narcissism” – that homosexuality stems from the emergence of what he calls a “secondary narcissism,” a love for one's own ego that motivates the subject to seek out objects that mirror back at him his own idealized self-conception as embodied in same-sex partners.⁹³ Though as we will see in the following chapter that these related aesthetic and psychosexual ideas were already at least partly taking shape in the Anglo-American West by the 1880s and find representation in the works of Henry James for instance, it was the psychological establishment that would take the incompletely formulated affiliation between style and sexuality that was to inform writers like James at the end of the 19th century and later with more certainty Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, and give that bond the authority of scientific, of medical, irrefutability. The crucial point as I argued in the previous chapter, though, is that these two psychoanalytic ideas – style as a symptom of

⁹³ Sigmund Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 7:1-122; *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, SE 11:59-138; “On Narcissism,” SE 14:67-104.

homosexuality and homosexuality as narcissism – are frequently joined in that enterprise we know as stylistic analysis, a point clearly illustrated in the work of many of the stylistic critics we saw in the previous chapter.⁹⁴ That joint results in the dangerous envisioning of what Lee Edelman calls in a different context the homosexual as “the figure associated in the popular mind with specularity or narcissism and in psychoanalytic discourse with the love of the imaginary as manifest in that figure’s identification with the mother.”⁹⁵

The work of this chapter is designed to challenge the prevailing reception of the psychoanalytic inheritance by stylistic criticism with its stubborn belief in the homosexual expression of style. I do this not by suggesting that we divorce ourselves completely from psychoanalysis because, as I explain in chapter five, certain aspects of psychoanalysis as a theory of sexuality and sexual difference can be useful to us when viewed askew in a different ideological context. In addition, I am skeptical as to whether a project that is as dedicated to a psychoanalytic approach – however informally – as stylistics can ever really be addressed except in the terms that it understands, using its own currency as Freud puts it so well. What I do want to contest, however, is the easy and bigoted assimilation of some of Freud’s most dogmatic ideas about the relationship between homosexuality and style by that corrupted discipline, stylistics. In this chapter I argue that psychoanalysis’ theories of style and homosexuality, especially as represented in the revisionary work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, have not only been misrepresented in their simplicity by many popular and literary critics but also that if we

⁹⁴ George Steiner, to recall, identifies the stylistic achievement of modern art as the product of an advanced self-regard based in homosexuality or “that abstraction of homosexuality which is narcissism.” Steiner, “Eros and Idiom,” 117.

⁹⁵ Lee Edelman, *Homogaphesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 196.

look closely at what Lacan has to say on the subject that we actually end up with virtually the opposite understanding of style's supposed expression of sexuality. In fact, by analyzing his work we will see that Lacan himself produced an under-recognized theory of style at odds with much widespread Freudian doctrine and that it can be a counter-reading of style that is of great use for the crucial goal of queer critique's challenge of stylistic criticism. By way of Lacan, then, I will argue that much of stylistics' understanding of sexuality is not only incoherent but is also misguided and that we can by following his lead in fact de-couple style from the normalizing agenda of much stylistic critique while still valuing the individual, even eccentric richness of stylistic expression.

Freud was no stranger to a thesis of homosexual narcissism that crops up time and again over the years in his work. Among the earliest instances is in a 1910 footnote added to *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in which he declares that inverts “take themselves as their sexual object. That is to say, they proceed from a narcissistic basis.”⁹⁶ Freud would develop this theory further in an aesthetic context, though, in his study of da Vinci. There he writes of the male homosexual that as a child,

The boy represses his love for his mother: he puts himself in her place, identifies himself with her, and takes her own person as a model in whose likeness he chooses the new objects of his love. In this way he has become a homosexual. What he has in fact done is to step back to auto-erotism: for the boys whom he now loves as he grows up are after all only substitute figures and revivals of himself in childhood – boys whom he loved in the way in which his mother loved *him* when he was a child. He finds the objects of his love along the path of *narcissism*.⁹⁷

Countless critics, of course, have written about the degree to which Freud considers this homosexual narcissism a “bad” thing or not, analyzing everything from the notorious

⁹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 11.

⁹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, trans Alan Tyson (New York: Norton, 1989), 55.

1915 footnote to *Three Essays* that argues that everyone is capable of and has already unconsciously made a homosexual object-choice to the letter Freud wrote to a concerned American mother of a gay son trying to put her worries about his sexuality at ease.⁹⁸ What is clear, though, is that even if Freud only considered homosexuality just one kind of variation of human sexuality, many of his followers had more sinister motives. And at any rate, as Juliet Mitchell points out, the very selection of the term “narcissism” implies a disastrous fate, one in which it is tough “for the person not to end up in the vicious circle in which Narcissus found himself.”⁹⁹

What is especially significant about the appearance of this discussion of the narcissistic etiology of homosexuality in Freud’s analysis of da Vinci – though we must point out that Freud seems to think this theory holds true only for the male variety – is that it is a text that sets out to explain da Vinci’s artistic greatness. Freud admires da Vinci and in fact attributes his artistic achievement precisely to his homosexuality, a sexuality that Freud claims da Vinci repressed and that re-emerged positively into his art and other work. As Freud explains, “in Leonardo’s case we have had to maintain the view that the accident of his illegitimate birth and the excessive tenderness of his mother had the most decisive influence on the formation of his character and on his later fortune, since the sexual repression which set in after this phase of childhood caused him to sublimate his sexual libido.”¹⁰⁰ In this remarkable piece of writing Freud makes the case that it is homosexuality that is responsible for empowering da Vinci with the ability to make artistic gains. For if Leonardo were not the narcissistic homosexual Freud believes

⁹⁸ Abelow, Henry. “Freud, Male Homosexuality, and the Americans,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelow, Michelle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁹⁹ Juliet Mitchell, *Psycho-Analysis and Feminism* (Vintage: New York, 1974), 33.

¹⁰⁰ Freud, *Leonardo*, 98.

him to have been then he would presumably have not sublimated his sexuality in the same way. It is one early version, then, of the popular modern notion of the innate artisticness of gay men. But as a treatise on aesthetics it also implicates homosexuality directly in the material production of the work of art. This is important because as we saw in the last chapter in a discussion of Freud's formulation of stylized language as a symptom of homosexuality, it is clear that there is an attempt on Freud's part to argue that homosexuality is responsible for the production of style by the individual. It is unclear to what extent Freud has any conscious motive for suggesting this idea but I am inclined to think that for whatever reasons Freud tried to theorize along these lines, the real damage was done not by Freud, who seems to genuinely respect da Vinci, but rather by those critics and other agents of popular culture who would seize on this point and hypostatize it in Western discourse. Regardless of Freud's intentions, then, he made available a scientifically certified theory of style's narcissistically homosexual origin to those agents who would later release it as a more free-floating and "common sense" intuition.

One of the most effective ways to challenge this culturally saturating presumption would be to interrogate the theory of narcissism upon which it depends. Michael Warner begins this work by analyzing the internally incoherent nature of psychoanalytic notions of narcissism even as he provides a polemical explanation of how that idea has been used to marginalize gay people and to protect straight ones. For example, Warner points out that "psychoanalytic theory has from the beginning described homosexuality – especially among men – as a version of narcissism ... [b]ut there has never been a sustained critique of the premises behind Freud's judgment, on this issue so widely taken as common

sense.”¹⁰¹ Warner complains of Freud’s theory that in it he only ever describes homosexuality in a condescending and normative way even while he is unable to recognize its logical self-contradictions. For the homosexual, Warner argues, is interested in people and objects outside of himself in exactly the way that a true narcissist is not. For all their stereotypical promiscuity, homosexuals do have relations with outside objects and therefore this homophobic stereotype strangely returns to refute logically the Freudian charge of narcissism. As the precipitating condition for the creation of style, then, homosexuality would not qualify as narcissism and therefore would not in and of itself create the self-involved and therefore only private, self-indulgent language that means to speak only to, for, and about the narcissist’s self-love. The homosexual, in fact, would presumably write with the same motives as any other sort of object-directed person: to communicate, to entertain, to persuade, to woo, etc.

In Lacan there is a similarly radical de-emphasis of the moral distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality as a result of his expansion rather than contraction of the notion of narcissism. Lacan describes the homosexual not as the pathetic creature consumed by an endless self-love but as no more or less narcissistic than any old straight person. “In doing so,” Warner explains, “he definitively removed any possibility of making narcissism a basis for a normative hierarchy between hetero- and homosexuality. Homosexuality may indeed be a way of loving one’s own ego, but so is heterosexual romance.”¹⁰² This universalizing of narcissism by Lacan is perversely one of the most liberating theoretical contributions he makes to overthrowing stylistic critique’s single-minded association between style and homosexuality. If, as stylistics often believes but

¹⁰¹ Michael Warner, “Homo-Narcissism, or, Heterosexuality,” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies* (New York: Longman, 1998), 626.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 632.

rarely admits, the love of one's own ego that is supposed to be characteristic of the homosexual narcissist is one of the most powerful motivations for the creation of style, that belief collapses under its own weight in the light of Lacan's theory. We are all narcissists, Lacan says, heterosexual and homosexual alike. But that revelation dissolves, then, the stylistic distinction made by any number of critics that would attribute a sexual identity of any kind to the creation of style.

The ideological purposes for wanting to ignore Lacan's claim that narcissism is the rule rather than the exception when it comes to humans of all sexual stripes may not be immediately clear. But, as Warner rightly points out, psychoanalysis's *raison d'être* has historically often been the perpetuation of heteronormative supremacy. "If the equation between homosexuality and narcissism in psychoanalysis tells us anything," Warner says, "it is that the central premises and vocabulary of psychoanalysis have been designed for a heterosexist self-understanding."¹⁰³ That discourse of self-understanding, however, is one that not only punitively discredits the homosexual as a means of celebrating its own heterocentric world-view. It also *uses* homosexuality as an excessive and abjected other in order oppositionally to create itself and its privileged relationship to language as a desirable state of being. In other words, one of the carrots that heterosexist discourse offers to join its side is the guarantee that one will have a privileged relationship to language, and one of the ways the privilege is enforced is by the circular logic of heterosexuality's claim to straight talk. The stick heterosexist discourse employs, on the other hand, is the threat that one's language will be de-certified, disqualified, and one of the ways that punishment is meted out is in the circular logic of

¹⁰³ Ibid., 634.

homosexuality's relegation to the sphere of stylization. The force of this discursive imperative, however, conceals a very different state of affairs as Warner argues:

The theorization of homosexuality as narcissism is itself a form of narcissism peculiar to modern heterosexuality. The central imperative of heterosexist ideology is that the homosexual be supposed to be out of dialogue on the subject of his being. Imagining that the homosexual is narcissistically contained in an unbreakable fixation on himself serves two functions at once: it allows a self-confirming pathology by declaring homosexuals' speech, their interrelations, to be an illusion; *and more fundamentally it allows the constitution of heterosexuality as such.*¹⁰⁴

Warner's critique cleverly inverts classical psychoanalysis's theorization of homosexuality to show how heterosexual discourse's narcissistic disavowal of its own narcissism casts aspersions on homosexuality by accusing it of precisely that thing that it wants no one to know about itself. Heterosexuality disowns its own narcissism by projecting that narcissism outward onto homosexuality in much the same way one might draw attention to a negative flaw in another person so as to distract from that same flaw in oneself. A major purpose of this project, as Warner points out, is not only to protect the moral vanity that heterosexuality evinces in its refusal to admit its own narcissism but also is to de-legitimize the speech of homosexuals as illusion; and what better way to carry that goal out than to shut down homosexuality's oppositional political content by pre-emptively undercutting its style as an exercise in excessive, perverse selfishness? Edelman suggests that "homosexuality, then, unforgivably, has the effect of compelling heterosexual masculinity to engage in the self-subverting labor of reading and interpreting *itself*, knowing full well that the more susceptible to interpretation it acknowledges itself to be, and the farther it gets from its 'original' condition as a state of 'natural' self-evidence, the more aggressively it must insist on its absolute

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 635.

indisputability.”¹⁰⁵ One of the most effective ways that heterosexuality has of shielding itself, however, is by deploying its assertion of its own “natural” relation to language and homosexuality’s artificial, styled one. As such, heterosexuality partly refuses what Edelman calls its “textualization,” meaning the opening up of it as a text to “ceaseless interrogation by forcing the recognition, first and foremost, that there are always *only* signifiers.”¹⁰⁶ In the safe haven of style, heterosexuality has found a means of keeping its own textualization partly at bay, insisting on its own transparent, un-styled language and homosexuality’s ceaselessly textual one.

There are several aspects of Lacan’s thought that make it invaluable for subverting this phobic political project, the first of which is that it radically disallows the easy accusation of narcissism (and consequently any privileged relationship to language) leveled by heterosexist discourse. For Lacan the relationship between any subject and his love-object, be it of the same or another sex, cannot help but be anything but narcissistic – “That’s what love is,” he definitively announces.¹⁰⁷ He goes on, “Love reopens the door – as Freud put it, not mincing words – to perfection.”¹⁰⁸ But it *reopens* the door to perfection because in love it always rediscovers a narcissistic love of itself: “It’s one’s own ego that one loves in love, one’s own ego made real on the imaginary level.”¹⁰⁹ The point is that one’s love for an object, whatever its gender, is always really based, and perfectly so, on that subject’s love for his own ego. In love one is captivated by the imaginary idealization one makes both of oneself and one’s object, the latter being loved

¹⁰⁵ Edelman, *Homographesis*, 205

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁰⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I Freud’s Papers on Technique*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991), 142.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

precisely because it enriches the ego's idealization of itself. What we so blithely call sexual orientation today is not a matter of who is narcissistic and who is not; whatever "orientation" we may evince in life, there is but one orientation, an orientation toward the imaginary love of our own egos. "As distinct from other psychoanalytic theories of the ego," as Shoshana Felman explains, "for Lacan the ego is not an autonomous synthetic function of the subject, but only the delusion of such a function. The outcome of a series of narcissistic identifications, the ego is the mirror structure of an imaginary, self-idealizing *self-alienation of the subject*."¹¹⁰ In other words, Lacan argues that homosexuality has no special place when it comes to narcissism, for every ego is built through an accretion of narcissistic identifications and self-delusion.¹¹¹ And in fact, as Warner suggests, it may be heterosexuality that actually evinces the more egregious instance of narcissism in that it is unwilling to acknowledge the pride injuring wound of its own narcissistic basis.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 11.

¹¹¹ In "The Mirror and the Tank," Edelman strikes a decidedly different note in an attempt to "unfold the logic behind the derisive representation of gay men as narcissistically fixated" (101). Rather than trying to escape from the rhetoric of homosexual narcissism, Edelman proposes that gay activism not recapitulate the larger culture's demonization of homosexuals as narcissists by stigmatizing those gays who cling to the mirror instead of taking to the streets. Instead, gay activism he says should try to include and accept those gays as "part of the complex and contradictory vision – at once social, political, and erotic – that vitalizes our community" (109). To that list I would add the category of the aesthetic, though I appreciate this aspect of Edelman's work since my project might mistakenly be construed also as an indictment of narcissism, as a project that defines "itself against its own subset of demonized 'faggots'" (109). I mean to do no such thing, for the political goal of my work is not to approve or disapprove of this or that style but to make style, like Edelman's notion of a gay community, a more inclusive political space that is free from the normalizing agenda of an outside discourse that seeks to install within this aesthetic category the sexual police. See Lee Edelman, "The Mirror and the Tank: 'AIDS,' Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism," in *Homographesis* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 93-117.

¹¹² Warner's reading begins to institute a new ethical hierarchy in which we might conceive of homosexuality, not heterosexuality, the more truly ethical position because it is only homosexuality that acknowledges its own narcissism and accepts its lack while heterosexuality continues to deny that lack. This project becomes more fully realized in Lee Edelman's recent work on queer theory and the death drive in which it is queers who are closer to recognizing their own disempowered position *vis a vis* the unconscious, language and the drives. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

This notion of the unexceptionalism of homosexuality, while it may not initially seem so, is actually a crucial step in arguing against stylistic criticism's claim to understand sexuality. For where Freud's formulations were very often normative and led to the further stigmatization of queer people both in the medico-psychological world and in the public sphere, Lacan is demonstrably less interested in producing diagnostic categories for the marginal. As Ellie Ragland describes it, "Lacanian structures can never be reduced to Freud's positivistic categories according to which an analyst diagnoses developmental or cognitive deficiencies as disorders ('disorder' itself presupposing a category of normal or natural order)."¹¹³ Because Lacanian psychoanalysis has a different, less positivistic orientation, it has of course often been used by queer critics as a way of retaining the most useful insights of psychoanalysis while eschewing the problematic diagnostic bent of most other modern forms of psychoanalysis. The purpose of Lacanian psychoanalysis, for example, is not to restore individuals to some normative model of mental health, which is not to say that Lacan does not also come to quite a lot of potentially disturbing conclusions for queer people. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, where Freud conceived of the goal of the talking cure as restoring the analysand's fractured and stylized speech to the smooth, orderly organization of so-called healthy speech, Lacan does not seek to "heal" by coaching towards a more "normal" standard. Instead, as Ragland explains,

In Lacan's teaching, the logic of *not whole* or *not all* typifies health. Indeed, one aim of analysis is to enable analysands to accept their lack(s) so they can live more constructively in the larger space of the social. Lacan *begins* by disagreeing with the "and they lived happily ever after," supposed ending to analysis. No, "they lived unhappily ever after," he says, as they deny lack.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ellie Ragland, "Lacan and the *Homosexuelle*: A Love Letter," in *Homosexuality & Psychoanalysis*, eds. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 101.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Freud conceives of his purpose as straightening out or destylizing language such that a “cured” patient could finally “give an ordered history of their life.” Lacan, in contrast, insists that therapeutic progress consists not in eliminating style and bringing the patient’s speech closer to some imagined norm of clarity; therapeutic progress is made as the analysand accepts her lack, her inability to speak in the flawless vernacular of the one presumed to know. Her speech will always be stylized and her lack will always be the linguistic disability Freud hopes to cure. A Lacanian theory of style, then, is opposed to the normative understanding of speech employed by Freud and by stylistics. It insists that all speech is already necessarily stylized and that no one type of sexual subjectivity is more likely to distort its possessor’s language than any other. For the only way that one could attain the magical position of stylistic clarity that heterosexuality greedily imagines as its own is to assume the impossible place of the Other, or as Lacan puts it more obliquely, “there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the Law) comes forward to make up for this, he does so as an impostor.”¹¹⁵

In this chapter I will lay out what I describe as a queer Lacanian theory of style, a theory that argues not for the critic’s authoritative deciphering of style as an index of sexuality but a theory that understands the language of every subject – gay, straight, or anything else – as always already stylized. One of the key problems that such an approach remedies is the dangerous tendency of stylistic criticism to assume a position of mastery over a text, to act as though empowered by a clinician’s eye to oversee and to diagnose it. A Lacanian theory of style, in contrast, eschews as a matter of principle the

¹¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 298.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

illusion of mastery over a text that so many critics embrace when talking about style. It understands the critic herself to be always also a product of narcissism who is also never able to achieve the control over language towards which Freud's theory of mental health orients therapy. As a consequence, a Lacanian theory of style represents not only a more honest appraisal of the literary critic's responsibility but it also will result in a more humane and non-pathologizing critique that doesn't make a helpless object of literary style.

One text largely overlooked by stylistic critique is Jane Gallop's wonderful 1985 study *Reading Lacan*, one of the first texts to begin to lay out the sort of critical practice I have in mind in calling for a revision of literary stylistics. Gallop's text comes out of a feminist literary tradition and aims to utilize Lacanian theory in order to argue against many of the discursive trends that have led to the cultural disempowerment of women. What is exciting and still fresh about the book is that in it Gallop decides to make the important rhetorical decision not to pretend to understand completely Lacan or to be a master of his text – she cedes that authority as a pretence. Her reason for doing so, she explains, is that

Lacan's major statement of ethical purpose and therapeutic goal, as far as I am concerned, is that one must assume one's castration. Women have always been considered "castrated" in psychoanalytic thinking. But castration for Lacan is not only sexual; more important it is also linguistic: we are inevitably bereft of any masterful understanding of language, and can only signify ourselves in a symbolic system that we do not command, that, rather, commands us.¹¹⁶

Gallop's larger purpose in emphasizing Lacan's theorization of the castration of every subject is a feminist one, namely a critique of classical psychoanalysis's conception of women as castrated and envious of the penis. Lacan shows us that it is a misunderstanding to think that only women are castrated, for castration is not simply a

¹¹⁶ Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 20.

matter of who has a penis and who doesn't. Instead castration is the state of any human being of any sex once she enters into language. For Gallop, as for many feminist psychoanalytic critics, this is a rich theoretical premise that can be used to challenge the discursive disempowerment of women that conceives of them as always partial, inferior versions of men. Women may be partial, Lacan tells us, but so too are all human subjects in language.

As I have already begun to suggest, Gallop's reading of Lacan can be useful not only for feminist critique but can also be instrumental in formulating a queer critique of style. While Gallop stops short at gender, her point could be extended further to include queer stylistic analysis.¹¹⁷ Gallop argues, for example, that "for women, Lacan's message that everyone, regardless of his or her organs, is 'castrated,' represents not a loss but a gain. Only this realization, I believe, can release us from 'phallogentrism,' one of the effects of which is that one must constantly cover one's inevitable inadequacy in order to have the right to speak."¹¹⁸ Yet this argument can also be considered not a loss but a gain for queer subjects who have similarly been the victims of heterosexism. For queer people as the texts that stylistics so often reads can be empowered by the realization that we may be castrated but so too are the ones who try to read our language as a site of our insufficiency and who must deny their own partial grasp over language's meaning in order to enter triumphant into the arena of discourse.

We may have seemed to have drifted a bit from style proper but Gallop's understanding of how Lacan can be tapped to formulate a progressive literary criticism is

¹¹⁷ And could be extended even further, in fact. David Eng's work, for instance, broadens the scope of this same idea to include an analysis of race in his examination of Asian American masculinity. See David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹¹⁸ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 20.

in fact firmly dedicated to a strategy for interpreting style. Gallop draws attention to Freud's discovery of what we now colloquially call the Freudian slip, that idea that when one's words slip and one says something different from what was initially intended, the slip is a sign of some concealed, and perhaps even more important meaning. "Lacan says of this," Gallop explains, "that Freud discovered that truth manifests itself in the letter rather than the spirit, that is, in the way things are actually said rather than in the intended meaning."¹¹⁹ And while Freud may have not fully grasped the importance of that discovery, his followers, at least among literary critics, were quick to take up the position of the psychoanalyst and explain the underlying significance of the letter, the style, in which literature is said. This allows us to see the unsurprising conjunction in the 20th century of the superficially different projects of literary criticism and psychoanalysis:

Literary critics learn how to read the letter of the text, how to interpret the style, the form, rather than just reading for content, for ideas. The psychoanalyst learns to listen not so much to her patient's main point as to odd marginal moments, slips of the tongue, unintended disclosures. Freud formulated this psychoanalytic method, but Lacan has generalized it into a way of receiving all discourse, not just the analysand's. There is no better way to read Lacan.¹²⁰

Stylistics could be understood as a project already partly coextensive with a Lacanian orientation because it does follow Lacan's recommendation that we attend to the style of language and not merely to the ideas that language consciously aims to communicate. Indeed, Lacan complains in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" that before his teaching, "it seem[ed] that this central field of our domain has been left fallow since Freud."¹²¹ So stylistic reading could be conceived of as picking up where Freud left off. And that project could proceed as something along the lines of

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 37.

how stylistic analysis analyzes a text. As Lacan says of the analysis of dreams, to take one example, “what is important is the version of the text [as opposed to the dream’s content], and that, Freud tells us, is given in the telling of the dream – that is, in its rhetoric. Ellipses and pleonasm, hyperbation or syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition – these are the syntactical displacements; metaphor, catachresis, antonomasia, allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche – these are the semantic condensations.”¹²² In short, then, Gallop is exactly right when she argues that “the object of psychoanalytic study reveals itself as ‘style,’” for Lacan himself insists on the same thing.¹²³ Stylistics and Lacan are at least partially in agreement, then, in their focus on style as the proper object of analysis. Only in Lacan, however, do we find a guide for how to understand style in a way that moves beyond the traditionally normative pseudo-Freudian approach of much of what passes for stylistic critique these days. In contrast, Lacan offers an approach that counsels us to examine style, the “telling” of the tale, “its rhetoric,” but not in order to make a sexual diagnosis or provide a moral hierarchy.

According to Lacan, the Freudian discovery of the unconscious failed to realize its full potential because the master’s discovery preceded the necessary theory of linguistics that would have allowed Freud to understand completely the potential of his own work. What Freud failed to grasp for historical reasons is the importance of signification, of the letter, in the practice of psychoanalysis. Freud was brilliant in his theorization of the significance of dreams, jokes, and slips of the tongue, Lacan says, but he lacked the necessary tools to realize that it was not, for example, the dream itself that is of central importance in analysis but rather how the analysand relates the dream.

¹²² Ibid., 57.

¹²³ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 23.

Lacan insists that Freud was following the right track and that he formulated a theory in advance of the emergence of linguistics which would make the Freudian promise finally realizable. As he explains in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” “right from the outset people failed to recognize the constitutive role of the signifier in the status Freud immediately assigned to the unconscious in the most precise and explicit ways.”¹²⁴ Lacan’s work remedies this overlooked aspect of the Freudian project by refocusing on the signifier, looking to the rhetoric or style of speech as the proper object of analysis. Style is important for Lacan because of “the possibility I have – precisely insofar as I share ... language [*langue*] with other subjects, that is, insofar as this language [*langue*] exists – to use it to signify *something altogether different* from what it says.”¹²⁵ In other words, language can always signify a meaning that is different from the strictly literal interpretation of what it denotes – the figure of “thirty sails,” for example, meaning not literally sails but rather a number of ships for which it stands in. Language effects this deceptive communication through the mechanism of style. Lacan even invokes in his discussion the name of that ancient theorist of style Quintilian when he introduces what will become for him the twin stylistic poles of psychoanalytic signification: metaphor and metonymy.¹²⁶ The crucial point is that as long as people use language that language’s meaning is never nailed down in its signification. It can always mean something more than the literal in its style.

In his earlier essays, Lacan draws mainly upon two key stylistic figures from the ancient theory of rhetoric in order to explain how the two key mechanisms of

¹²⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 153.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹²⁶ See Lacan, “Instance of the Letter,” 147-150.

psychoanalysis – condensation and displacement – operate through language. In metonymy, he says, the part is taken for the whole as in the example of “thirty sails” representing “ship.” “The connection between ship and sail,” he explains, “is nowhere other than in the signifier, and ... metonymy is based on the *word-to-word* nature of this connection.”¹²⁷ For Lacan, then, an instance of metonymy operates exactly according to the same principle as displacement, that is through a “transfer of signification” from one signifier to another. Likewise with metaphor, “one word for another,” that shares the same structure as condensation, or “the superimposed structure of signifiers,” one on top of the other. The goal of the analyst is to zero in on these stylistic figures when they appear, to interrogate the style he encounters so as to understand the way in which the subject is saying “something altogether different” than what her language denotes in the strictest sense.

These two figures – metaphor and metonymy – are two of the most famous terms Lacan uses that have been imported in a technical way into literary criticism. Criticism has missed the larger Lacanian insight, however, that these two figures are just two among many that may appear in a given style during analysis. The proper goal of a Lacanian literary criticism, then, is not simply to locate instances of metaphor or metonymy in a text and explicate them in a Lacanian manner. No, in fact to try to psychoanalyze a text, a project Lacan calls “insane,” is to miss the point completely. Indeed one ought to pay the strictest attention to “periphrasis, hyperbaton, ellipses, suspension, anticipation, retraction, negation, digression, and irony, [for] these are the figures of style (Quintilian’s *figurae sententiarum*).”¹²⁸ However, the critic must

¹²⁷ Ibid., 148.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 160.

understand that these figures are the way that a subject engages her into dialogue, they evoke responses in the critic rather than giving a transparent view of the speaker. Lacan asks us, “can one see here mere manners of speaking, when it is the figures themselves that are at work in the rhetoric of the discourse the analysand actually utters?”¹²⁹ In other words, the story that a given text tells is far less important for Lacan than the style in which it is told – it is the figures (style) that are at work in discourse and that constitute the proper site of engagement like peaks that rise from the flat surface of the analysand’s language. The ultimate purpose of reading these stylistic quirks in a therapeutic setting, of course, is to help the patient come to terms with his lack and to help him accept his truth, or as Lacan puts it, “we cannot confine ourselves to giving a new truth its rightful place, for the point is to take up our place in it. The truth requires us to go out of our way. We cannot do so simply by getting used to it.”¹³⁰ In other words, getting to truth is a journey, one we must actively seek after. Truth is not something that approaches us in the words of the other and that we as critic decipher and reveal. Truth can only be reached by each subject for herself, and that makes stylistic analyses that purport to reveal the “truth” about a writer’s sexuality irreparably flawed. If the purpose of Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, is through the psychoanalytic dialogue to help the subject not to repress his truth but come to accept it, how can that project be used in literary criticism? For the relationship between critic and text is not similarly dialogic in any obvious way.

In order to understand how a stylistic critic might put this theory into practice in literary criticism we must first amend stylistics’s overly psychological orientation, an

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

orientation that flies directly in the face of everything Lacan worked for. The problem with the way that much of literary stylistics has approached its analysis of style is that it places the critic in the position of psychologist and it psychologizes its analysis in that way Lacan calls “insane.” That is, stylistics generally seems never to have heard of Lacan at all and instead relies on a psychological style of reasoning dedicated to protecting its own narcissistic mastery over the text’s meaning.¹³¹ That mode of reading enrages Lacan, for “he locates the downfall of American psychoanalysis, its betrayal of Freud, in its willing assimilation into a general psychology. Psychology is the construction of the ideological illusion Man, nowadays armed with all the defensive appurtenances of hard data, as any illusion, the ego foremost, must be defensively armed.”¹³² That assimilation into general psychology is what I called in the last chapter stylistics’s democratic and intuitive common sense understanding of style. It is also, as I argued there, what makes stylistics’s ignorance of Lacan especially problematic because it is a project that can never do anything but find normative results, dedicated as it is to a conservative ideology that only ever wants to confirm its own truth. Lacan, however, challenges that project by asking us not just to engage superficially at the level of the symbolic – language – but to try to use the appurtenances of the symbolic – style – in order to understand the critic’s implication in an imaginary relationship with the text. In other words, Lacan shifts the focus from the critic’s masterful understanding of the text to an analysis of the critic’s own aggressive or desiring relationship toward what he reads.

¹³¹ Psychological style of reasoning is a concept borrowed from Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 125-141.

¹³² Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 23.

How can we go about overturning stylistics's embrace of the psychological style of reasoning while retaining its positive pursuit of the sort of attention to what Lacan calls a text's "semantic evolution: this corresponds to the stock of words and acceptations of [its] particular vocabulary"?¹³³ It is difficult to do because as Felman says, we tend to assume "a relation in which literature is submitted to the authority, to the prestige of psychoanalysis. While literature is considered as a body of *language* – to be interpreted – psychoanalysis is considered as a body of *knowledge*, whose competence is called upon to interpret. Psychoanalysis, in other words, occupies the place of a subject, literature that of an *object*."¹³⁴ We have definitely seen this at work in stylistics in the previous chapter in which the presumed authority of a psychological style of reasoning is brought to bear by the critic *upon* the literary text and its author as an object. The critic, then, acts as the sole subject, the master whose critical eye sees all that style can be said to mean and uses his profound body of knowledge to come to a conclusion deductively about his subject's sexuality.

This critical posture is problematic on a number of fronts, not the least of which is that, as Lacan shows us, even in the analytic situation the analyst is not in the position of the god-like Other, he merely stands in its place in the analytic structure. It is the analyst's task to hear the analysand's words and to listen for the odd stylistic moments that punctuate it. It is the analysand's faith in the analyst as the expert who "understands" his discourse and not any genuine knowledge of his truth that gives fuel to the analytic process and gives momentum to a dialogue that will help the analysand discover his own truth. The analyst does not ever simply tell the patient what his words

¹³³ Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech," 50.

¹³⁴ Shoshana Felman, "To Open the Question." *Yale French Studies* 55-56 (1977), 5.

mean as stylistic criticism often does in its analysis of a text. It is the critic's proper role, then, to reserve judgment and not to try to give the final solution as to what the style means but rather to engage it dialectically as himself – a human being in language who does not even have full understanding of his own words let alone those of the author.

Gallop illustrates why that subject/object approach to the analysis of literary style is not only non-Lacanian but also liable to produce reductive, regressive, and repetitive re-discoveries of the same old meanings. Stylistics is still largely dedicated to an outmoded kind of literary analysis, one that Gallop describes as “based solely on interpretation. Freudian readings interpret literary texts to show, for example, anal drives or negative oedipal complexes, while Lacanian readings show symbolic fathers and signifying chains,” as in Lacan's didactic essay on “The Purloined Letter.”¹³⁵ Yet these sorts of analyses do not just fly in the face of a Lacanian understanding of analysis, they are also likely to do nothing more than conservatively to “discover” representations of psychoanalytic concepts with the text, a point that might actually make some of Harold Bloom's stridently polemical comments make a lot more sense: “Hamlet did not have an Oedipus complex, but Freud certainly had a Hamlet complex,” for example.¹³⁶ A more innovative approach, Gallop recommends, is not to rely solely on interpretation of style but also to incorporate into one's reading an analysis of *transference*.

Freud understands transference to occur within the scene of analysis as displaced affect. In the relationship between analyst and analysand, not only do “infantile prototypes re-emerge and are experienced with a strong sense of immediacy” but also “the transference is acknowledged to be the terrain on which all the basic problems of a

¹³⁵ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 25.

¹³⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Riverbend, 1994), 350.

given analysis play themselves out.”¹³⁷ In other words, in the transference the analyst and analysand both find themselves caught up in a recreation of past relationships, which can be potentially very dangerous if the analyst does not handle the transference well but which is a necessary precondition for the real work of analysis to begin. Transference is a key development in psychoanalytic thought because it brings the realization that the analyst is not the isolated master sitting in judgment and interpreting the patient’s thoughts. The transference implicates the analyst, her desire, in a powerful intersubjective drama into which she is as certain to be drawn as her patient. We do not as of yet have a comprehensive or satisfactory theory of how we might account for the effect of transference in a literary analysis and most certainly stylistics has resisted building such an understanding into its practice. But “transference,” as Gallop explains, “is the repetition of infantile prototype relations, of unconscious desires in the analytic relation. Without transference, psychoanalysis is simply literary criticism, by an unimplicated, discriminating reader, lacking either affect or effect.”¹³⁸ It is vital, then, that we heed the advice of critics like Gallop and Felman and begin to admit to the signal importance that transference has for any stylistic analysis. As I argued in the last chapter, stylistic critique more often than not is an exercise in the disproportionate application of power on the side of the critic over his object’s sexuality. That is to be expected since “interpretation is always the exercise of power, while transference is the structuring of that authority. To analyze transference is to unmask that structuring, interrupt its

¹³⁷ Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 455.

¹³⁸ Jane Gallop, *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 73.

efficient operation.”¹³⁹ An analysis of the transference experience that occurs in a stylistic reading, then, is a way to disrupt the asymmetry of power that operates within it and to expose the heterosexist imperatives that have for so long driven its critical operation.

Given the neglected consideration of the role of transference in stylistic criticism, the most important thing that a queer critique of style must include is an acknowledgment of that transference. After all, it is transference, I will argue in chapter four for instance, that produces a dramatic misrepresentation of the style of Ernest Hemingway, a reading of his style as falsely straight that works not only to the author’s advantage but which also satisfies the critic’s own narcissistic embrace of Hemingway’s style as a defense against the impossibility of any truly “straight” style. Including that line of thinking into a new kind of stylistic critique, however, requires us to relinquish the supreme authority over language that the critic desperately clings to, to accept, as Gallop earlier suggested, our own lack. As Gallop says,

In the relation of transference, the critic is no longer analyst but patient. The position of patient can be terrifying in that it represents, to the critic who in her transference believes in the analyst’s mastery, a position of nonmastery. The critic escapes that terror by importing psychoanalytic “wisdom” into the reading dialectic so as to protect herself from what psychoanalysis is really about, the unconscious, as well as from what literature is really about, the letter. The psychoanalytic critic in her refusal to confront literature is like the patient who, in his resistance to his analysis, intelligently discusses psychoanalytic theory on the couch.¹⁴⁰

Our goal must be to re-imagine our relationship to the text as one in which not only is the style of the author relevant as an object of inquiry to be studied and appreciated but crucially it is a *relation*, a relation of power in which our desires and aggressions as readers are implicated too. As Felman argues, “dialogue is not an accident, a

¹³⁹ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 27.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

contingency of the reading, but its structuring condition of possibility. The reading [proposed by Lacan] is revolutionary in that it is essentially, constitutively dialogic. It is grounded in a division; it cannot be synthesized, summed up in a monologue.”¹⁴¹ We must not therefore use an analysis of style in an attempt to master a text and its author’s desires because any attempt to do so is an illusory one, a corrupted enterprise in which the critic acts, as Lacan says, as an “impostor,” the false lawgiver who assumes for herself access to a pure metalanguage that can, in fact, only be accessed by the Other. Stylistic analysis, as we saw in the last chapter and will see in the following chapters in the critical responses to Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein, primarily proceeds from exactly this position of impersonation, repeating psychoanalytic “wisdom” such as the claim that ornate style is a symptom of an exceptional homosexual narcissism. Gallop refuses that goal, showing how that assertion of mastery is a defensive measure that protects the critic from having to confront her own transference relationship with the text.

The theory I offer here does not aim to attack individual critics for failing to accept the role of their own desire in reading style. For that is the Lacanian insight, that we buy into the imaginary conditions of our situation and use the symbolic resources at our disposal to try desperately to confirm those illusions. I do, however, offer a rejoinder to critics who allow the homophobic logic of stylistic critique to overpower their analyses as they surely are responsible for accepting the political message to which their texts are committed. What I want to offer instead is a theory of style that is focused on deciphering how and why the social order has seized upon style as a site by which to adjudicate sexuality and how we might, perversely, *disempower* the critic’s authority

¹⁴¹ Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*, 23.

over language as a con-game. The end result of such a project would be a generalization of lack to all critics, one that would in a sense bring us all down to the same level but that would also shine a light on the ideological motivations – in particular phallocentrism and heterosexism – that drive stylistics’s denial of its own incomplete grasp of language.

In the overture to *Ecrits* Lacan guides us in this task by offering a reformulation of the classic dictum “style is the man himself [*Le style est l’homme même*], replacing it with a new and shocking formula: “style is the man to whom one addresses oneself” [*Le style c’est l’homme à qui l’on s’adresse*]. This revision is tough to get one’s head around but it is a substitution that has dramatic consequences for how we think about a queer critique of style as it does a lot of work to advance that goal. In his message Lacan destroys the central premise upon which stylistic criticism has operated, the notion that style and the writer are self-identical.¹⁴² Lacan understands style not as the simple and readily decipherable outward expression of the individual on the page. Instead, style is one half of an intersubjective experience, the partner to whom and against whom one speaks. We must pause to ask ourselves, though, how does one address oneself *to* style? Style as the means by which one metaphorizes and metonymizes, condenses and displaces, is the second subject, the subject of address in a shift “from the individual person taken as a separate monad to the intersubjective dialectic.”¹⁴³ In psychoanalysis, as the subject expresses himself in language he directs his address to the ideally neutral position of the analyst. A reader, as we know however, is never a neutral party and is always caught up in the dialectic of transference. A reader, then, finds herself in the position both of the addressee and of style, for if style is the man to whom one addresses

¹⁴² See Gallop’s discussion of this same point, 115-117.

¹⁴³ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 117.

oneself then the reader is paradoxically in that position of style. The theory of style I propose takes this Lacanian insight and understands the reader to be in the position not of the adjudicator of style but as that exact locus upon which the writer projects her style. The critic's task, then, is not to receive the message and report what secret is contained within as though she were codebreaker with an intercepted message in a time of war. The critic's proper role, after all, is not to intercept anything but to take her place as a subject of address, to accept her engagement in the transference, and to ask, instead of what style means about the one who sends it, how that style received engages the critic's own desires and aggressions; one might say that the proper goal of stylistic analysis is a self-analysis. Why does a critic, for example, receive and celebrate Hemingway's style as the highest achievement both of simplistic writing and heterosexual masculinity? Why does a critic face the challenge of Gertrude Stein's incantatory rhythms and call her a lesbian? A queer literary critique engages with these questions, accepts the critic's own partial relationship to language (that is, does not presume that the critic speaks in a metalanguage that can describe the exotic variety of the writer like a Western anthropologist describing some forgotten group of indigenous peoples), and tries to answer the most pressing question facing progressive critics of style: not what does a given writer's style express about him in some absolute way but why does the critic herself, for what reasons, does she think she recognizes in style the expression that she does? This is not to say that style is meaningless, for it most certainly is not. Rather, a queer critique of style understands that the critic does not occupy the sufficient place of the master to understand fully style's meaning, limited as she is by her own castration in language. Rather than fleeing from that partial understanding, however, she accepts it for

the partial meanings she can get from it instead of, as has so long been the case, projecting the imaginary image of self-image of control and pretending she's got what it takes to provide a comprehensive explanation of style.

We may feel unsatisfied with a program that offers no conclusive answers on what style "means" but instead asks us to try to understand how style engages the critic in the transference dance. But this is a crucial goal for queer critique to try to reach, especially because to continue along the path of trying to pin down absolute stylistic meanings does nothing more than to collude with the heterosexist ideology of much stylistic critique by allowing it to, as Edelman says, mobilize the symbolic to defend its own narcissistic self-image. In other words, analyses that abide by the same rules that stylistic critique uses but merely provide counter-readings of sexuality merely reinforce the notion of linguistic mastery we know to be a fraud but which heterosexist discourse pretends to have as its birthright. As we will see in the following chapters, that self-image is heavily invested in proving to itself that itself is on the side of an objective standard of stylistic clarity, the "good" side of honest, hard working, plain talking folks. And it is a self-image that defines itself against what it depicts as a deceptive, unthrifty, and excessive mode of the perversely styled. Our goal should be to try to dismantle this entire apparatus to, as Edelman says, "unmask it as always *only* imaginary" and to implicate those critics' imaginary investment in style by proving everyone's imaginary investment in it.

In the chapters that follow I will examine three literary writers known for their unique styles and the stylistic critique that has been mobilized to defend or to excoriate the sexuality of each. I will have little recourse to the technical language of Lacanian

psychoanalysis there, preferring instead to remain true to the practice of the mode of critique I have described here. In other words, rather than trying to locate in each writer instances of Lacanian themes or chains of signifiers, I take a more truly Lacanian critical approach in trying to decipher the critic's response to style, to ask why and for what ideological reasons the critical response to each figure has been what it has been.

Seeking to provide no final answers on what style "means" about each of the writers I attend to, the work ahead does consider how each uses signifiers strategically as part of their aesthetic projects. But I am far more interested in the work ahead to ask why we tell ourselves with such deluded confidence the stories that we tell about what style means for each writer.

Chapter III
A Personal Quantity,
Or, Bringing Out Henry James

Why should one call one's self anything? One only deprives other people of their dearest occupation.

Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*

The Jamesian ideal of consciousness express[es] a dream of detaching instruments of sublimation (speech and thought) from the activity of repression. The best talk and the best thought would be the talk and the thought which resist interpretation. Language would no longer reveal character or refer to desires "behind" words; it would be the unfolding of an improvised and never completed psychological design.

Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*

In chapter nine of *The Tragic Muse* (1890), Henry James relates the first extended interview in the novel between two reunited Oxford friends – the failed politician and aspiring painter Nick Dormer and his aesthete-writer college chum Gabriel Nash.¹⁴⁴ Their conversation as they stroll around the Notre Dame area ranges from Nash's theories on art and good living to Dormer's feelings concerning his would-be sponsor in an upcoming parliamentary election, the wealthy and politically ambitious widow Julia Dallow. Throughout their talk, Dormer displays a marked longing to avoid the return to British political life that Julia and his parochial mother are pushing on him in favor of a career as a portraitist, a path that seems much more fitting given the artistic taste he evinces while abroad in Paris at the novel's start. Nash, responding to Dormer's obvious

¹⁴⁴ *The Tragic Muse* appeared serially in *Atlantic Monthly* beginning in January of 1889 before being published in book form in 1890. The first part of this chapter title is derived from James's final novel *The Golden Bowl* in which Prince Amerigo reflects on his relationship with Maggie Verver, telling her that she knows only one of two parts of him and that "there's another part, very much smaller doubtless, which, such as it is, represents my single self, the unknown, unimportant – unimportant save to you – personal quantity. About this you've found out nothing." Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

desire not to stand for the newly vacant seat representing Harsh, interrogates his friend about his plans for the future, in the process prompting the revelation of Nick's profound ontological uncertainty:

I don't know *what* I am – heaven help me!” Nick broke out, tossing his hat down on his little tin table with vehemence. “I'm a freak of nature and a sport of the mocking gods. Why should they do everything so inconsequent, so improbable, so preposterous? It's the vulgarist practical joke. There has never been anything of the sort among us; we're all Philistines to the core, with about as much aesthetic sense as that hat. It's excellent soil – I don't complain of it – but not a soil to grow that flower. From where the devil then has the seed been dropped? I look back from generation to generation; I scour our annals without finding the least little sketching grandmother, any sign of a building or versifying or collecting or even tulip-raising ancestor. They were all as blind as bats, and none the less happy for that. I'm a wanton variation, an unaccountable monster. My dear father, rest his soul, went through life without a suspicion that there's anything in it that can't be boiled into blue-books, and became in that conviction a very distinguished person. He brought me up in the same simplicity and in the hope of the same eminence. It would have been better if I had remained so. I think it's partly your fault that I have n't,” Nick went on. “At Oxford you were very bad company for me – my evil genius: you opened my eyes, you communicated the poison. Since then, little by little, it has been working within me; vaguely, covertly, insensibly at first, but during the last year or two with violence, pertinacity, cruelty. I've resorted to every antidote in life; but it's no use – I'm stricken. ‘*C'est Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée* putting Venus for ‘art.’” It tears me to pieces as I may say.”¹⁴⁵

It would be tough for many queer readers of this passage not to hear in it an all-too-familiar story about growing up queer. In fact, what at first blush looks to be the mere uncertainty of a youngish man about what he wants to be when he “grows up” instead reveals a canny perceptiveness on James's part about the emerging growth of an assumed conceptual relationship between aesthetic production and sexuality. There is no misunderstanding Nick's obvious anguish in this moment, his sense not only that he doesn't have a clue to what he wants to do, but more ominously for a queer audience, his sharp hatred of what he is beginning to admit to himself that he is. Many readers might see this scene as a moment of dramatic plotting designed to create suspense about whether Nick will ultimately accede to his family's pressures to pursue a respectable

¹⁴⁵ Henry James, *The Tragic Muse* (*The New York Edition of the Novels and Tales of Henry James*, 26 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907-1917], vols.7-8), I.181. All further references are to this edition and will be given by page numbers in the text.

future in politics – an outlook represented not so favorably in the figure of the novel’s other male lead, the diplomat and hopeless boor Peter Sherringham – or whether Nick will instead follow his hopes and become a painter, a much more dubious proposition he thinks. Reading through a different lens, however, makes this passage stand out for very different reasons. It is no coincidence, after all, that Nick makes this emotional confession to the novel’s dandyish representative of aestheticism, or that it immediately follows Nash’s queries about whether or not Nick is really in love with and plans to marry his cousin Julia, something that is even by the book’s end far from confirmed. It is apparent for a host of reasons that, at least as far as Nick understands it, the respectable life, the boring but socially desirable married life of his father and the rest of his family before him, and a life that indulges in producing art are incompatible. Art and blue-books don’t go together. In the social economy of the novel as in the social economy of the bourgeois West more generally, to be married, practical, and plainspoken are all of one piece, while to be enamored of art and under the suspect influence of frivolous, immature, fancy-speaking company from one’s college days are all of quite another.

What might in any other novel be a decision for Nick tempered by ambition, indolence, or avarice is sucked into the orbit of shame and humiliation in *The Tragic Muse*. “I’m a freak of nature,” Nick wails, as well as “a wanton variation, an unaccountable monster.” All that fuss because he doesn’t want to be an MP? If that were the whole story after all, calling him a drama queen would be a vast understatement. Nick later explains to Nash that the reason the situation is so fraught for him is that “you don’t know the atmosphere in which I live, the horror, the scandal my apostasy would provoke, the injury and suffering it would inflict. I believe it would really kill my

mother. She thinks my father's watching me from the skies" (I.182). Some critics have pointed to this declaration in order to argue for the insignificance of the alternative to politics that Nick is considering. For some the most important fact is just that Nick is concerned about violating the strict norms of bourgeois decorum by failing to demonstrate the proper social, political and economic ambition as imagined by his mother and by his aged benefactor Mr. Carteret. Indeed that does seem to be what is really objectionable as far as Mrs. Dormer and Carteret, which is to say the older generation, are concerned. Nick's tortured and remarkably modern soul-searching, however, cannot simply be explained away so easily as a matter of not wanting to disappoint his mother's socio-economic aspirations, nor can it be explained as his need to please Carteret, his father's old friend, in order to secure for himself an inheritance that he will later turn down from Julia Dallow; the gravity of his dilemma is not satisfyingly "solved" by either of these banal, plot-oriented explanations. For Nick does not simply obsess about two more or less equivalent alternatives, one being the specific career trajectory imagined by his mother and the other being anything less than that. Rather, and this is crucial, the specificity of the other choice, that Nick wants to paint, i.e., to pursue *style* over a *prosaic* political existence, is central to the novel's understanding of sexual subjectivity and therefore of Nick's narrative crisis. Try as we might want for a variety of motives, we must not explain away as meaningless Nick's attraction to "style," nor can we afford to ignore the dawning sexual significations the novel insists that term had begun to accrue in the culture during this important stage of James's career.

While it may not be up to the level of literary excellence of the virtuoso novels of his major phase – one of James's harshest critics, Maxwell Geismar, derided him for

having “rationalized all of the obvious defects in this weak novel into a series of hidden virtues” – *The Tragic Muse* nevertheless marks an extremely significant moment in James’s career.¹⁴⁶ For one thing, James seems to have planned *The Tragic Muse* to be his last novel, his theatrical ambitions finally having reached the tipping point. James writes to his brother William, “*The Tragic Muse* is to be my last long novel. For the rest of my life I hope to do lots of short things with irresponsible spaces between them.”¹⁴⁷ We might pay special attention to the novel, then, as what James appears to have, at one point in time anyway, thought of as his final statement in the novel form. Jonathan Freedman in his *Professions of Taste* dismisses this speculation as perhaps “too facile,” though he agrees that *The Tragic Muse* is a crucial document for understanding James’s complicated, often conflicted relationship with aestheticism, a relationship that is thoroughly entangled – particularly in the relatively one-sided critical response that “consistently treated [him] as an aesthete *tout court*” – with homosexuality.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, Freedman is right to point out that for the majority of the past hundred years, when critics spoke of James’s “aestheticism,” they were also often talking about “James’s homoeroticism, an unspoken subject that clearly underlies the language of effeminity and effeminacy that anti-Jacobites persistently used to describe James’s putative aestheticism, and for which the term ‘aesthete’ long served as a virtual synonym.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Maxwell Geismar, *Henry James and the Jacobites* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 106.

¹⁴⁷ *The Letters of Henry James, vol. 1*, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Scribner, 1920), I.163.

¹⁴⁸ Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), xiii. Aestheticism as a category is widely assumed to be the topic of the novel, the motivation for James’s response to a broad aesthetic trend. While I don’t dispute that claim, I wish to suggest that one related problem – style – because of its especially fraught nature, holds a special place in the novel over and above the explicit Jamesian response to an artistic and political movement.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

If after the Oscar Wilde debacle aestheticism in the 20th century served as a kind of short-hand for homosexuality – not to rehearse the fractious debates surrounding the matter of James’s own “actual” sexuality – what of *The Tragic Muse*’s own time? What could and would Nick’s attraction to the bright flame of Nash’s aestheticist acclamation of style signify for the culture when James produced this text?¹⁵⁰ To answer these questions would be to, in Michel Foucault’s words, “enable discursive practice to be grasped at precisely the point where it is formed,” to appreciate the establishment of the sexualized discourse surrounding style in the late 19th and early 20th centuries at precisely the moment they came into being during James’s middle period.¹⁵¹

If we appeal to *The Tragic Muse* for answers it would seem to suggest a nascent yet budding appreciation of the cultural reorganization (discussed in chapter one) that produced the modern gay signification of style as we know it. Nick, for example, in a move that already uncannily anticipates the nature or nurture debates of more recent times, wonders at length about from where his artistic proclivity springs. He at first speculates on a biological explanation for its origins, noting that “there has never been anything of the sort among us; we’re all Philistines to the core, with about as much aesthetic sense as that hat,” before rejecting the biological appeal to “the core” as his stock is “not a soil to grow that flower.” He deduces that he began “in the same

¹⁵⁰ For the record, I happen to find the argument that James was a gay man very compelling, especially when presented with the evidence of his extensive and passionate correspondences with other men. On the other hand, I do find Sheldon Novick’s specious assertion, first proposed in *Henry James: The Young Master* that, as Novick later put it, “one evening in the spring of 1865, James jerked off . . . his young friend Oliver Wendell Holmes” less compelling, though, and maybe this is just my own prurience, a fun speculation that tells us a lot more about the people (predominantly straight men) debating its historical “truth” than it does about Henry James. See Sheldon Novick. 1997. “Henry James’ Love Life,” *Slate*. <http://www.liu.edu/CWIS/CWP/library/workshop/citchi.htm> (accessed January 10, 2007). For the original mention see Novick, *Henry James: The Young Master* (New York: Random House, 1996), 470 n.42.

¹⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the College de France, 1973-74*, ed. Jacques Lagrange, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13.

simplicity” as his unimaginative father and that he was seduced into the life, as they used to say, by Gabriel Nash, who “communicated the poison.” And could there be a more authentically incipient portrait of a gay man recognizing his own finally nameable sexuality than in Nick’s last, desperate words: “Since then, little by little, it has been working within me; vaguely, covertly, insensibly at first, but during the last year or two with violence, pertinacity, cruelty. I’ve resorted to every antidote in life but it’s no use – I’m stricken”? The passage reminds one of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a text by James’s close friend (whom he also quotes in the preface) published just four years earlier, because it has often been read as staging a prototypically similar, allegorical narrative of overcoming homosexuality. This is all to say that the problem at the center of Nick’s growth over the course of the novel – his indecision about his artistic career – operates as a kind of synecdoche for a struggle that remains indeterminate in the elusiveness of its sexual subtext, even though it nonetheless provides a compelling thematic marker of James’s awareness that style had by this point become a matter of sexuality, that by the 1880’s at the latest the two topics already virtually signified one another.¹⁵² The very special and particular vocational dilemma, then, displaces in the text the overt formation of Nick’s sexual subjectivity, a topic for which James may or may not have had a rich vocabulary but with which he was undoubtedly, as his less public writings make clear, very familiar.¹⁵³ What is left is a novel that remains ambivalently committed to the Victorian traditions of appropriate

¹⁵² Though of course the career is not entirely indeterminate as becoming an artist requires rejecting marriage with Julia Dallow who is, let’s admit, throwing herself at Nick with her own purposes in mind.

¹⁵³ James’s recently collected letters to younger male friends such as Hugh Walpole and Hendrik Anderson provide an illuminating perspective on how James conducted himself among intimates. See *Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James’s Letters to Younger Men*, eds. Susan E. Gunter and Steven H. Jobe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

subject-matter even as it registers that culture's response, in the form of its problematization of style, to the crisis of a brand new and wholly modern type of sexual subject.

Suggesting that this is just a novel about a gay man becoming gay is sure to meet with some harsh rebukes, and though that is a tempting argument to make, I do not mean to suggest that homosexuality is the solution to *The Tragic Muse*. Rather homosexuality – conceived as a signified *and* signifier of style – is an important ingredient and essential outcome of the novel's logic. It is crucial that we recognize, as David McWhirter argues, that “James's position as a transitional figure who, for all his superficial adherence to the Victorian sexual mores of his audience, nevertheless embodies ‘the ferocious contradictions of his age.’”¹⁵⁴ What I take to be one of the signature qualities of James's writing, especially in a mid-career novel like *The Tragic Muse*, is his talent for balancing these contradictions, often through the use of, in his famous term, “counterplotting,” critically evoking at once the established mores of characters like Mrs. Dormer and Mr. Carteret alongside the revolutionary but uncertainly efficacious values of a distinctively modern generation. When it comes to sexuality, the novel steps two ways at once, attempting to satisfy the traditional, heterosexual conditions that typically signal the completion of the well-made novel on the one hand and on the other frustrating those same conditions by leaving Nick's romantic situation virtually unresolved. Nick, after all, does not finally marry Julia (nor his muse Miriam for that matter), anticipating Lambert Strether's similar rejection of financial security in the form of Maria Gostrey in James's late novel *The Ambassadors*. Instead, his sister Biddy marries Sherringham and it is Mrs. Dormer, courtesy of Julia's generosity, who is at last secured in the economic

¹⁵⁴ David McWhirter *Desire and Love in Henry James* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.

comfort we all along expect our protagonist to achieve. Meanwhile, the impermissible contamination of Gabriel Nash is expelled from the novel even as his influence on Nick seems to persist well past the book's conclusion. In the final accounting, then, the reader is left with a "superficial adherence" to the well-made ending whose faults are so deep and wide that we wonder how long it will stand.

Eve Sedgwick notoriously examines James's handling of a similar superficial adherence to conventional novelistic sexuality in her provocative essay "The Beast in the Closet," suggesting that the mysterious presence at the center of James's tale "The Beast in the Jungle" is its protagonist John Marcher's inability to navigate the powerful and competing demands of homoerotic desire and homosexual panic.¹⁵⁵ Many critics have taken Sedgwick to task for the audacity of her reading, protesting in classic reactionary fashion that she is reading too much into things, injecting her own vested political interest into a text that is about a man who, afraid to live, has no evident homoerotic leanings of any kind. Sedgwick takes an unspecified affliction, this line of thinking goes, and twists it into something dirty to advance her own intemperately pro-gay agenda.¹⁵⁶

I could likely be accused of a similar transgression, taking what is a legitimate point of plot – Nick's indecision about his career – and making a lot of gay hay about it. Critics after all have not historically read the novel in the way I suggest and even recent queer readings have inflected the novel in a different manner. Christopher Lane, for example, points out the novel's "awkward prominence of homosexual desire" but sees,

¹⁵⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet," in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 182-212.

¹⁵⁶ Alternatively, David Van Leer attacks Sedgwick's reading from a perspective that renders Sedgwick an unauthorized outsider to gay male experience who homophobically stigmatizes gay men by disallowing the possibility of "the healthy, well-adjusted male homosexual." David Van Leer, "The Beast of the Closet: Homosociality and the Pathology of Manhood." *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Spring 1989): 587-607. For Sedgwick's thoughtful response see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Tide and Trust." *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Spring 1989): 745-57.

wrongly I think, that desire manifested in an erotic attraction between Nick and Nash.¹⁵⁷ An assertion of homoerotic desire between the two men is overly speculative, and I understand Gabriel Nash's role to be that of an initiator to a specific culture rather than a potential lover. Lane's thoughtful handling of the novel's bungled attempt to jettison homoeroticism in favor of an unbelievable heterosexual resolution, however, is extremely perceptive. Lane is also correct to warn us away from "the assumption that homosexual desire is simply the 'truth' of *The Tragic Muse*," suggesting instead a more nuanced approach that uncovers the occluded homosexual meanings of the text without trying to out its characters or author. This sort of reading is precisely what I have in mind when arguing that this transitional novel is divided against itself, that it ultimately submits to understanding the society that it is critiquing in the same problematic terms that society employs to describe itself. The novel poses a challenge to Victorian standards of propriety and decency in its opening acts before finally collapsing into what is more or less a reification of some of its most troubling values. In other words, even as the text suggests an alternative, non-heteronormative existence as a desirable and to a great extent positive possibility – (Nash's jet-setting, opera-going, cosmopolitan life sounds pretty fabulous to me, anyway) – it nonetheless perpetuates as fact some of the most problematic negative associations, specifically the notion that homosexuals are detectable by, for one thing, their predilection for style, about a "lifestyle" whose outlines seemed at that very historical moment to be coming into focus.

The crudely aestheticist ideals propounded by Gabriel Nash allow James to emphasize thematically the novel sexual significance of style in the society in which he

¹⁵⁷ Christopher Lane, "The Impossibility of Seduction in James's *Roderick Hudson* and *The Tragic Muse*." *American Literature* 68.4 (December 1996): 739-64, 748.

lived and worked – a bourgeois, Anglo-American culture that was at this moment beginning or about to begin to widely assume (years before the Wilde trial exploded onto the front pages, cementing lasting impressions of gay men, e.g., effeminacy and urbanity) that style means homosexuality – on behalf of what seems to be what we would today call a moderately activist pro-gay agenda.¹⁵⁸ In thematizing the homosexualization of style in this novel, James transmits a field report, a first hand account in which we can clearly discern the discursive transformations of the final years of the 19th century that enabled style and (homo)sexuality to be read together. If James was only beginning to register and write about the topic in a heavy-handed tale like “The Author of ‘Beltraffio’” (1884), he had by the time of *The Tragic Muse* definitively perceived that style in the modern age meant something radically new and that the signification of style would come to be understood in opposition to all of the bourgeois values ultimately rejected by Nick at the end of this novel – marriage, children, economic upward mobility, national pride, and British imperialism. This is, as Ross Posnock points out, one of James’s most consistent patterns, that is “a willingness to recognize and submit to a new scale of values and new ‘importances’ rather than to contrive measuring by older standards.”¹⁵⁹ I argue further that though James provides a scathing critique of Victorian standards of sexual and artistic subjectivity in *The Tragic Muse*, he nonetheless ends by reifying the stigmatization of style and homosexuality in a novel that seems to want but is ultimately unable to offer a genuinely new and sustainable model of sexual subjectivity and instead collapses at its end into a pretence of heterosexual resolution in what Joseph Litvak terms

¹⁵⁸ See Joseph Litvak *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) and Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

¹⁵⁹ Ross Posnock *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 10.

“one of the more extreme, if not exactly terroristic, instances of James’s counterplotting.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, James seems to want to make room for his protagonist to step outside of the heteronormative matrix and to create a life for himself that is dedicated to style and to a prototypically gay existence, something akin to what we might today call an “art fag.” Yet at the same time by coupling in the logic of the narrative these two things – style and a lifestyle that cannot shake, rightly or wrongly, discrediting presumptions about sexuality – James hypostatizes the fledgling notion that style is the locus of the homosexual. Ironically, the consequence for James is that the same kind of moral and aesthetic assessment – in short, style is a tell-tale signifier of homosexuality – that he writes about and fails to recuperate in the middle period of his career will later be marshaled against him, especially with regards to the notoriously mannered novels of the major phase. If then while James’s finely tuned perception shows a striking apprehension of the sexual inflection style undergoes during his middle period, he will later fall victim to the very same discursive conversion on which he is at this point reporting, a lamentable repercussion for a writer who seems eager to open a space for novel erotic experience and style of life, but in the final accounting cannot permit himself to do so.

Though it does recognize the positive potential style might conceivably afford to the erotically marginal, *The Tragic Muse* repeatedly figures style of expression as one of its most fraught terms. James starts the book, in fact, by defining the milieu in which Nick lives as being expressively impoverished, staging the respectable world of bourgeois Anglo-American society as a stylistic void. “The people of France have made

¹⁶⁰ Joseph Litvak *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 258 n.25.

it no secret,” the narrator informs us, “that those of England, as a general thing, are to their perception an inexpressive and speechless race, perpendicular and unsociable, unaddicted to enriching any bareness of contact with verbal or other embroidery” (I.3). The statement, presented as national opinion rather than fact, is soon confirmed when the narrator speculates that “this view might have derived encouragement, a few years ago, in Paris, from the manner in which four persons sat together in silence, one fine day about noon, in the garden, as it is called, of the Palais de l’Industrie” (I.3). Our introduction to the Dormer family is all the more convincing as to their stylistic emptiness because, as Sara Blair points out, the narrator “deftly distances himself from English ‘insularity’ and ‘inexpressiveness’ in his elaborate play with syntax and narrative style,” creating a stylistic acrobatics that makes the Dormers seem every bit as stodgy and inexpressive as the French are alleged to think.¹⁶¹ His very stylishness underlines the plainness of those he is describing. The very first thing we learn about the culture that James will satirize over the course of the novel is that it is prone to shunning style and that it is likely to welcome style’s intrusion with the same icy silence that the Dormers demonstrate at the novel’s opening. By no means is it hard to imagine what that stifling world must feel like for the man in the middle, Nick, who probably might have a lot more in common with the people of Paris than with his own “inexpressive and speechless race.”¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Sara Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 133.

¹⁶² It might at this point be fair to object that the distinction James draws at the outset of the novel is one based not on the vicissitudes of sexual identity as my larger argument suggests, but rather on a key opposition between national identities, that is French versus English, or racial basis. Race and nation are indeed the categories James employs both in ascribing a collective sentiment to “the people of France” and in characterizing the English “race.” Blair argues that the novel experiments with race before finally foreclosing on the possibilities afforded by the myriad racial, ethnic and national identities that populate it, most notably of course in the figure of the tragic muse herself, the foreign-born Jew Miriam Rooth (155). While I agree with this argument and do not wish to dismiss its importance, what James sees himself as being up to, I think, by marking the difference between the English and French is rather more related to

While the problem of sexual identity is left unresolved at the conclusion of the novel, it is quickly established as indistinguishable from the question of the expressivity with which James begins. The arrival of Gabriel Nash in the novel's opening chapters,

sexuality than Blair acknowledges. James de-emphasizes the racial aspect of that reading, for example, in his account of the genesis of the novel in the New York edition preface:

What I make out from furthest back is that I must have had from still further back, must in fact potentially have always had, that happy thought of some dramatic picture of the 'artist-life' and of the difficult terms on which it is best secured and enjoyed, the general question of its having to be not altogether easily paid for. (I.v)

James, despite his characteristically circuitous manner, is clear to stress that his preoccupation, the germ from which the novel sprang, is the high cost to be paid for attaining the life of the artist rather than that theme in its relation to other national contexts. Obviously James's "dramatic picture" is situated within a national context, the English one, a point he acknowledges again in the preface by pointing out that:

Art indeed has in our day taken on so many honours and emoluments that the recognition of its importance is more than a custom, has become on occasion almost a fury [...] especially in the English world (I.ix).

However, where Blair sees the project of nation-building as an implicit part of that notion of Englishness, I see instead James trying to situate an aesthetic problem within a sociological and more importantly psychological context. As a consequence of her emphasis Blair reads the conclusion of the novel as showing that "James's identifications with cosmopolitan alterity will collapse into the well-made ending, with the requisite marriages and reversals of fortune, of the distinctly English literary tradition he has attempted to redirect" (156). As I have pointed out already, however, this description is not entirely accurate. Nick does not, in fact, as Blair says "embrac[e] the patriarchal cultural imperative he initially resists," nor does he submit to the requisite marriage the reader all along expects he eventually will (156). Instead, *The Tragic Muse's* ending is a kind of stop-gap measure, a partially well-made ending that queerly excuses Nick from its totalizing and terrorizing heterosexual completion. Gabriel Nash had predicted – not without a substantial note of irony – Nick's return to the respectable fold, telling him to "take care, take care ... and every one, beginning with your wife, will forget there's anything queer about you, and everything will be for the best in the best of worlds" (I.406). Yet that prophesied future never comes to pass. Instead on the final page of the novel the narrator reasserts his queer presence in a gossipy – gossipy as we all know being that supposed province of women and gay men – finale, contradicting Nash with news:

[O]f Nick Dormer, in regard to whom I may finally say that his friend Nash's predictions about his reunion with Mrs. Dallow have not up to this time been justified. On the other hand, I must not omit to add, this lady has not, at the latest accounts, married Mr. Macgeorge. It is very true there has been a rumour that Mr. Macgeorge is worried about her – has even ceased at all fondly to believe in her. (II.441)

While I agree, then, with Blair that many if not most of the identification with cosmopolitan alterities we encounter in the novel are collapsed at its end, the resolution of the novel does remain brazenly if playfully indeterminate when it comes to sexuality and that that sexual indeterminacy is a direct consequence of the novel's modernity. For as the narrator remarks at the novel's end, "in glancing about the little circle of interests I have tried to evoke I am suddenly warmed by a sharp sense of modernness" (II.440). If it is true as Blair suggests that these other forms of alterity (racial, ethnic, national, etc.) are dispensed with at the novel's end, what else remains to evoke the warmth of that modernity but the tantalizing yet not completely embraced hope that Nick, all rumor aside, won't stick around with Mrs. Dallow at all?

for example, unsettles Nick's reluctant conformity with his family and countrymen and inaugurates the possibility both of stylistic and of sexual transformation. Nick admirably explains to his sister Bidley that Nash "has written a very clever book ... a sort of novel" that he cannot describe other than to say it contains "a lot of good writing" (I.29). Nash is from the start, then, associated with the violation of proper convention, of the aesthetic conventions that would make his work more easily classifiable as something other than "a sort of novel," whatever that means, and of the social transgression that is a consequence of the boundary to polite bourgeois appreciation instigated by the inability of the characters to discuss the book, a problem that brings a swift end, in fact, to Nick and Bidley's discussion of Nash's sort of novel. Nash makes bad art, clever bad art, that contains good writing for sure, but art that is totally alien to English culture because it does not play by the conventional stylistic rules.

What is much more palatable to polite Anglo-American society, the novel suggests, is the "unstyled" vernacular of the political class. Gabriel Nash rejects that dialect outright in an exchange that makes him about as close as the novel has to a spokesperson for the cause of rejecting boring, self-satisfied political rhetoric. He suggests, simultaneously criticizing the ineloquence of British politicians and the prejudice of the reading public, that literature in his transgressive style is far better art but that the demands of his readers ultimately make writing a bankrupt enterprise. His critique rests on his almost Foucauldian belief that categorization of individuals is the primary task of modern Western culture, a belief that has been borne out all too well over the decades in the case of his, Nash's, creator. "Why should one call one's self anything?" he wonders. "One only deprives other people of their dearest occupation"

(I.34). That occupation acts particularly fiercely against writers, Nash explains, and “from the moment” writing is “for the convenience of others the signs have to be grosser, the shades begin to go. That’s a deplorable hour! Literature, you see, is for the convenience of others. It requires the most abject concessions. It plays such mischief with one’s style that really I’ve had to give it up” (I.34). Nash suggests that he greatly values his freedom to produce art in a style foreign to his audience but that he has found the freedom to be unacceptably curtailed by his readership. For him the moment one gives in and allows mischief to be made with one’s style is the moment that it is not worth doing any more. Literature may be a means of communicating with one’s audience, Nash concedes, but he is also voicing the novel’s commentary on its own reception, a commentary that reads as deeply dissatisfied with the conventions of literary criticism, especially the conventions of style.

One can imagine that what Nash wants instead is the freedom to continue in his own style, to write books that aren’t quite novels, without that project marking his own person so definitely. He recognizes, though, that to use style is to make oneself vulnerable to the judgment of readers, in other words, that it is the writer who bears the burden of stylistic analysis, especially the burden of sexual diagnosis. Nash, after all, is first described by Bidy as being in the company of “queer female appendages” and “as generally a good deal accounted for by the literary character” (I.29). His strangeness seems to her to bear a direct correlation with the literature he produces. It is as though Nash’s literary character, the quality of his writing, and his social character – the quality of his being or behaving – directly imply one another.

Dormer can easily be read as being in the same perilous position. Nick clearly understands his situation and Nash's to be related, if not identical, because different kinds of art seem only various manifestations of the same core artistic impulse. Early in the novel Nick explains as much to Bidy, telling her "all art is one – remember that, Bidy dear. ... It's the same great many-headed effort, and any ground that's gained by an individual, any spark that's struck in any province, is of use and of suggestion to all the others. We're all in the same boat." (I.14). While Nick is a painter and, in one of James's slier undercuttings a mere portraitist, his story as he understands it is the story of any artist. James reinforces that notion in his preface in which he writes of "the happy thought of some dramatic picture of the 'artist-life'" or as he puts it, "art, that is, as a human complication and a social stumbling block" (I.v). James's aim is to produce a portrait of *the* "artist-life," suggesting we are meant to see Nick's and Nash's predicaments as overlapping or even the same.¹⁶³ On this reading Nick's artistic indecision and Nash's disgusted rejection of the literary world have a lot in common; both face the demands of an inexpressive public ready to pounce on any, to use one of James's favorite words, "queer" instantiation of style.¹⁶⁴

We need look no further than the way that James stages the major opposition of the book – the artist-life versus the politician-life – as a battle over style to see that painting and literature are allies in this novel, allies aligned on the promiscuously productive side of style over and against politics' monogamously barren idiom. The

¹⁶³ This would not be at all an unexpected move for James as Michael Moon shows that James thought that what he calls his own "initiation" into style occurred through his reception of painted works as a boy and that that initiation carried over into the adult James's written aesthetic. Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 31-65.

¹⁶⁴ For an analysis of James's use of the word queer see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*" in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

inclusion of Nash's critique of the literary establishment allows James to position art and politics as competing values that can be measured on the same scale of expressive value. In other words, it would be ungenerous to evaluate politics on the basis of a plastic art like painting but if all art is one, then it is perfectly reasonable to talk about style as a value across the board, to talk at once about style in painting but at the same time to talk about style as a literary or rhetorical feature.

The problem of politics in *The Tragic Muse*, I suggest, is that it manifests the same trend toward inexpressive or "unstylized" language that drove Nash out of the writing business. Politics, as Nick says sarcastically, "is still worse for one's style" (I.35) than even the demands of fiction writing. Nash emphatically agrees, pointing out that "it has simply nothing in life to do with shades!" (I.35). In other words, as the demands of the citizenry and the reading public homogenize, they force linguistic concessions that leave texts bleached of style, with politics, that path for which Nick continues to be groomed on all sides, as the worst culprit. As evidence Nash points out that once Nick "had a style, upon my words he had! But I've seen it go. I've read his speeches" and "it was like listening to a nightingale in a brass band" (I.35). In his former life Nick had a style, that same former life by the way in which he was under Nash's sway at Oxford. Once he finds himself a servant to his country, though, Nick's style seeps out of him, leaving behind a dried up husk of boring prose. Politics, what Nash calls "the verbiage of parliamentary speeches – !" (I.175), is the style killer, a tradition-bound rhetoric designed to conservatively advance the protection of traditional or family values, to borrow a modern day neology.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Family values being in this case the Dormer clan's, especially Mrs. Dormer and Nick's prospective wife Julia's, ambitious hopes for Nick's political ascension as a catalyst for their own social climbing.

For Nick to return to that domain would mean a special embrace of bourgeois values. He would marry Julia, contract into a large inheritance from his father's friend Carteret, and secure his supposed obligation to his mother to do right by her fiscally. But it would also mean buying into the tradition of English rhetoric, "the tradition of dreariness, of stodginess, of dull dense literal prose" (I.170), the sort of existence we already know Nick is aversive to. Moreover, he would have to foreclose on the style of life that Nash's reappearance has activated and put into play as a possibility. Nash, of course, is having none of it, telling Nick that that dense literal prose "has so sealed people's eyes that they've ended up thinking the most natural of all things the most perverse. Why keep up the dreariness, in our poor little day? No one can tell me why, and almost everyone calls me names for simply asking the question" (I.170). The tyranny implied in that passage is telling as to the social conditions Nick faces and James reproduces. If Nash is "out" about his proclivity for style, it is not for lack of trying on the part of the discursive forces that enfold him. For life is not merely made boring for Nash by his linguistic surroundings – that cardinal sin of modern times for the dandy – but are actually dangerous for him as those around him gladly take up the ideological labor of policing the boundaries between socially acceptable and perverse idioms. As John Carlos Rowe points out, "James's male characters who suffer their secrets of artistic or homosexual passion are also victims of social orders in both England and America that do not permit the expression of masculine aestheticism or same-sex eroticism."¹⁶⁶ Some of those characters, like Nash, defy the social order and express in spite of it, only to face the punitive measures here euphemistically termed "name calling," of the social order's response. Others like Nick (and we can speculate James himself) remain ambivalent,

¹⁶⁶ John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 34.

attracted to the idea of an open and expressive vernacular but abjectly frightened by the torments that Nash so nonchalantly shrugs off. As Rowe puts it, Nash and Dormer are instances of James's "gay characters and those identified variously as 'different,' who are victimized just insofar as they are required to speak a language that expresses only their powerlessness or dispossession."¹⁶⁷

Nash's function in the novel is to voice the possibility of another kind of existence rooted in an appreciation of style and "the most natural of all things," which operates as a kind of short-hand for the unspoken homosexual meaning that style implies. Rowe argues that "on one level James is defensive in his representation of same-sex relations, preferring to subordinate any explicit sexuality to textual and aesthetic issues. In this regard James often acts out the homosexual panic Sedgwick finds structurally integral to masculine writing in the Victorian period and a necessary corollary of its constitutive homosociality."¹⁶⁸ While I agree that James is often "defensive" about same-sex relations as evidenced in his famous refusal to sign a mass protest of writers and artists against Wilde's prosecution, Rowe's reading here strikes me as a slightly insufficient description when considering *The Tragic Muse*. Such a reading necessarily makes homosexuality the secret of this text, the hidden answer or "what he's *really* talking about" when he talks about style. But as I've said already this is not just a text "about" same-sex desire that camouflages that story by overlaying an arbitrary narrative about aesthetics on top of it.¹⁶⁹ Rowe is right to suggest that James very often addresses aesthetic or textual issues with the goal, conscious or not, of taking up same-sex eroticism

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹⁶⁹ To be fair I also don't mean to imply that Rowe is making such a reductive argument as this last point might suggest.

as a problem – take for instance the litany of tales about writers such as “The Author of ‘Beltraffio’,” “The Figure in the Carpet,” and “The Death of the Master” that are saturated with queer meanings. Rowe’s recourse to the idea of subordination, however, paradoxically and problematically attributes greater value to the *subordinated* term; the subordinate or concealed term – homosexuality or “same-sex relations” as he calls it – takes on greater importance because it is the term that requires us to breach the author’s defenses – moral, textual, psychological – in order to reach. It is crucial, I contend, that we not subordinate the very real same-sex eroticism of *The Tragic Muse* only to let it, in Gordian fashion, dominate our entire understanding of the novel at the expense of the aesthetic issue – style – that supposedly subordinates it. Because the aesthetic and textual issue of style – a term that so preoccupies Gabriel Nash that he returns twice to lecture his friend about it – is surely just as important to the novel as is the panic of same-sex eroticism, we must be careful to counterbalance, as James so masterfully does, the two terms. Eric Haralson lucidly describes that counterbalance in *Henry James and Queer Modernity* when he talks about the new idea in the Victorian period that

Aspects of style – such as the tone and diction of a speech such as “We defy augury” – can reveal or betray authorial sexuality, and precisely because sexuality determines what sort of “line” an author can or cannot produce. By implication, only a straight author can write a straight line (or walk a straight line, or deliver a straight line), just as a queer line can only be composed by, and thus invariably signals, a queer author.¹⁷⁰

Haralson is not directly talking about *The Tragic Muse* or at least not talking about it by name, but his is a near perfect description of the novel’s central thematic preoccupation, a culture-wide preoccupation that I discuss at length over the course of chapter one.

If the homosexualization of style is a thematic concern in the novel, though, *The Tragic Muse* also suggests in its own form that distinctive style is the province of a

¹⁷⁰ Eric Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

distinctive few, namely of Nash, the narrator and finally, though uncertainly, of Nick himself. As I've already pointed out, the staid speaking style that is attributed to Nick's family and the English public at large (and especially to the people's representatives in government, that depository of all the very worst of "the verbiage of parliamentary speeches") is regularly contrasted with the urbane exuberance of the narrator's commentary. Among all the Jamesian narrators, this one especially flaunts a punditry nourished by James's twin commitments (or one an aspiration and the other a burden) to the past age and to the new. This narrator stays reluctantly bound by the conventions of novelistic plotting even as he laments the omission of that non-heteronormative excess of the story to which he seems more dedicated. At the start of the book's second volume, for instance, the narrator abridges a conversation between Nick and Nash, moving on but complaining that "with much of our tale left to tell it is a pity that so little of this colloquy may be reported here; since, as affairs took their course, it marked really – if the question be of noting the exact point – a turn of the tide in Nick Dormer's personal situation" (II.23). This formative moment, a queer tutorial if you will, is truncated by the demands of the novel form for movement towards its conclusion yet we can hardly resist noting that our narrator doesn't seem to want to fulfill that obligation and that he (and of James's anonymous, omniscient narrators surely this one ranks close to the most decidedly marked as male at least and gay male probably) registers his disappointment in a stylized way. That style in turn marks a decidedly erotic investment in the Nick/Nash sub-plot, a trope of intense interest in those kinds of narrative tributaries that will especially in the 20th century become one of the hallmarks of queer spectatorship.¹⁷¹ But more to the point

¹⁷¹ One especially memorable instance of this practice for me is Susie Bright's interview in the film *The Celluloid Closet* in which she recounts her identification with and imaginative investment in the

of our present concerns, that queer tactic is executed in a – maybe even *the* – queer way, a stylized way. Notice in particular the strange cobbling together of two sentences relaying a fairly short and simple idea along the seam of a semi-colon whose position serves *only* to complicate the style rather than to elucidate, at the level of “meaning,” the narrator’s point. It is as though the narrator’s overdetermined allegiance to the story of Nick and Nash overtakes the responsibility he owes to relate the fairly conventional (and dare I say it not all that interesting) marriage plot, and his protest is registered stylistically. Stranger still than that awkward joint, though, is this narrator’s characteristically involuted style as enacted in the sentence’s second part, a multiple in-turning or embroidering of thought as resistance to linearity or simplicity. This style is not yet at the level of what Sedgwick describes as the property of the sentence in *The Ambassadors*, “whose relatively conventional subject-verb-object armature is disrupted, if never *quite* ruptured, as the sac of the sentence gets distended by the insinuation of one more, and just one more, and another, another, and impossibly just one *more*, qualifying phrase or clause,” yet that is because, I would argue, James and his narrator too still remain suspicious of, if undeniably interested by, what a novel written in such a style would reflect about its author.¹⁷² Or to put it more precisely, James cannot yet bring himself to abandon the novelistic form in all its heteronormative triumph, as half-heartedly embodied in *The Tragic Muse* as it is, even as his narrator voices this dissatisfaction that is both enchanted, like Gabriel Nash, with the queer play of style and

anonymous woman Marlene Dietrich famously kisses in *Morocco*. Bright explains that upon seeing the film she constructed a series of alternative stories in her mind about this character and her (lesbian) relationship with the star, perversely pulling this minor and backgroundless cipher into the foreground of her own erotic relationship to the film as a queer spectator. *The Celluloid Closet*, DVD, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (1996; Sony Pictures, 2001).

¹⁷² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Is the Rectum Straight? Identification and Identity in *The Wings of the Dove*” in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 102.

yet clamped by its ankle to a form whose violation could mean all manner of social and professional calamity.¹⁷³

This is the tension that runs throughout *The Tragic Muse* at the level of both plot and form. Indeed though the novel does fulfill its obligation to move teleologically forward in order to resolve the marriage plot it sets up at its beginning, it nonetheless looks longingly sideways at the indulgent and pleasurable mischief of style as it passes. This double-move, what I have called the novel's division-against-itself, is summed up by the novel's report that "Nick Dormer had already become aware of having two states of mind while listening to this philosopher [Nash]; one in which he laughed, doubted, sometimes even reprobated, failed to follow or accept, and another in which his old friend seemed to take the words out of his mouth, to utter for him, better and more completely, the very things he was on the point of saying" (II.52). The text goes out of its way to disavow Nash's philosophy, purporting that Nick had "two states of mind" about Nash's doctrine but then going on to multiply the side against five-fold, making it not just two equally weighted states of mind at war but rather a gang of five – "in which he [1] laughed, [2] doubted, [3] sometimes even reprobated, [4] failed to follow or [5] accept" – versus the outnumbered proposition of accepting what Nash has got to say. And no wonder the text marshals such odds as Nash is figured here as reaching into Nick's own mouth to fish out his language, a terrifying and attractive combination of unwilling possession and of recognition by Nick that he and Nash are a lot more alike than he thinks, a point that seems to confirm Julia Dallow's proclamation to Nick that "you're everything you pretend not to be" (I.277). The passages I have discussed here represent the novel's twin imperatives, or more precisely one imperative and one temptation. On

¹⁷³ A point confirmed, need I even mention it, by Wilde's ruin.

the one hand stands maturity, adult and end-oriented, marriage focused, straightforward plotting that would draw Nick Dormer inexorably toward his heteronormative fate (even doom?); on the other stands the perversity of style, the meandering of eccentric storytelling, the ambiguity and uncertainty of an ending that will not resolve its loose ends, and the refusal of predetermined, irresistible heterosexual scripts. As I've tried to show, *The Tragic Muse* tries to have it both ways, making James' creation into one of his most monstrously conflicted texts. And if I complain, following both Nash and the narrator, that this story contains too much of the former position and not enough of the latter, the novel is still a compelling document of its author's gradual rejection of the former and growing embrace of the latter. Flying in the face of popular notions of psychology and of psychoanalysis, James's novels do not grow up and grow out of the kind of supposedly immature sexuality that must, for respectability's sake, give way to a fully-formed adult sexuality and its responsible narratives of family-growing. *The Tragic Muse* is remarkable because it is at that center point of James's career in which that oppressive script begins to become inverted. If this is an imperfect novel, as Geismar claims it is, it is not for the reasons he says but rather because its commitment to a queer form is fractured, its loyalties divided, its future promise at this point uncertain.

How can we account for such internal strife in *The Tragic Muse*? First, there is the hot-button topic of James's response to what is by now his fairly obvious homoerotic inclination. For generations scholars were eager and willing to turn a blind eye to or even manufacture elaborate theories so as to keep the master free from the stain of homosexuality. Most often these critics went the route of arguing for James's celibacy, a convenient excuse that solved the problem not only of the striking homoerotic elements

of some of his texts but also the embarrassing biographical fact of his confirmed bachelorhood. These arguments ranged from the relatively mild but still necessarily pathologizing claims of F.R. Leavis: “it should be generally agreed that something went wrong with his development” to the hateful and panicked embrace by many of James’s famous “obscure hurt,” Leon Edel going so far as to disseminate the outlandish speculation that James’s penis was burned off in an accident at a young age – better to castrate the boy than humiliate the master.¹⁷⁴ And when critics did begin to allow James to take the first tentative steps out of the closet they still frequently did so in a defensive manner, shielding him from any *actual* same-sex attraction or behavior as in this estimation: “James did renounce for good and all without having had much of a taste of what he was renouncing and ... had he not renounced he would have been a homosexual.”¹⁷⁵

All but the most stubbornly unwilling critics today would agree that James was neither straight nor desireless nor even, though this would be the contentious part, sexless. Yet as Hugh Stevens points out, “there is in James ... a straightforward (and easily documented) desire to conform to public standards of acceptability, to ease the reception of his novels (he abhorred the scandal surrounding Wilde and Hardy, for example).”¹⁷⁶ In spite of that speculated desire to conform James remained a sharp critic of the prices that conformity extracts from those it constrains, especially when it comes to sexuality. James’s “The Author of ‘Beltraffio’” stands as one of his sharpest rejoinders to that conformity, a story that like *The Tragic Muse* is also a thorough meditation on the

¹⁷⁴ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1955), 161.

¹⁷⁵ Nicolas Buchele, “Renunciation in James’s Late Novels,” in *Henry James and Homo-Erotic Desire*, ed. John R. Bradley (New York: St. Martins, 1999), 140.

¹⁷⁶ Hugh Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

links between perversion and style. As part of James's anxious view on the cultural discourse on style and sexuality that was beginning to take shape around him and within him, *The Tragic Muse* is a decidedly more subtle and refined, if ultimately just as conflicted, take on the subject than in James's earlier treatment of it in "The Author of 'Beltraffio.'" Written just a few years before *The Tragic Muse* James's story displays a remarkably more savage attack on the cultural trend to read homosexuality in style even as it, like *The Tragic Muse*, remains ambivalent about the same-sex desire it represents between the narrator and his object of erotic curiosity, the eponymous novelist. The story itself is narrated by a zealous American partisan of writer Mark Ambient, who comes via letter of introduction to spend a weekend at the country home of Ambient and his wife, son and spinster sister. From the start the narrator's effusive enthusiasm for Ambient's work, and in particular the novel *Beltraffio*, is met with dismissive scorn by Ambient's wife Beatrice who repeatedly declares, "I don't read what he writes."¹⁷⁷ We learn from Ambient's sister Miss Ambient, moreover, that it is not mere ignorance or intellectual incapacity that motivates Beatrice Ambient's cold response to her husband's work but rather that "she does n't like his ideas. She does n't like them for the child. She thinks them undesirable."¹⁷⁸ As the story progresses, Beatrice's suspicion of Ambient's "ideas" and her disgust with "his writings most objectionable" drives her to deny medical attention to their critically ill young son Dolcino, resulting ultimately in the boy's untimely death.¹⁷⁹ Miss Ambient later explains to the horrified narrator that Beatrice's

¹⁷⁷ Henry James, "The Author of Beltraffio" (*The New York Edition of the Novels and Tales of Henry James*, 26 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Son's, 1907-1917], vol. 21), 19.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

actions were to her a hygienic measure: “she determined to rescue him – to prevent him from ever being touched.”¹⁸⁰

Once the initial shock of this gruesome infanticide wears off, we must critically ask what Beatrice finds so objectionable about her husbands “ideas,” what could in essence drive a mother to kill her son. The reader is never exactly privy to the content of Ambient’s books but from the discussions on literary method that Ambient has with his admirer one can capture a good sense of why his wife finds those ideas so dangerous. It becomes apparent that what is such a hysteria-inducing threat about Mark Ambient is, like Gabriel Nash, his aestheticist preoccupation with style. In the opening pages of the story, for instance, the narrator singles that preoccupation out as evidence that “the man who drew those characters and wrote that style understood what he saw and knew what he was doing,” suggesting that perhaps the most characteristic feature of Ambient’s work is not its commitment to some intrinsically immoral or politically objectionable subject matter but rather something remarkable about its style.¹⁸¹ The narrator continues to stress this point when he reports that,

This was the taken stand of the artist to whom every manifestation of human energy was a thrilling spectacle and who felt for ever the desire to resolve his experience of life into a literary form. On that high head of the passion for form – the attempt at perfection, the quest for which was to his mind the real search for the holy grail – he said the most interesting, the most inspiring things.¹⁸²

Beyond merely having an extreme dedication to form (“style”) the story presents that stylistic preoccupation as evidence of a deeper stigmatizing tendency. For instance, though Ambient expounds at length on the aesthetic virtues of “literary form,” he nonetheless has “in his books . . . uttered but half his thought, and that what he kept back

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸² Ibid., 30.

– from motives [the narrator] deplored when [he] made them out later – was the finer, and braver part.”¹⁸³ Ambient’s aesthetic manifesto, then, exceeds even the studied excellence of his published writings. The narrator’s words suggest that Ambient’s dedication to style is in theory absolute but that “at bottom the poor fellow, disinterested to his finger-tips and regarding imperfection not only as an aesthetic but quite also as a social crime, had an extreme dread of scandal.”¹⁸⁴ Though stylistic perfection is of the utmost importance to Ambient, the scandal that style might provoke among his readers curtails the lengths to which he is willing to go to put that aesthetic theory into practice.

The sort of scandal Ambient’s style is liable to incite is hinted at by the sudden eroticization of discussions between the two men. The narrator initiates this trend, suggesting to Ambient that the latter’s artistic goal is “to stick your shaft deep and polish the plate through which people look into it – that’s what your work consists of.”¹⁸⁵ This rather strange description of the writing process combines the sexually prurient imagining of Ambient sinking his shaft deep together with a voyeuristic rendering of style as the process of making that sexual act transparent to the audience. In other words, style is conceived here as that thing that makes visible to every reader exactly where and how one sinks one’s shaft – a decidedly phallogocentric conception of the artistic process to be sure – and that is both its tremendous value and the reason it instills in Ambient, as with James, such “an extreme dread of scandal.”

The narrator is not the only one to perceive style in this way as Miss Ambient also proves herself to be a keen observer, freed from the world of socio-sexual exchange as she is, of how style and sexuality work together. “I’m intensely sensitive to form,” she

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 43.

says. “But sometimes I draw back don’t you see what I mean?”¹⁸⁶ Miss Ambient’s position as a spinster seems to make her both unusually perceptive and unusually free to speak. Passed by, as it were, by the chance of married life somehow attunes her to form, style, and also of course to sexuality. Miss Ambient, after all, delicately interrogates the narrator, “Do you also write then? And in the same style as my brother? And do you like that style? And do people appreciate it in America?”¹⁸⁷ With these questions she feels out the narrator – his answers are pointedly omitted – asking in a roundabout but very telling way if his “style” is the same as her brother’s. Her coy entreaties here are matched by her assertion that “poor Mark does n’t make love to other people either. You might think he would, but I assure you he does n’t.”¹⁸⁸ Miss Ambient’s again knowing suggestion here, especially in her carefully worded explanation that Mark isn’t sleeping with “other *people*” confirms our suspicions through its very denial. Both the narrator and reader might expect that Mark would stray given that he is, as the narrator puts it, “mismatched,” but the gender-neutral selection his sister uses is clearly meant to put everyone in the know on the same page. Miss Ambient as a “modern” woman, one we might otherwise scorn because of her “failure” to achieve conventional heterosexual union – “Miss Ambient was a restless romantic disappointed spinster” – comes out herself in the story as perhaps the most sexually knowing, or at least the one most willing to talk about the open secret of Ambient’s sexuality. And though the narrator “was never more than half to penetrate her motives and mysteries,” Ambient’s sister reiterates James’s familiar terror of the rapidly crystallizing link between style and

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 38.

homosexuality.¹⁸⁹ This description of Mrs. Ambient's fear of Mark's style should sound very familiar: "she has a dread of my brother's influence on the child – on the formation of his character, his 'ideals,' poor little brat, his principles. It's as if it were a subtle poison or contagion – something that would rub off on his tender sensibility when his father kisses him or holds him on his knee."¹⁹⁰ Shades of Gabriel Nash. The threat of contagion, then, forms the key point upon which the climax of the tale turns, a pivot that might not be immediately obvious to all but which intimates to those in the know a wider trend in Anglo-American literary culture. As Kevin Ohi points out, "the wife's concern that Ambient's writing might corrupt the young could be read to index, in a more or less oblique way, the intimations of homosexuality that would have clung, for members of James's circle as perhaps for a wider English audience, to Symonds."¹⁹¹

Critics have, of course, long recognized the homoeroticism that saturates "The Author of 'Beltraffio.'" Freedman perhaps puts it best by historically contextualizing the tale, seeing in it a reflection of James's conflicted relationship to John Addington Symonds, upon whom Mark Ambient seems to be at least partly modeled:

James evinced equal measures of fascination and disturbance with J.A. Symonds's defenses of male-male love; and James's ambivalence is inscribed into his story *The Author of Beltraffio*, which inflates gossip about Symonds's alienation from his horrified wife, pained by her husband's frank acknowledgment of his sexual inclinations, into a tale of Gothic horror in which a mother lets her child die rather than grow up with a homosexual father.¹⁹²

Freedman, by situating the tale within the determining pull of the history of aestheticism, with its long ties to homoeroticism, usefully illuminates one strand of influence on James's writing. It is important, however, not to discount the other important, more

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 38.

¹⁹¹ Kevin Ohi, "The Author of 'Beltraffio': The Exquisite Boy and Henry James's Equivocal Aestheticism." *ELH* 72.3 (2005): 747-67, 749.

¹⁹² Freedman, 172.

literary component of Ambient's crime in his wife's eyes. For it is not the whole story, as Freedman says, that Mrs. Ambient doesn't want her son to grow up with a homosexual father, though that is of course part of it. Ambient himself, for example, points out that "she thinks me at any rate no better than an ancient Greek," a reference not only to his non-Christian values but also to the sexual act that would to a man of James's time – and to many still does – characterize the men of that culture.¹⁹³ What the story reiterates time and again is that what strikes genuine terror into Mrs. Ambient is her husband's writing, and in particular his style; she is horrified by the thought that some day her son will read his father's stories – "we must simply tell him they're not intended for small boys," Ambient helpfully offers – and know without a doubt that his father is a fag.¹⁹⁴ To Mrs. Ambient the proposition is too obscene, worth essentially killing for. What I mean to stress, then, is James's awareness of a culture that could produce a mother, albeit a fictional one, who would rather kill her son than let him bear witness to his father's perverted style. What the story represents, and the reason that it is important to our larger understanding of what is going on in *The Tragic Muse*, is that it shows us in a rather unfiltered way why James understands the coupling of style and sexuality to be under such high stakes. Whereas in *The Tragic Muse* the pull to style and the homosexual identity that move connote function under the auspices of family disappointment, in "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" James gives us the naked truth – the genocidal reaction of a culture that thinks it knows exactly what sort of person is attracted to style and isn't

¹⁹³ A student of mine recently made this attitude perfectly clear by authoritatively describing the culture of the ancient Greeks as being one in which "the guys were all doing each other," an historically misguided and frankly rather unappetizing proposition. See also David Halperin's discussion in the opening pages of *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* of the impression of ancient Greek life as imagined in Forster's *Maurice*. David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁹⁴ James, "The Author of Beltraffio," 45.

afraid to go to virtually any lengths and to accept virtually any measure of collateral damage to stop that predilection from spreading. While Ohi argues that “James’s verifiable knowledge is perhaps less relevant than the implicit cultural link between aestheticism and sociosexual nonconformity that, implicit in 1884, was cemented and made explicit by the Wilde trials,” it is hard to argue given its prominence in both “The Author of ‘Beltraffio’” and *The Tragic Muse* that James was not only verifiably aware but actively intervening where he could to critique the “implicit cultural link” between style and homosexuality. In this tale, though, he would only go so far as to paint a stinging portrait of the class of people – “so religious and so tremendously moral” – that stand ready to discharge their cultural duty to do the stylish so much harm.¹⁹⁵

If we take the gothic story in general to often function as a kind of caricature of the crises that unsettle a given culture, James’s subsequent effort at exploring the sexual circulation of style is the more measured and nuanced but no less fraught work of *The Tragic Muse*. In that novel we find the graphic dramatization of “The Author of ‘Beltraffio’” replaced with a less overtly panicked but still restrained representation of sexuality and style. For instance, gone is the fanatically murderous mother of “Beltraffio,” replaced this time with a more modern, less morally inflexible mother whose motives express outward social piety but really depend on a thirst for personal material comfort. Dissolved as well is the salaciously charged mentorship of the narrator and Mark Ambient, leaving instead the push/pull, attraction/negation couple of Dormer and Nash. Finally there is the ramification of style itself. In “Beltraffio” a personal obsession is always threatened with a public or semi-public exposure that will ultimately bring calamity down on itself and even those around it; in *The Tragic Muse* it is no less

¹⁹⁵ James, “The Author of Beltraffio,” 39.

psychically fraught but its discovery, while it may mean social ruination is unlikely to leave any actual bodies in its wake. What I mean to suggest by drawing these parallels is not that James was telling the same story twice or that *The Tragic Muse* is a kind of mature revision of a child's horror story; certainly it would be wrong to call "Beltraffio" unsophisticated. Rather, what these two texts demonstrate through their similar preoccupations is James's working through over a period of years the question of style. In the earlier text style and same-sex desire (which function as more or less one and the same) are spaces of excess and abjection, cast out of the respectable, bourgeois family unit and expressible only under the aegis of certain suspect and discredited zones of disreputable privacy: either in the queer space of the aficionado and the celebrity or in the confidence of the gossipy, pruriently interested old maid. *The Tragic Muse*, in contrast, attempts to recuperate and to nurture the dyad style/homoerotic desire in the course of Nick Dormer's long struggle with his vocational and sexual identity in a way that doesn't seem possible in the earlier text. As I argue, however, even that novel hastily casts doubt on the project of recuperation upon which it had embarked, pessimistically concluding that the hope for artistic and sexual liberation it tries to make possible for Nick is probably untenable. F.R. Leavis says of James that "essentially he was in quest of an ideal society, an ideal civilization. And English society, he had to recognize as he lived into it, could not after all offer him any sustaining approximation to his ideal. Still less, he knew, could America. So we find him developing into something like a paradoxical kind of recluse, a recluse living socially in the midst of society."¹⁹⁶ Leavis's rather bleak assessment of James's idealism aside, the sense of his claim has generally seemed correct. These two texts register James's dissatisfaction and finally disappointment with

¹⁹⁶ Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 163.

trying to resolve the problem of style as a site at which one can experience the erotic self. He finds, as Gabriel Nash does, that style is always prone to mark one as an excessively sexual subject, a prospect that James seems to have been extremely skittish about. His later response, though, is not to withdraw, as Leavis suggests, into a kind of reclusive living death. Whereas Nash had retired from the world of writers in total frustration, James takes a surprising turn in what Leavis calls “his queer development” and forges ahead, putting aside style in the thematic register and re-investing in form to create the most dramatically eccentric style of his career.¹⁹⁷

I turn now in the final section of this chapter to James’s late novel *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). Its historical proximity to the two texts I have already discussed combined with its status as the first of the so-called major phase novels makes it a particularly rewarding place from which to view James’s stylistic response to the cultural discourse whose effects he had explored in “Beltraffio” and *The Tragic Muse*. Disappointed by his inability to satisfyingly resolve the crisis of style on a thematic or narrative level, James instead took the risky step of responding to it on the level of his own style, reapproaching a failed project not through plotting but by entering this fraught territory on its own terms. That is, if his usual technique of counterplotting did not allow him to deal with the discursive demands placed on style in its new infancy in the 1880’s, James responded not by giving up the project as Leavis would suggest but by trying a different formal tactic. Where a critic like Leavis sees in “the peculiarities of his later style” nothing but “complexities and exhausting delicacies and its incapacity for directness,” there is in fact a strategic – strategic in the sense popularized by Foucault – effort to deploy *style* as the answer to the dilemma posed by the link of style and

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 163.

homosexuality in the cultural imagination, that is, to create a radically disruptive style that would evade the sexual policing of stylistics that James saw growing around him and described in “Beltraffio” and *The Tragic Muse* through recourse to a style of negativity.¹⁹⁸ Leavis, echoing a common opinion of mid-20th century critics about James contends that “the style involves for him, registers as prevailing *in* him, a kind of attention that doesn’t favour his realizing his theme.” In contrast, in the novels of the major phase I contend that style *is* one of the great themes, that style and the sexuality it allegedly expresses are now for James strategically utilized to frustrate the prying eyes of sexual diagnosis by forging a manner of writing that would infuriate many with its ruthless insistence on the surface, on the signifier or letter of nothingness rather than the more conventional focus on plotting that had already failed him.

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the Jamesian style in *The Wings of the Dove* is its often remarked upon insistence on negativity, its almost obsessive insistence on describing the world of the novel by what it is not. This technique of course had long been a favorite of James’s to use in his characters’ dialogue, famous as his novels are for featuring long conversations that studiously avoid any mention of the characters’ motives. By the time of *The Wings of the Dove*, however, James had begun to extend that practice to the style as a whole, creating what Kristin King describes as a “reliance on indirection, circumlocution, definition by exclusion, double negation, and silence.”¹⁹⁹ We can see this practice at work in the early introduction of Merton Densher, one of the novel’s three “centers of consciousness”: “Merton Densher, who passed the best hours of each night at the office of his newspaper, had at times, during the day, to make up for it, a

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 166.

¹⁹⁹ Kristin King, “Ethereal Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*: The Transparent Heart of James’s Opaque Style.” *Henry James Review* 21 (Winter 2000): 1-13, 2.

sense, or at least an appearance, of leisure, in accordance with which he was not infrequently to be met in different parts of the town at moments when men of business are hidden from the public eye.”²⁰⁰ What strikes one immediately about this passage, of course, is that it is “passive, tentative, and self-postponing”; in other words, it begins in declarative fashion by suggesting that it will provide a straightforward description of the man whose name is introduced at the sentence’s start.²⁰¹ But it immediately undercuts that expectation by diverting the narrative thrust into a potentially endless series of syntactical tributaries or cul-de-sacs. The sentence draws back, hesitates, or willfully refuses the simple narrative logic of description in favor of its own exhibitionistically frustrating embroidery. With each successive clause the sentence holds out to the reader the satisfying promise that it will resolve the ambiguity that it in turn only deepens rather than abbreviates with every additional clause before finally discharging that meaning that it so closely guards in a final expulsion: “in accordance with which he was not infrequently to be met in different parts of the town at moments when men of business are hidden from the public eye.” In addition to the sentence’s syntactical complexity, though, the text also relies on a strategy of stylistic exclusion or definition through negativity. Notice, for example, the text’s refusal to pin down the details of Densher’s existence, describing him instead as a man who “had at times, during the day” been out and about but going no further to narrow its specificity than to say it is “not

²⁰⁰ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 2003), 46. All further references are to this edition and will be given by page numbers in the text.

²⁰¹ King argues that “this obfuscating style, which some have argued enacts James’s shy retreat from unappreciative markets and inattentive readers, also creates a kind of literary exhibitionism.” I endorse King’s reading here but I also want to emphasize my skepticism of her notion of passivity in the language quoted above, especially as that term has a long and infamous relationship with the negative connotations of male homosexuality. I do agree that the language is tentative and careful but it is important to distinguish that caution from what might come too close to indicting James for effeminacy or sexual passivity. King, “Ethereal Milly Theale,” 2.

infrequently.” Moreover, Densher has “a sense, or at least an appearance, of leisure,” but the reader does not know in what that “sense” consists, nor if it is a “sense” or an “appearance” of leisure, nor even what that distinction means. Together these techniques produce *The Wings of the Dove*’s characteristically opaque and often frustrating style, what Sedgwick describes as one that “presents the reader of the beginning of the sentence a blankly baffling, ‘closed’ grammatical façade, which yet as one arduously rounds a turn of the sentence will suddenly open out into a clear, unobstructed, and iron-strong grammatical pathway of meaning.”²⁰²

If the grammatical complexity at the sentence level is eventually resolved into a grammatical pathway of meaning at the end, however, that meaning is still more often than not rendered through negativity. For instance, the narrator, remarking on the undecidability of Densher’s appearance, notes that “distinctly he was a man either with nothing at all to do or with ever so much to think about; and it was not to be denied that the impression he might often thus easily make had the effect of causing the burden of proof in certain directions to rest on him. It was a little the fault of his aspect, his personal marks, which made it almost impossible to name his profession” (46). I want to draw attention to the narrative strangeness of this description, especially the way that its pronouncements always just slip away from narrative certainty. For instance, Densher is “a man *either* with nothing at all to do *or* with ever so much to think about,” a statement that as King says “evades responsibility” for decision and that even as it presents two possibilities still wants to go no further than “nothing at all” or “ever so much.” That abdication of narrative responsibility pervades this description, asserting confidently that “it was not to be denied” that Densher’s impression uncertainly “might often” have an

²⁰² Sedgwick, “Is the Rectum Straight?”, 102.

effect. And it was only “a little the fault of his aspect” that makes it “almost impossible” to discover his occupation, a handy turn of phrase that assigns responsibility to Densher’s “personal marks”, but only “a little”, and with indeterminate (“almost impossible”) consequences.

If the Jamesian style is tough to scratch beneath in passages like the ones I have discussed so far, it only gets more complicated. In this final passage about Densher that I will discuss, we witness the full force of Jamesian style unleashed in an astonishing escape act of meaning:

He was a longish, leanish, fairish young Englishman, not unamenable, on certain sides, to classification--as for instance by being a gentleman, by being rather specifically one of the educated, one of the generally sound and generally civil; yet, though to that degree neither extraordinary nor abnormal, he would have failed to play straight into an observer's hands. He was young for the House of Commons, he was loose for the Army. He was refined, as might have been said, for the City and, quite apart from the cut of his cloth, sceptical, it might have been felt, for the Church. On the other hand he was credulous for diplomacy, or perhaps even for science, while he was perhaps at the same time too much in his mere senses for poetry and yet too little in them for art. You would have got fairly near him by making out in his eyes the potential recognition of ideas; but you would have quite fallen away again on the question of the ideas themselves. The difficulty with Densher was that he looked vague without looking weak--idle without looking empty (46).

As before the description starts out simply enough with a physical portrait of Densher that depicts him as rather middling in all things, “longish, leanish, fairish.” The passage quickly shifts, however, into its regular mode of negativity in insisting that Densher is “not unamenable,” meaning presumably either amenable or at least indifferent, “on certain sides,” whatever those might be, “to classification,” of what sort we aren’t really sure. What follows is a litany of things that Densher is not, as the stylistic method of the novel is writ large. For instance, Densher is “neither extraordinary nor abnormal” and hence he remains an elusive character. His qualities make him seem, according to the narrator, unfit for any proper post or even environment. “[Y]oung for the House of Commons” and “loose for the Army,” he is also “refined, as might have been said, for the

City” as well as “skeptical, it might have been felt, for the Church.” We should notice especially how the stylistic negativity goes into overdrive, emphasizing ambiguity not only through its insistence on where Densher does not fit but simultaneously casting suspicion on even that speculation of ill-fittingness with its relentless “mights” and later “perhapses.” For example, Densher “was credulous for diplomacy, or perhaps even for science, while he was perhaps at the same time too much in his mere senses for poetry and yet too little in them for art.” There are literally dozens of instances of this technique in the passage I have been discussing but the crucial point is that it all adds up to the sense that, just as the narrator claims, Densher “would have failed to play straight into an observer’s hands.” Yet it is not merely because his physical nature appears so vague that observers fail to place Densher. The style in fact ruthlessly insists on this point; it makes it a fact of the textuality of *The Wings of the Dove* that everyone and everything fails to play into the reader’s hands. The novel as a whole is an experiment in stylistic elusiveness, a long and difficult text that is always at least one and often several steps ahead of the foreclosure of meaning and the reader’s grasp. Just as our hands seem to have caught definite meaning they close finally around nothing. For a description like this one – and admittedly this is one of the more hyperbolic but certainly not unrepresentative examples from which I could have drawn any number – has told very little that is definite about Merton Densher. Perhaps the one iron-clad fact comes at the start – he is an Englishman. But everything else is like a smoke-ring, at first glance solid, coherent, textural and dense that as one stares begins to unravel itself and drift away into nothingness. It is a stunning narrative experience that at once partakes of an excessive, often infuriating style that retains for its author a certain kind of plausible deniability

about everything it might be said to represent. If it is true, after all, that the novel brazenly exhibits its syntactical invention and its annulling style of narration, it at the same time reserves with all its “mights” that that style might mean nothing at all about its author.

While I have focused my attention here to one brief section in the novel, any point really might have served just as well. Late in the novel the narrator reports on Densher’s realization about his relationship with Milly Theale that “he hadn’t only never been near the facts of her condition – which counted so as a blessing for him; he hadn’t only, with all the world, an impenetrable ring fence, within which there reigned a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements, all strained to breaking” (350). While the passage of course repeats the stylistic mode of the novel it also is a fitting description of the state of the novel’s project, a project based on “a kind of expensive vagueness” full of “beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements” that create both the textual difficulty of the novel and its tremendous aesthetic value. Yet that project also functions as “an impenetrable ring fence,” an exclusionary device that we can admire for its beauty but that also keeps its author safe inside and its reader at a safe and safely disempowered distance. It is this authorial disarmament, this stylistic neutralization, that James activates in response to the seemingly inescapable bind that he confronted – and lost to – earlier in his career. For if James could not plot his way out of his culture’s pronouncement that style and homosexuality are virtually one and the same, he could invent a negative style that would steal from the reader’s grasp any ability to apply that same inescapable logic to him. In other words, if James determined he could not argue his way out of the sexually

stigmatizing connotations of style (one reason, in fact, he may have decided to end his novel writing career with *The Tragic Muse*), with *The Wings of the Dove* he discovered that he could do the next best thing – stylistically foil the blame game before it has a chance to ensnare him by disappearing behind a smokescreen of expensive vagueness.

It is a commonplace, of course, to emphasize the extreme stylistic difficulty of the novels of the major phase. James's earliest critics had argued this point. Writing in 1912, one suggests that "even the most ardent admirers of Mr. James to-day will, I think, admit that they have to work at times to grasp his meaning" since "his style *has* become more involved and less clear."²⁰³ Following a familiar line of thinking, this same critic, Clara McIntyre, indicts James's late career shift of style as a suspect enterprise for which she cannot completely account:

Mr. James's style – that is, the later style, is certainly not unobtrusive; and I think only the most extreme of his supporters would affirm that the increase in obtrusiveness has meant a gain in sense and vigor. If, as some of them seem to think, he *must* write in this way to express the windings of his thought, it would seem to the uninitiated that there must be something wrong with the thought.²⁰⁴

McIntyre's critique rests on an objection to what she views as an over-complication that obfuscates the sense of James's meaning for his readers. Yet it is worth drawing attention to how she collapses back exactly into the diagnostic mode of which James has been so critical in *The Tragic Muse* and "Beltraffio," especially in her claim that style reveals "that there must be something wrong with the thought," that the corruption of substance is betrayed by an extremity of style. And as we have already seen, it would be obvious to many in James's circle if not the wider reading public what sort of corruption – sexual deviance – is likely at fault with that thought.

²⁰³ Clara F. McIntyre, "The Later Manner of Mr. Henry James." *PMLA* 27.3 (1912), 354.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 370.

In opposition to this unsurprisingly normative reading of James I posit a counter-reading that draws for its inspiration on another, more recent theorist and proponent of literary style. In *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, D.A. Miller argues that Barthes, while he very rarely writes about homosexuality openly in his books nonetheless was also often writing about the gay experience generally in ways that are not always obviously legible. In an astonishing sequence, Miller autobiographically describes his own preparations for his first trip to Japan, a trip that he explains he thought of as modeled in some ways on Barthes's own journey there as recounted in *Empire of Signs*. Miller says he readied himself for the trip by getting equipped to explore "gay Tokyo": buying a gay guidebook to the city, learning the lay of the gay land in advance, and making sure he possessed a working understanding of some Japanese keywords he thought he would need (cock, rubber, type). Miller recalls that upon a first reading he found Barthes's account of his Japanese experience "impoverished," as not containing the same sorts of preoccupations he as an out gay man found himself busied with, and that the book depicted Barthes as "the pathetic picture of 'the homosexual' (for once the sterilized, sterilizing term was apt) who in fact had no sexuality, in any sense that counted had no sex."²⁰⁵ Miller's story takes a truly remarkable turn, though, when he returns to *Empire of Signs*, his vacation preparations complete, only to discover that he could now recognize what he previously could not discern, that "Barthes, in writing of those impromptu drawings by means of which the inhabitants of Tokyo give directions to strangers, illustrated the phenomenon with a sketch map of the same area of Shinjuku Ni-chome I had just committed to memory."²⁰⁶ Miller reads this revelation as evidence that Barthes had indeed been all

²⁰⁵ D.A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1992), 5.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

along, even when he seemed most to be neglecting any mention of homosexuality, producing a wholly different, heretofore illegible kind of gay *écriture*, a point made surprisingly, delightfully evident in our recognition of Barthes's cartographical familiarity with Miller's own fantasmatically anticipated cruising spots.

According to Miller, parsing Barthes's use of gay writing is no simple task of uncovering these moments, of discerning what we might call the gay subtext – and hence the supposedly hidden and “authentic” gay subjectivity – of the work. As Miller says, “however intimately Barthes's writing proved its connection with gay sexuality, the link was so discreet that it seemed to emerge only in the coy or hapless intermittences of what under the circumstances I could hardly pretend to reduce to just his repression.”²⁰⁷ And we might think something similar of Henry James, a writer who often in the margins of his works acknowledged gay sexuality in the world but whose refusal to ensure that writing with a consistent, coherent and readily legible authorial sexuality has almost entirely been understood as a matter of his own repression. Even when it has not been taken that way, often it has been subject to the same sort of psychological expertise that, appropriating the benevolent guise of a “helping profession,” removes the scarlet letter of repression but leaves the author still a victim of his own immodest and shameful psychology. What if, however, we were to afford James the same sort of good faith denial of the easy diagnosis of repression that Miller affords to Barthes? In other words, what if we were to read James's late work, especially as typified by *The Wings of the Dove*, not as being the product of enslavement to homosexual desire but as the work of the sort of active, experientially open agent that, as Posnock argues in *The Trail of Curiosity*, James is? And also, what if we took this approach specifically with regard to

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 6.

Jamesian style, seeing it not as the failure Leavis argues for but as an active intervention on James's part into the aesthetic and ideological problem endemic to stylistics that James understood as resolvable not through plotting, as "The Author of 'Beltraffio'" and *The Tragic Muse* suggest, but only at the level of style?

Miller of course worries about his own culpability in such a maneuver, cautiously trying not to trace every textual mark to a definite sexual subject but also noting that,

Even when not spoken in this writing, homosexuality does not fail to be spoken any the less. On the contrary, though seldom a topic, it comes to inflect any topic, no matter how remote, through the operation of a means comparable, even continuous with that inexhaustible fountain of revelation popularly known (in fear, scorn, or love) as a *gay voice*.²⁰⁸

James, I would argue, in *The Wings of the Dove* partakes of something comparable to what will come to be known as gay style, as "gay voice," but I at the same time resist ascribing his participation in this mode to any specific kind of sexual orientation. To be more specific, I suggest not that we, as has so often been the case with James studies in the last two decades, continue to try to reveal the "real" James, the supposedly repressed and pathetic closet-case, but instead that we should try to see James's text as utilizing a technique that can be of great value for queer critique without our having to ascribe an authorial sexuality to the author who produced it. Just as Miller is hesitant to "out" Barthes in the sense popularized by proponents of the controversial tactic of "outing" public figures, so too must we resist "outing" James, of trying to show that we have discovered the last piece of evidence that will finally convict him of the homosexuality we have for a long time assumed we should find there. Rather, I mean something more along the lines of Miller's hope to bring out Barthes in much the same way a scarf brings out one's complexion. So too can we "bring out" James's complexion, make it useful

²⁰⁸ Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, 25.

and new and recognize in it a powerful aesthetic critique that may or may not come from a gay man – and who can ever say anyway really? – but that is on the rhetorical “side” of those with the gay voice. It seems that James is speaking in his final novels in something like what Miller calls that gay voice, but we don’t need to nail him down in order to recognize how that gay voice is not speaking for James’s essence as an “inexhaustible fountain of revelation,” but instead how it might be speaking for us, a voice that critiques the heteronormative discourse of style through the very act of refusing to engage in its game.²⁰⁹

While James removes from his text those characters we find in “Beltraffio” and *The Tragic Muse* who seem representative of a burgeoning gay male identity in its tense relation to style, that move is partnered with an equal intensification of his own stylistic practice, a de-gayng at the level of content joined together with a complementary ratcheting up of style. Miller argues that “Barthes is engaged in the ambiguously twinned projects of at once sublimating gay content and undoing the sublimation in the practice of what he calls in the case of Proust ‘inversion – *as form*’”.²¹⁰ This is James’s project in the late works, an unfolding of style whose political stance is coextensive with that of the gay voice without being reducible to it. James’s late style, then, is inversion as form, inversion of the rules that say that style should be a transparent window onto the author’s sexual substance, a pleasurable rupture with the insistence of a normalizing literary criticism that always demands to be in control of the terms of stylistics and sexual discovery. It is an inversion of power with its stylistic negativity manifesting a politically oppositional assertion – “no.”

²⁰⁹ I am grateful to David Halperin for his discussion with me of many of the ideas in this paragraph, especially as they relate to the idea of “outing” versus “bringing out.”

²¹⁰ Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, 27.

In closing I would like to return to the epigraph with which this chapter begins. Leo Bersani's perceptive reading of *The Wings of the Dove* in *A Future for Astyanax* remains an indispensable tool for any understanding of Jamesian style. For Bersani the Jamesian project as realized in *The Wings of the Dove* is also the sort of oppositional practice I have argued for. Resisting the trope of repression and freeing sublimation from its troubling adjacency to it, James produces a style that, as Bersani says, "would no longer reveal character or refer to desires 'behind' words; it would be the unfolding of an improvised and never completed psychological design." This, I would argue, is one of James's most important contributions to the ongoing cultural reorganization of his time that forced together so violently the notions of style and of homosexuality. Resisting firmly the assumption, derived from Freud, that style is an unconscious *effect* or even a symptom of homosexuality, James inverts the process, making style into an unfolding but ultimately unforcloseable movement of pleasure. I mean, then, to explain my title as an attempt neither to call out James's alleged cowardice nor to indict any complex identity he may or may not have held but rather to generously and generatively bring his style into the community of queer critique. James, having witnessed, reflected upon, and written about the crisis in subjectivity provoked by this literary and historical moment did not go quietly but rather resisted as best he could with his own style of inversion as form. And this is what makes the Jamesian style so threatening to what McIntyre called "the uninitiated," for James himself, queer or not, was writing a queer critique.

Chapter IV

Gay Hemingway

If I started to write elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something, I found that I could cut that scrollwork or ornament out and throw it away and start with the first true simple declarative sentence I had written.

Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*

The assumption that “health” and mental soundness must be correlated with simplicity, ease of access, or the appeal to so-called “common sense” reinforces the hypostatization of the “natural” upon which homophobia relies and thus partakes of an ideological labor complicit with heterosexual supremacy.

Lee Edelman, *Homographesis*

About the most unlikely figure one could take up in thinking about the modern gay inflection of style is Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway, perhaps best known for the distinctive simplicity of his prose style — hard, lean, terse — has come to seem to many readers the most unimpeachable representative of an especially clear and particularly manly brand of literary realism, which is to say he often seems to many of us as far from gay as is possible. Driving that understanding is the tough to face fact that in spite of the proliferation in the last few decades of feminist and queer readings that have challenged many of the familiar ideas we have about Hemingway, one assumption — that his style is the gold standard of clarity — has remained almost entirely unshaken. His supporters and detractors alike have for that reason mostly found Hemingway’s sparse, declarative prose style inhospitable to a deconstruction-steeped literary criticism that privileges a multiplicity of meanings, precisely the sort of criticism upon which a large wing of queer

theory is built.²¹¹ Susan Beegel suggests that the popularity of deconstruction and its apparent incompatibility with the simplicity of Hemingway's style are major reasons for the general decline in Hemingway's critical reputation. That claim is, I think, true but also conceptually strange in that deconstruction often tends to privilege as the richest sites for reading those places in which language seems most straightforward, least complex, a point that would seem to make Hemingway an ideal subject for deconstructive reading. And yet if we simply look at the paucity of deconstructive approaches to Hemingway's work in what is one of the largest critical corpuses around we can see compelling evidence that we tend by and large to take Hemingway's transparency for granted. It is exactly, I will argue, this ideology-fuelled illusion of clarity, interwoven as it is in our culture with a triumphant ideal of straight male virtue, that plays so significant a role in grounding the Hemingway style, rightly or wrongly, as a paragon of heterosexuality.

For some critics, no doubt, the famous style, the simple cleanness, has made Hemingway a figure relegated to a mere historical footnote for his influence on American letters, and it has also made him, some would say, a writer not much worth reading any more. Consider his alleged propensity for misogyny, machismo, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism — just to tick off a few strikes against him in the popular imagination — and it is not hard to see how he could fall out of favor among contemporary critics, especially among those critics who see themselves as contributing to the formation of a progressive literary criticism. The Hemingway ethos just doesn't quite seem to fit any more. Hemingway, however, like probably no other single figure,

²¹¹ Susan Beegel, "The Critical Reputation of Ernest Hemingway," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway*, ed. Scott Donaldson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

startlingly throws into relief the process through which sexuality becomes bonded with literary style in the West today. He provides a rich example, standing as he does at the center of the man's man imaginary, of how style and sexuality are made one and what a resiliently homophobic culture stands to gain from keeping Hemingway's style immobilized, in the face of strong evidence to the contrary, in the domain of the heterosexual.

Putting aside the issue of Hemingway's unsure status within "high-brow" criticism for now, it is hard to dispute, like him or not, that he is a key figure in the history of literary style, one who has indelibly marked the ways we conceive of it overall. So influential has he been that Harold Bloom insists that Hemingway "sets the style of an age." Not simply a product of the 20th century but a dynamic influence on it in many ways, his revolutionary prose style arguably did more to reform American literature than perhaps any other modern writer.²¹² Often imitated, close even to duplicated, the Hemingway style stands as a model to which countless other writers have appealed, seeking to gain for themselves something of his legendary straightforwardness. In one critic's estimation Hemingway's "crisp and unpretentious prose changed the nature of American writing. Newspapers and magazines produced decades later bear clear indications of [his] transformation in style."²¹³ Perhaps Hemingway's greatest legacy, then, is that his prose, claiming as it does such a powerful hold over the popular and critical imagination, has certified its own claim to simplicity to such a degree that many subsequent texts have adopted its style as the most appropriate or genuine way to present

²¹² Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 5.

²¹³ James Nagel, "Brett and the Other Women in *The Sun Also Rises*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway*, ed. Scott Donaldson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 87.

clarity.²¹⁴ Such a broad legacy puts Hemingway, undoubtedly just as he'd like it, right in the thick of things, that is, at the center of the canon of style.

Much more surprising than the wide influence Hemingway has had in the last century is the relative uniformity of opinion about his writing, a popular and critical consensus that has established him as a figure whose writing embodies, or so the story goes, not only straightforward clarity but also the unmistakable signs of masculinity and heterosexuality. Though it would be unfair to say that no one has taken exception to the orthodox view of Hemingway, it is fair to say I think that there *is* an orthodox view, and a powerful one at that.²¹⁵ Rena Sanderson, for instance, explains that “from the very beginning of Hemingway’s career, critics made an issue of the ‘masculinity’ in his writings. His early stories won him critical praise for their stoic, understated, ‘masculine’ style and their graphic depiction of male pursuits and attitudes.”²¹⁶ This was true to such a degree that by 1934 *Vanity Fair* was calling Hemingway “America’s own literary cave man; hard-drinking, hard-fighting, hard-loving — all for art’s sake.”²¹⁷ These assessments reflect to a great degree what has come down to us as the “official” reading of Hemingway. Even after his death critics continued to read Hemingway in much the same way. “Hemingway’s emphasis on the masculine point of view is easily the most characteristic aspect of his writing,” one explains, especially with its “emphasis on virile

²¹⁴ Think of a contemporary example like James Ellroy, for instance, a writer who has so unabashedly adopted something like a latter-day version of Hemingwayesque that many readers would be hard-pressed to tell the difference: “They sent him to Dallas to kill a nigger pimp named Wendell Durfee. He wasn’t sure he would do it,” begins one such novel. James Ellroy, *The Cold Six Thousand* (New York: Vintage Press, 2002), 3.

²¹⁵ Mark Spilka’s *Hemingway’s Quarrel With Androgyny*, to cite just one important exception, did a great deal of work to resituate Hemingway in a more complex relationship to masculinity and heterosexuality than had previously been understood. Spilka’s book remains one of the most cited texts in Hemingway studies. Mark Spilka, *Hemingway’s Quarrel With Androgyny* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

²¹⁶ Rena Sanderson, “Hemingway and Gender History,” in *Cambridge Companion to Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Scott Donaldson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 170.

²¹⁷ “Vanity Fair’s own paper dolls – no. 5.” *Vanity Fair* (March 1934), 29.

and direct language.”²¹⁸ His prose is, we are all supposed to know, stoic, understated, unpretentious; it is in short the paradigm of heterosexual American masculinity, a style full of virility and directness, which are, or so this line of thinking goes, virtually one and the same.²¹⁹ What else could we expect from the man they call “Papa,” a nickname that captures within it a whole host of reassuringly gendered patriarchal relations to the author?

The most important yet usually overlooked assumption in this familiar story about Hemingway is that his writing is marked by masculinity and heterosexuality precisely because it is so simple and clear — virility and directness are part and parcel. Carl Eby argues that “Hemingway’s position in American literature surely owes more to his contribution as a literary stylist and technical innovator than it does to his expression of psychosexual issues.”²²⁰ I insist, to the contrary, that the two topics — Hemingway’s literary style on the one hand and the psychosexual issues raised by his texts on the other — are intimately related, are each part of the same problem. In other words, clarity and simplicity have become the tell-tale signifiers of heterosexuality and masculinity, standing in metonymically for them in a great many critical assessments. Hemingway

²¹⁸ Jackson J. Benson, *Hemingway: The Writer’s Art of Self-Defense* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 28.

²¹⁹ Carl Eby concedes that “it has become increasingly clear that Hemingway’s reign as the hairy-chested icon of American masculinity is coming to an end. To be sure, this message hasn’t yet filtered down to the general reading public. In the popular imagination, Ernest the monovocally masculine bullfight aficionado, boxer, hunter, deep-sea fisherman, and pitchman for Ballantine Ale and khaki pants still looms over the American literary horizon.” Eby emphasizes a crucial problem for Hemingway studies: while few reputable critics today would be willing to argue (publically at least) that a given piece of fiction is more or less masculine in its linguistic or rhetorical construction, that change has not yet trickled down to the people who buy and consume Hemingway’s books. In fact, Hemingway is one of the few remaining figures whose barrel-chested machismo has insulated him and his readers to a large degree from the destabilizing consequences of the linguistic turn in criticism. What is required is a more global cultural shift, a way of reconceiving our relation to style more generally so as to eliminate the still quite strongly fortified holdouts who persist in their phobic stance on style. Carl Eby, *Hemingway’s Fetishism: Psychoanalysis and the Mirror of Manhood* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1999), 3.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

himself encouraged such a reading, insisting in *Death in the Afternoon* that his “prose is architecture, not interior decoration.”²²¹ Such a pithy mandate in fact displays a testily self-conscious conflation of sexuality and literary style. Hemingway lauds a literary method based on physical exertion and construction, of masculine design and execution at the expense of the more faggotty pursuit of mere decorating. In contrast to his own “architectural” prose he situates the suspect practice of interior decoration, a lesser art devalued, so it seems, not only for its excessively ornamental emphasis but more importantly for the femininity and homosexuality it connotes — frivolity, overindulgence, and ultimately sexual passivity being that vocation’s consequences.²²² Real men, Hemingway suggests, don’t write decorative prose, nor do they decorate interiors. Critics often, even if unintentionally, tend to perpetuate the same intrinsically homophobic logic when they claim, as in the influential case of Carlos Baker, that Hemingway’s prose is “as clear as the observation. Nothing is ornamental. None but essential modifiers are called, and only a few are chosen. No similes, no metaphors, no literary allusions, no pathetic allusions, no balanced clauses.”²²³ To sum up, the prose style is direct, even, to recall the nomenclature of architecture, concrete. Baker’s seminal account of Hemingway’s prose is unquestionably meant as unqualified praise for his fine (and finely hardy) aesthetic achievement. It is important to notice, however, that descriptions like this hierarchize sexuality even as they seem to be doing nothing of the kind; they extol clarity and implicitly the heterosexual masculinity it connotes even as

²²¹ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), 191.

²²² Wayne Koestenbaum explains that “by the twentieth century, homosexuality already meant more than just sex acts or desires shared by bodies of the same gender. It implied a milieu and a personality — flamboyant, narcissistic, self-divided, grandiose, excessive, devoted to décor.” *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 85. On the importance of “connotation” to homosexual definition see D.A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” in *Inside/Out*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

²²³ Carlos Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 61.

they denigrate “ornamental” style — what Hemingway sometimes calls “the inability to state clearly” — as a gender and sexual transgression.²²⁴ Hemingway criticism in general is governed by a commanding but implicit sexual regime, one in which heterosexuality is repeatedly celebrated under the guise of clarity or simplicity even as homosexuality is relentlessly condemned under the sign of ornament or decoration.

If this standard version of the macho Hemingway has remained dominant, there are of course also less bombastically masculine and heterosexual Hemingways out there. But these alternative readings of Hemingway, multiplying as they have with the dissemination of feminist and queer theory, and especially with the posthumous publication of Hemingway’s extremely odd, gender bending novel *The Garden of Eden* (1986), still remain in the minority.²²⁵ Often these queer readings actually end up doing more harm than good to politically progressive criticism by relentlessly psychologizing the author, trying to show that Hemingway was “really” homosexual or “really” the product of an androgynous psyche who tried to overcompensate for his self-perceived shortcomings with an exaggerated masculinity in his life and his art.²²⁶ Take, for example, Georges-Michel Sarotte’s claim in *Like a Brother, Like a Lover*, that Hemingway is the clearest example in American literature of the sublimation of

²²⁴ Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, 54.

²²⁵ A bibliography of the major texts that treat Hemingway in dialogue with queer concerns might go something like this: Kenneth Lynn’s biography *Hemingway* was revolutionary, building much of its reading of Hemingway on his childhood cross-gender dress. Kenneth Lynn, *Hemingway* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). Mark Spilka builds on this idea, producing a cultural history of androgynous representation and arguing that Hemingway’s writing is part of his life-long struggle with androgyny. Mark Spilka, *Hemingway’s Quarrel With Androgyny* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes, *Hemingway’s Genders: Rereading the Hemingway Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Carl Eby, *Hemingway’s Fetishism: Psychoanalysis and the Mirror of Manhood* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1999); and Debra Moddelmog, *Reading Desire: In Pursuit of Ernest Hemingway* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

²²⁶ Such, at least, was Max Eastman’s opinion, that Hemingway created a literary style entirely from “false hair on the chest,” a “beard” of sorts signifying an insincere theatricalization of virility and heterosexuality. Cited in Thomas Strychacz, *Hemingway’s Theaters of Masculinity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

homosexuality.²²⁷ Or, more infamously, Kenneth Lynn suggests in his groundbreaking biography *Hemingway* that an infancy spent dressed as a girl-child had a significant and lasting influence on the adult Hemingway.²²⁸ Each of these readings, though valuable for their attempts to complicate or dispel the old myths about Hemingway, tend toward reductive, at times predictably Freudian attempts to queer Hemingway in ways that can be easily dismissed by detractors, both homophobic and gay-affirmative. Even Eby's painstaking psychoanalytic treatment of Hemingway's fetishism ultimately proves problematic in its attempt to provide a psychobiography of the author through a reading of his literary work. It should be obvious that I am extremely suspicious of any attempt to produce psychobiography, much less a sexual psychobiography, of any author based on his or her literary writings. Such a practice, though supposedly dead and gone, is as we can see from these examples still thriving in a variety of incarnations.²²⁹

All of this is not to say that certain psychological resources, and I have in mind psychoanalysis in particular, cannot be useful for appreciating Hemingway style without resorting to the questionable enterprise of psychobiography. Arguably the first attempt, after all, to queer Hemingway, though an attempt that perhaps today seems far less radical in light of some more recent interventions, is Philip Young's classic psychoanalytic study *Ernest Hemingway*.²³⁰ Hemingway, suspicious of psychoanalysis

²²⁷ Sarotte, to be clear, calls Hemingway an example of "(almost) *perfect sublimation of the homosexual instinct*," a formulation that leaves one to wonder just how much leftover homosexual instinct is bound to escape. Georges-Michel Sarotte, *Like a Brother, Like a Lover*, trans. Richard Miller (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978), 276.

²²⁸ Kenneth Lynn, *Hemingway* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

²²⁹ W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" is one of the most distinguished texts to lead in the direction away from psychobiography. Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" takes another important step.

²³⁰ Young's original 1952 study *Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Rinehart, 1952) was reissued with additional and revised material as *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1966).

from the start, initially sought to thwart the publication of Young's book with its psychoanalytic study of trauma by withholding the copyrights so as to prevent Young from publishing. Ultimately, of course, Hemingway did accede to the book's publication — generously, according to Young — though he apparently remained skeptical to the end about the study's thesis. "Wounds that do extensive bone and nerve damage," Hemingway opined to George Plimpton with characteristic glibness, "are not good for writers, nor for anybody else."²³¹ Young insists, though, that the central and distinguishing feature of Hemingway's writing — the psychic burden instituted by physical trauma — is understandable only because of the tools made available by the psychoanalytic method. The principle characteristic of the text for him is the haunting of that text by a traumatic wound, a biographical influence Young traces back to Hemingway's severe injury in Italy during the first World War. Young argues that this biographical incident, the trauma a young Hemingway experienced, creates a compulsive pattern in his work that is a "key to his personality." Still grappling with the psychic aftermath of that injury, Hemingway draws on the wound to form his art, making "not the trauma but the use to which he put it which counts; he harnessed it, and transformed it to art."²³² In this reading psychic injury hovers somewhere between compulsive repetition and artistic mastery as Hemingway is both unconsciously afflicted by the wound and yet also able to deliberately manipulate its effects in his work. Style thus becomes legible as the outlet for Hemingway's unique repetition compulsion in that "the strictly disciplined

²³¹ Quoted in Young, *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration*, 28.

²³² *Ibid.*, 171.

controls which he exerted over his hero and his ‘bad nerves’ are precise parallels to the strictly disciplined sentences he wrote.”²³³

While we should be suspicious of this appraisal as it dubiously emphasizes the repetition of content (the wounded hero) in Hemingway’s books as a negative consequence of disability, it is still an extremely valuable reading as one of the first and most sustained attempts to describe the author’s formal strategy as something other than the result of untarnished masculine discipline. Though Young’s negative understanding of disability is problematic in a number of ways, his work is nonetheless of special value for its brave effort to demonstrate that the idealized Hemingway’s claim to unequivocal heterosexual privilege is not quite so invulnerable after all. Although the reading does reflect some of the able-bodied prejudices of its time, most notably in its commitment to a medical model of “overcoming” disability, we should not too hastily dismiss Young’s legitimate critique of the still dominant belief in Hemingway’s masculine perfection. In fact, it is precisely through his re-imagining of style as a kind of prosthesis for disciplining a body out of control — a true innovation of his approach — that Young mounts the most effective challenge to that myth. The proposition may at first seem a counter-intuitive one: that great art is possible for Hemingway only because of his disability. Without an injury to “correct,” after all, Hemingway would not have required the strictly disciplined style that makes his art so remarkable; it is only as a consequence of disability that Hemingway is driven to create an illusion of invulnerability to mask it. Young understands style to play precisely that role, to act as “strictly disciplined controls” that straighten out both text and psyche as a means of compensating for

²³³ Ibid., 208.

disability, a story that is utterly alien to the prevailing conception of Hemingway's able-bodied and muscularly impervious style.²³⁴

Jake Barnes of *The Sun Also Rises* is the ideal avatar of Young's model, a hero whose disability and sexuality overlap exactly in his physical and psychological unmanning during the war. In Jake's case, moreover, the strict discipline of a controlled and simplistic style supports both a disabled body and an uncertain sexuality and relies on linguistic prosthesis to protect his self-presentation in the world. Ultimately, though, that prosthetic falters at times, as when Jake bursts into tears following his first meeting with Brett Ashley in the novel, at which point an hysterical outpouring is sealed up linguistically so as to head off the eruption of trauma: "I was thinking about Brett and my mind started jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry. Then after a while it was better and I lay in bed and listened to the heavy trams go by and way down the street, and then I went to sleep."²³⁵ The injury, ordinarily so well managed by prosthetic control, breaks loose for a moment, even as Jake as narrator quickly reigns it in and stifles his emotion with tight linguistic restraint.

²³⁴ In this line of thinking Young anticipates the later work of disability studies, especially the work of critics David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis*. Mitchell and Snyder call attention to "the prosthetics nature of all intellectual endeavor" in order to critique the pervasive presence of disability in literary representation as an object that serves to be either corrected (as in Hippolyte's clubfoot in *Madame Bovary*) or to be counter-posed against a normative body that relies upon the abnormal body as contrast. Mitchell and Snyder argue that "literary forms - - like disabled ones - are discordant in their unwillingness to replicate a more normative appearance. That which breaks with the conventions of desirability at any historical moment garners an unseemly attention for itself as the very product of its deviance." Hemingway as a formal innovator and disabled author is all the more remarkable in light of this tendency because *both* his stylistic weirdness and his disability have been occluded, both in the service of producing the discursive union of clarity and masculine heterosexuality. Recall, for instance, that Hemingway was kept out of the American army and became an ambulance driver for the Italians in the first place because of his poor vision - just the first of many corporeal and psychological factors that critics tend to acknowledge only to efface or to discursively "heal" in order to project the myth of Hemingway's impervious heterosexuality and unshakeable formal clarity "overcoming" them. Even his depression and suicide of later years can be seen in this vein as a final act of affirmative, heroic action. David T. Mitchell and Sharon I. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001, 9.

²³⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 39.

The style plays-down, as it does so frequently in Hemingway's work, what is being represented, or conspicuously *not* represented, namely that Jake has lost conscious control over himself. The style's chief function is to dampen with its apparent simplicity the dangerous explosion of Jake's unmanly sobbing, un-representing it only between sentences. The disciplined style in "then all of a sudden I started to cry" and "then after a while it was better," tames Jake's weakness and reasserts the hero's self-mastery, even if it is all a sham. Young's real value, then, is his suggestion that Hemingway style, which for Young is more or less the same thing as his hero's, is not the self-confident manifestation of macho, straight male control, but instead that Hemingway writes from a precarious, even histrionic position, on unsure footing that requires a fragile stylistic supplement to create the bold illusion of mastery.

This is all to say that what makes Young's thesis so intensely valuable for queer approaches to the study of Hemingway is not his by now tired trotting out of Freudian clichés about the psychic residues left behind by bodily injury.²³⁶ The reason queer theory needs to recognize Young is to appreciate that he was among the first to question with the resources of Freudian interrogation the heterosexual invulnerability of Hemingway style. In other words, though Young does it in a way we may ultimately find very hard to accept politically, what's really new here is that there might be quite a different way to understand Hemingway style's relation to sexuality and that this other way must surely not allow any easy one-to-one equivalence between Hemingway style and "straightness." Discounting the heterosexual mythos surrounding Hemingway style

²³⁶ Tobin Siebers has interpreted both the sources of these popular beliefs in Freud as well as examined their continued circulation and political relevance today. See Tobin Siebers, "Tender Organs, Narcissism, and Identity Politics," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002).

– the important work done here by Young – forms a crucial starting point for any queer reappraisal of Hemingway because at its most basic level, what Young is really saying is that Hemingway style only pretends to be straight in order to cover up the embarrassing fact of being bent. Surprisingly, however, even in a culture so hungry for and amenable to easy psychoanalytic explanations, Young’s serious objection to the pristine heterosexuality of Hemingway style doesn’t seem to have taken firm root.

Even with a history of such long-standing readings that challenge the traditional view of Hemingway it is still hard to shake the feeling that his famous style remains securely immunized against perversion in the minds of most readers. Debra Modellmog has argued persuasively that a variety of powerful cultural forces have converged to make exorcising that Hemingway especially difficult. “People have high stakes in circulating a particular image of Hemingway,” Modellmog says, “and in reading and teaching his work in a specific way.”²³⁷ In addition to the diffuse discursive forces of sexual normalization I describe in the introduction, Modellmog singles out capitalism’s interest in perpetuating a marketable “straight” Hemingway, useful not only for selling his books but also for the veritable advertising cottage industry that has sprung up around him, as one of the most influential fuels for the Hemingway mythos. The overdetermined cultivation of this version of Hemingway most certainly propels many defenses of his style against queer interlopers. As the most recent Scribner’s paperback proudly declaims, for example, Hemingway “was known for his tough, terse prose,” an assertion whose passive construction both suggests irrefutable certainty and conceals the

²³⁷ Debra A. Modellmog, *Reading Desire: In Pursuit of Ernest Hemingway* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

publisher's own hand in producing and disseminating that historical reading it purports merely to describe.²³⁸

Because of the strikingly resilient connection between Hemingway's sparse prose and the version of masculine heterosexuality that it supposedly reflects, I aim to unsettle that apparently settled conviction by trying to think Hemingway differently, to think him gay. The question that should immediately arise from such a proposition is, "What's gay about Hemingway?" Let me stress that I do not mean to imply anything at all about the historical personage Ernest Hemingway, least of all anything about his sexual subjectivity.²³⁹ Instead I am concerned with "Hemingway," the figure constructed by and through a whole series of cultural forces, one of the most important of which, it should be obvious by now, is a pervasive fear of the taint of homosexuality. These forces, in turn, shape how we experience and think about the literary artifacts left behind by the historical figure Ernest Hemingway. The fiction of the masculinity and heterosexuality of Hemingway's style, along with the positive valence of the terms most often used to describe it — lean, taut, tough, clean, clear, hard, unpretentious — is a reading I strenuously contest and is one that Young's analysis ought to have already begun to erode. That old reading, however, unfortunately still wields broad influence over what we think of when we think about literary "clarity" as a general concept. I attempt to defamiliarize Hemingway, refocusing the picture of him we thought we knew to show that Hemingway style has been anything but "clear," which is to say, "straight," all along,

²³⁸ Ernest Hemingway, *Ernest Hemingway: The Short Stories* (New York: Scribner's, 2003).

²³⁹ Other critics have already made this move, one about which, as I've said, I am highly skeptical. Philip Young in his pioneering *Ernest Hemingway* was the first to make a sustained link between Freudian psychoanalysis and Hemingway style. More recently, Ann Douglas has implied and Kenneth Lynn has claimed outright that Hemingway's style is directly related to the biographical fact that Hemingway was dressed as a girl by his mother. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

a move that will in turn expose the fiction of the innate connection between style and sexuality that it both partakes of and helps strengthen by example.

The aims here are larger, as these last remarks should suggest, than a simple reinterpretation of Hemingway as an individual writer. His writing forms a key node of influence in the genesis of the ideology of style, an ideology that is formed in great measure on presumptions about sexuality. To that end, Hemingway is an invaluable limit case for the theory of style I propose in the preceding chapters and he marks an important step in my larger project of investigating the sexual composition of the idea of style. For if it is true, as I believe, that style in our culture is habitually and ideologically coded as gay – and coded as such in a normalizing and punitive manner – where then does that leave us with a figure like Hemingway who seems to have virtually no style at all? I maintain that Hemingway, far from being an exception to the thesis I propose in chapters 1 and 2, in fact vigorously confirms its most unsettling claims. After all, Hemingway has come to be received, despite all evidence to the contrary, as the “clearest” of writers and hence the least stylish, i.e., the least gay. Even as early as 1932, however, Hemingway was already anxiously defining his work as a practice of masculine construction in contrast to the more revealingly dubious enterprise of “interior decoration,” a dismissive shorthand whose economy goes arm in arm with the efficiency of its sexual knowingness. I will show that what we have come to understand as Hemingway’s clear unstyle is actually highly idiosyncratic, highly *stylized*. And if Hemingway is an instance of a particularly mannered version of experimental modernism, rather than, say, an exponent of an especially “natural” brand of American literary realism, we will see that Hemingway style, as the conventional (and deeply troubling) wisdom about style

generally insists, would be as far from straight as they come. Moreover, in the general disavowal of perversion that is the masculine myth Hemingway helped cultivate about himself, the normalizing, mythic ideal of a natural, transparent style is hypostatized, making ready, as Lee Edelman convincingly argues in *Homographesis*, the fertile linguistic soil that homophobia requires to thrive.²⁴⁰ Finally, though we may endlessly debate the matter of Hemingway's own homophobia, ample evidence of which certainly exists, it will become apparent that Hemingway criticism as a body of work is profoundly marked by the ideological forces of homophobia and that this body of criticism in particular, even frequently under the banner of progressive politics, is itself often deeply homophobic in its indebtedness to a dangerously normalizing model of style.²⁴¹

My approach here is to focus primarily on the two texts that established Hemingway as a literary celebrity and that established the popular idea of what the famous style is: the short story collection *In Our Time* (1925) and Hemingway's first serious published novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). By looking closely at these two texts, I will show how Hemingway style's experimental perversion has been so profoundly misrecognized, with most readers placing it mistakenly under the auspices of clarity and simplicity. In particular, I propose that Hemingway style, what Susan Beegel calls the "craft of omission," is based on a method of excision that leaves gaps in the writing to be

²⁴⁰ Lee Edelman, *Homographesis* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

²⁴¹ See, for example, the entry for "Maricón" in the explanatory glossary of *Death in the Afternoon*. Hemingway writes:

A sodomite, nance, queen, fairy, fag, etc. They have these in Spain too, but I only know two of them among the forty-some matadors de toros. This is no guaranty [sic] that those interested parties who are continually proving that Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, etc., were fags would not be able to find more. Of the two, one is almost pathologically miserly, is lacking in valor but is very skillful and delicate with the cape, a sort of exterior decorator of bullfighting, and the other has a reputation for great valor and awkwardness and has been unable to save a peseta. In bullfighting circles the word is used as a term of opprobrium or ridicule or as an insult. There are many very, very funny Spanish fairy stories.

filled in by readerly desire.²⁴² During the writing process, Hemingway would cut away from a text, removing as much as possible from the bone so as to leave, so he believed, only the barest, most essential, truest parts behind.²⁴³ In contrast to the elaborate, Hemingway strove to “cut that scrollwork or ornament out and throw it away,” leaving behind an oftentimes curiously vacant text that would make the reader feel even more powerfully what was not there.²⁴⁴ However, the excision-method Hemingway employs consequently leaves his work, as in the weeping scene in *The Sun Also Rises*, especially vulnerable to the heterosexist usages by which it has frequently been appropriated. Because the method by design leaves gaps in the text, the cut (one is almost tempted to say castration) is bound by its very nature to incite the movement of desire. And in a culture that is so deeply frightened by homosexuality, it is not surprising that the desire most frequently called forth by Hemingway’s writing has been a desire that violently excludes the possibility of homosexuality and securely establishes the belief in its heterosexuality.

I should point out that I do not wish to argue that there are not parts of Hemingway’s writing that are fairly direct – parts that come close to what we could call, provisionally at least, objective or even un-mannered. More often than not, however, Hemingway uses these moments of direct description in juxtaposition with more complex or vague passages that rely on omission for their full effect. In this manner he mimics an unbroken stream of objectivity or an absence of personal style when in fact the text alternates between genuine clarity and disguised, idiosyncratic ambiguity. “Soldier’s Home,” the seventh story in *In Our Time*, is a case in point. The story concerns a

²⁴² Susan F. Beegel, *Hemingway’s Craft of Omission* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988).

²⁴³ I am indebted to Tobin Siebers for his suggestions and helpful discussion about these ideas.

²⁴⁴ Ernest Hemingway. *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Scribner, 1964), 12.

recently discharged young soldier, Harold Krebs, who after spending two years in Europe as a Marine during the first World War, has reluctantly returned to his family of origin in an Oklahoma small town. There Krebs spends his mostly quiet days and nights reflecting on his experiences during the war or on the prettiness of the local girls. The climax of the story occurs when Krebs reveals to his mother that he does not love her, causing her to burst into tears and pressuring him to retract his statement and disingenuously reverse his position. It is a story in which not much happens on the level of plot. And yet from the way the story is told, it is clear that Krebs has been deeply affected by his recent experiences as well as by his post-war return to his adolescent home and that, in the absence of any sign or system of values other than the arbitrary, infantilizing will of his parents, he is left to aimlessly wander the sleepy town, reading his newspaper and watching his sister play indoor baseball.

The story opens with an indisputably direct description of Krebs' life up until the war. It is classic Hemingway — short, uncomplicated sentences spell out just the facts. It follows precisely, in fact, Malcolm Bradbury's description of Hemingway's style in which "the universe and action described is sparse, so the words are limited; adjectives are cut to a considered few; causal connectives, similes and metaphors are reduced; the writing points always towards objects."²⁴⁵ We could probably not find a better instance than the beginning of "Soldier's Home":

Krebs went to the war from a Methodist college in Kansas. There is a picture which shows him among his fraternity brothers, all of them wearing exactly the same height and style collar. He enlisted in the Marines in 1917 and did not return to the United States until the second division returned from the Rhine in the summer of 1919.

There is a picture which shows him on the Rhine with two German girls and another corporal. Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms. The German girls are not beautiful. The Rhine does not show in the picture.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Malcolm Bradbury, "Style of Life, Style of Art" *The Hemingway Review* 1:2 (Spring 1982), 58-61.

²⁴⁶ Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925).

The mode is ekphrastic as the narrator describes two photographs, one showing Krebs with his fraternity brothers before the war and another with two German girls and a fellow soldier during the war. In this moment of ekphrasis, the exegesis of photographs stands in for a narrative that is represented by the presence of photographic evidence and yet entirely unspoken.²⁴⁷ The text offers the credentials of reliable objectivity – photographic proof, no less! – as a substitute for a narrative that can subsequently be omitted. In other words, we can “trust” the story because it is objectively testified to by the photos, and we can extrapolate the narrative of Krebs’ life from frat boy to roughneck. Even with the presence of these photos, however, there are signs of deep instability in meaning or value. The narrator, for instance, follows up the thumbnail biography of Krebs with a series of impressions positioned as facts, moments in which while the language seems to share a one-to-one correspondence with real things, it is instead signifying something deeply subjective, deeply insubstantial. First, “Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms,” a statement, relying as it does on perspective (they “look too big”), whose epistemological status is uncertain at best. Secondly, “The German girls are not beautiful,” another stereotypical Hemingway sentence, but one that even as it reads as objectively certain cannot but rely on subjective opinion. These examples demonstrate that transparency, or the exact equivalence of word to thing, is the alias of Hemingway’s writing; instead of the objective world, we have a text that operates *as if* it were clear, smuggling subjectivity and ambiguity in under a cloud of objective statement. Who is it, after all, who sees the uniforms as ill fitting? Who is it who thinks the German girls unattractive?

²⁴⁷ I wish to thank David Halperin for his discussion with me of the ideas in this paragraph and for his pointing out to me the instance of ekphrasis in the passage.

While critics have long maintained the validity of the famously objective and direct Hemingway style, in reality it utilizes a subtle form of strategic ambiguity that deceives us into seeing it as much more straightforward than it actually is. It performs, flaunts a mirage of straightness. We learn, for instance that for Krebs, “all of the times that had been able to make him feel cool and clear inside himself when he thought of them; the times so long back when he had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else, now lost their cool, valuable quality and then were lost themselves.”²⁴⁸ The text follows the familiar pattern of Hemingway style: the words are extremely simple, as is the sentiment. The simplicity of diction, however, once more disguises an absence — what is it, we must ask, over which Krebs is ruminating? The text never tells. Whatever it is that is “the only thing for a man to do ... when he might have done something else” (eat? sleep? masturbate?) is missing, hidden in a haze of “direct” but deliberately non-specific description. This is an obvious moment in which Hemingway style, as it so often does, foregrounds its own claim to objective, clear description — no fancy words, no metaphors, no allusions — as a red herring. We even get a definitive assertion — there is only but one “thing for a man to do.” In point of fact, however, quite a lot is not being said here in a way that misdirects our understanding by investing a stylized, subjective ambiguity with the aura of direct, unstyled objectivity.

It turns out therefore that the task of tracing the “direct” in Hemingway style is precisely at the same time the task of tracing indeterminacy. Richard K. Peterson defines the style as based on the mutually constitutive play of the direct and of the oblique.²⁴⁹ In

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Richard K. Peterson, *Hemingway: Direct and Oblique* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967).

response to this quality Peterson asks, “how much of Hemingway’s ‘objectivity,’ one wonders, is akin to stylized small talk about safe or unimportant topics, avoiding what is emotionally charged and suggesting it very obliquely?”²⁵⁰ That description would seem to admirably fit many of the most familiar Hemingway stories: “The Battler,” for instance, concerns a young Nick Adams who, after being thrown from a train for illegally boarding, stumbles across a menacing pair of drifters whose threat is implied through small talk rather than directly evidenced. It is the mysterious, unsettling, and often poignant interchapters to *In Our Time*, though, that best illustrate Hemingway’s blend of the direct and the indeterminate. The interchapters, originally published alone as *in our time* (1924) without the longer stories that were later to accompany them, have long puzzled critics with their non-sequitur sentiments and their unspecified relation to the longer stories they divide. The first of the interchapters alone could stand as a primer on Hemingway style:

Everybody was drunk. The whole battery was drunk going along the road in the dark. We were going to the Champagne. The lieutenant kept riding his horse out into the fields and saying to him, “I’m drunk, I tell you mon vieux. Oh, I am so soused.” We went along the road all night in the dark and the adjutant kept riding up alongside my kitchen and saying, “You must put it out. It is dangerous. It will be observed.” We were fifty kilometers from the front but the adjutant worried about the fire in my kitchen. It was funny going along that road. That was when I was a kitchen corporal.

The vignette perfectly blends the simplicity of direct description, “the whole battery was going along the road in the dark,” with the indeterminate, yet still directly depicted: “it was funny going along that road.” To call this passage unmannered would be to seriously misread it. The final line, in fact, is especially significant, beginning with a pronoun (“that”) that is itself remarkably indefinite. It is a sentence that gives the sense of absolute directness and yet it depends on the reader not assigning a definite value to the

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 61.

pronoun. Does “that” refer to the moment at which the adjutant worried about the fire?; is “that” the entirety of the journey to Champagne?; of the entire night?; or is “that” some longer period – a tour of duty perhaps? Looking closely, we notice that Hemingway gets away with being called totally clear even though the evidence is right before us that something a lot more complex, a citation of clarity in the service of an artificial, mannered style is being produced. Peterson explains that “the abundance of ‘objective’ detail substitutes for and vaguely suggests something else, some very strong but unmentioned feeling” and that the reader’s attention is “continually directed to everything and anything else — to the small detail, even to the trivial — while knowing all the time that there is something much more important in the background which is only hinted at.”²⁵¹ Indeed there is something particularly ominous about this scene that defuses what could be humorous about it — the drunk lieutenant talking to his horse — and makes it rather more tonally dark. Ultimately the passage raises more questions than it answers and yet Hemingway has succeeded, first in producing an illusion of clarity and second in creating a mood, a feeling of barely contained dread, evoking it through a very queer style that directly describes at an oblique angle.

The most systematic description of how Hemingway achieves this effect comes from his bullfighting book. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway talks at length about his craft and in detail about paring down his texts so as to maximize their effectiveness, their evocative potential. “If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about,” Hemingway explains, “he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-

²⁵¹ Ibid., 64.

eighth of its being above water.”²⁵² The concluding reference, of course, is to Hemingway’s famous iceberg principle, a metaphor he would return to time and again throughout his life. According to that theory, only one-eighth of Hemingway’s stories is visible on the surface of the text; the rest is submerged and yet “felt” by the reader through the strength of the writer’s prose. A notorious example is the much anthologized short story “Hills Like White Elephants,” in which a man and woman over very many cocktails resolve a troublesome accidental pregnancy that is never named outright. Hemingway omits the most objective fact — that the couple is quarreling over an abortion — so as to communicate the *feeling* of the events to the reader.

Journeying far beyond mere artistic preference, though, Hemingway casts his technique in terms of artistic competence, suggesting that his craft of omission gets closer to “true” feelings than other sorts of “overwritten” language:

If a man writes clearly enough any one can see if he fakes. If he mystifies to avoid a straight statement, which is very different from breaking so-called rules of syntax or grammar to make an effect which can be obtained in no other way, the writer takes a longer time to be known as a fake and other writers who are afflicted by the same necessity will praise him in their own defense. True mysticism should not be confused with incompetence in writing which seeks to mystify where there is no mystery but is really only the necessity to fake to cover lack of knowledge or the inability to state clearly. Mysticism implies a mystery and there are many mysteries; but incompetence is not one of them; nor is overwritten journalism made literature by the injection of a false epic quality.²⁵³

It is worth noting the whole cluster of oppositions that Hemingway deploys as measures in his aesthetic theory. Above all, Hemingway values the “straight statement,” a phrase that should come as no surprise to us given that he conceives, as we’ve seen, of the straightness of his prose at least partly in relation to sexuality. Added to this is his tough-guy disdain for the “so-called rules of syntax or grammar,” suggesting that genuine

²⁵² Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, 192.

²⁵³ Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, 54.

straightness of prose has little to do with effete prescriptions of grammatical correctness and more to do with “the ability to state clearly.” Interestingly, however, Hemingway seems to see no contradiction between the imperative to state clearly and the preference for omission — he does not notice or he does not want to admit that, as Peterson says, “like any other device, ‘objectivity’ can become a mannerism or trick.”²⁵⁴ For Hemingway, there is a distinct envisioning of style as worked-at, to be sure, but worked at to make the writing “true,” make it straight and “natural” rather than quirkily mannered.

If we take these descriptions of the writing process from *Death in the Afternoon* as reliable statements, it becomes apparent that Hemingway’s theory of style by its nature accords a powerful, unspoken role to the reader. To fail to take the reader into account is to miss the understanding that, as Barthes reminds us, “every reading is steeped in Desire.”²⁵⁵ In other words, though it is more or less implied rather than stated outright by his poetics, Hemingway depends on his readers’ desire to fill in his writing, and he counts on it to inflect the words on the page. Even if he were to make his prose absolutely straight, and as I’ve suggested he more often than not doesn’t do that at all, the gravity of readerly desire will always bend the text to its own ends. As Modellmog argues about Hemingway, “the attention [he] has traditionally received is so clearly overdetermined and thus makes visible what is often hard to see: that critics’ desires play an integral role in the construction of authors and the interpretation of their works.”²⁵⁶ While I agree with Modellmog on this point, I would like to shift her emphasis slightly so as to view it

²⁵⁴ Peterson, *Hemingway: Direct and Oblique*, 66.

²⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 35.

²⁵⁶ Modellmog, *Reading Desire*, 2.

with an eye toward our interest in style. After all, what I obviously find most troubling about Hemingway's legacy is that we often assume that the style in which his works are written is explained by or reflective of masculine heterosexuality. It is instead vital to understand, as Modellmog shows, that readers' desires dramatically alter how it is that we construct an author's texts.²⁵⁷ It is we as readers who accord sexual status to style and it is we as well who can with effort see it in a different way.

In the case of Hemingway the influence of readerly desire is all the more crucial to understand because the style is based upon excision, that is to say the style always has a lack built into it. Moreover, a style built on a foundation of lack flirts with, solicits, the reader's desire, and desire, as Lacan tells us, is the "desire for nothing," desire for that (no)thing — what he calls *objet petit a* — that promises to reintroduce the imaginary fullness cleaved from the subject by the imposition of language.²⁵⁸ Desire is always propelled forward by absence, a lack in being that pushes the subject to attempt the recovery of, through obtaining the imagined fulfillment that *objet petit a* will bring, the wholeness that has been lost. As Lacan puts it, "desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists."²⁵⁹ The key phrase here is Lacan's suggestion that lack is not a lack for any particular, specific thing – it "isn't the lack of this or that." Instead, desire chases after a more foundational absence in the subject that can temporarily take as its object any number of substitutions. Moreover, "this lack is beyond anything that can

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁵⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Sylvania Tomàs Elli (New York: Norton, 1991), 211.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 223.

represent it. It is only ever represented as a reflection on a veil.”²⁶⁰ Hemingway style in its ostentatious flaunting of lack impels the reader’s desire for imaginary plenitude by flaunting the false promise of a satisfying object hidden somewhere “back there.” Hemingway has it in mind that each reader will empathetically draw close to the “true” object that has been excised from the text. What Lacan teaches us, though, is that the reader’s genuine desire is not really for that specific object that Hemingway pretends to hold back — the secret behind the drunken soldiers of *In Our Time*’s first interchapter, for instance — but is instead a desire for her own imaginary fulfillment; that is to say, the reader always has the impossible goal of achieving her own satisfaction as a motive.²⁶¹ What the reader encounters in Hemingway style is the veil to which Lacan alludes, a veil that ostentatiously hides behind it the non-existent “truth” of Hemingway’s omissions but that in fact serves, the style that is, as a surface, a mirror in which the reader finds reflected back his own self-interested desire.

The Sun Also Rises, in one of the most frequently discussed passages in the novel — the entrance of Lady Brett Ashley in the company of a gaggle of young gay men — underscores the power of this readerly desire to create an almost inescapable expectation of clarity and simplicity on behalf of the reader’s own satisfaction. As in the earlier “Soldier’s Home,” the laconic style obscures even as it hints at an objective “fact” — the homosexuality of Brett’s night-time companions. The passage is worth quoting at length to understand its style’s characteristic strangeness:

Some one asked Georgette to dance, and I went over to the bar. It was really very hot and the accordion music was pleasant in the hot night. I drank a beer, standing in the doorway and getting the cool breath of wind from the street. Two taxis were coming

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ That satisfaction, though, always eludes the subject. True satisfaction is possible only for the animal, for the animal functions solely on instinct without the burden of a symbolic order to interpose itself between demand and desire.

down the steep street. They both stopped in front of the Bal. A crowd of young men, some in jerseys and some in their shirtsleeves, got out. I could see their hands and newly washed, wavy hair in the light from the door. The policeman standing by the door looked at me and smiled. They came in. As they went in, under the light I saw white hands, wavy hair, white faces, grimacing, gesturing, talking. With them was Brett. She looked very lovely and she was very much with them.

One of them saw Georgette and said: "I do declare. There is an actual harlot. I'm going to dance with her, Lett. You watch me."

The tall dark one, called Lett, said: "Don't you be rash." The wavy blonde one answered: "Don't you worry, dear." And with them was Brett.

There is a noticeable minimum of interiority in the passage aside from Jake's assessment of temperature and of the pleasantness of the music, a desaturation of detail about Jake's mind. At the same time the high-spirited playfulness of the gay men conspicuously contrasts with the stoic response to it by the company of straight men – symbolized by the policeman's conspiratorial straight hail. The text seems to establish a division by which to be on the side of the restrained, to speak simply, is to be straight. This is opposed to the puckish behavior of the gay men with their white hands and wavy hair, and more revealingly still, the insincere exuberance of their speech. "Don't you worry, dear" is, after all, simultaneously meant to reassure and to playfully demean Lett even as it makes a mockery of expectations of proper gender behavior. "An actual harlot!" one exclaims also, prizing the prostitute Georgette purely for her camp value rather than for any genuine interest in her. What this passage establishes, then, is a sexual hierarchy determined by the use of language. Whereas straight men say little or nothing at all, resigned to make the most out of the limited linguistic resources they are permitted to employ, gay men chatter on merrily, extravagantly, and without much apparent substance.

What is surprising about the passage is that its obvious motive – to signify sexuality by taking note of styles of expression – runs contrary to the way that goal is carried out because the desire represented exceeds the technique with which it is

expressed. In the strange repetition of the phrase “with them was Brett,” for example, we see the problem of appropriate style dramatized most recognizably. In a matter of just a few lines the phrase appears three times in three different forms, as though Jake’s style is being short circuited by Brett’s proximity. The text orbits compulsively around the phrase, almost as if it is trying it out in different forms so as to “get it right.” Each permutation contains only a slight variation that utilizes minor stylistic transformation rather than major embellishment: “With them was Brett,” “and she was very much with them,” and “And with them was Brett.” One obvious explanation for that phenomenon is Jake’s powerful desire for Brett, a force that keeps drawing the text back to her because of Jake’s tragic and finally unconsummable longing. That can be only half the story, though, for this is a matter not simply of representation but also of linguistic form. The text seems to be reaching not only for Brett but also for the right words, the right linguistic version to express that desire. Given the constraints of how modern men are supposed to behave, however, Jake can only go so far in his style unless he appear too much like the other men in this scene, too excessive, too over-the-top. The censorious proximity of the queens makes it all the more urgent that Jake proscribe the excess of his own style. When his sentiment reaches outward for new, creative expression, that style becomes impoverished at the moment it is most desperate for novel language, blocked from the linguistic resources towards which it had tried to reach by the self-censoring demands imposed by social convention. The result is a text that trembles with a feeling that exceeds the words present, the permitted form of expression being nowhere near enough for what really wants to be said. The passage is virtually a paradigm for Hemingway style, a text that is simultaneously performing straightness even as it

underscores the fictionality of its own performance. It gives itself away, playing the straight game even as it emphasizes the weirdness of that performance, the off form it must take, as with the repeated “with them was Brett.”

This passage and many others like it reveal the degree to which Hemingway’s writing is, contrary to the general feeling about it, unusually mannered, and mannered in a self-conscious simulacrum of simplicity, a copy with no original. We overwhelmingly, as I’ve argued, tend to view this unusual mode of writing as unmarked, as the “natural” condition of clarity, since Hemingway’s legacy has been the installation of this kind of writing as the prime example of the unadorned. What the examples so far have shown, however, is that Hemingway style is anything but naturally unmarked and clear. Robert Penn Warren suggests that Hemingway, who “characteristically is simple even to the point of monotony” shares “an obvious relation between this style and the characters and situations with which the author is concerned — a relation of dramatic decorum.”²⁶² That style often works, according to Warren, as an “antidote” to the ailments of modern existence, an antidote Hemingway had to work hard to create. For Warren, Hemingway’s means of combating the problems of modern existence is his recourse to simplicity, a way of writing, in Hemingway’s words, “simply and straight.”²⁶³ Richard Bridgman in an excellent article expands on this argument by calling out the distinctive simplicity of Hemingway’s prose *as* exaggerated mannerism. Bridgman insists that “we must be prepared to qualify radically the kind of simplicity we are willing to acknowledge is

²⁶² Robert Penn Warren, “Ernest Hemingway,” in *Ernest Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda Wagner (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), 93.

²⁶³ Hemingway writes of *The Old Man and the Sea*, “whatever I learned is in the story but I hope it reads simply and straight.” Ernest Hemingway, “Letter to the Editors,” *Life* (August 25, 1952), 124. Quoted in *Ernest Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda Wagner (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974).

present. Both Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson are proof enough that limitation of vocabulary and simplification of syntax are not in themselves sufficient to earn clarity and directness.”²⁶⁴ Bridgman, like Peterson, has it just right. The pared down “simplicity” of Hemingway style is itself affected, a mannerism that at its time must have been just as strange for readers to encounter as the radically experimental prose (that some would say Hemingway stole) of Gertrude Stein. Hemingway was above all else an experimental writer, one who was pushing the stylistic envelope even in his early masterpieces *In Our Time* and *The Sun Also Rises*, but pushing it in such a way as to flaunt its “straightness” openly. Not to recognize how mannered his style is is an understandable but serious and even ideologically propelled miscalculation.

Paul Morrison suggests that to call someone’s prose “too mannered” is one familiar, perhaps universally available way in the West to implicate that person in the charge of homosexuality.²⁶⁵ If gay men have for a long time been thought to give away signs of their condition, so a supposedly mannered style has become one of the ways for them to incontrovertibly do so. Calling an individual’s prose “too mannered,” as Morrison points out, is a gesture of implication through the socio-sexual meanings that term connotes rather than through direct accusation. The power of connotation is that it suggests, without ever needing to say explicitly, so that it can never be refuted. Even to try to refute it, to raise the issue oneself, is to confirm the charge of connotation, protesting too much as it were, against a charge that was never leveled.²⁶⁶ It follows that

²⁶⁴ Richard Bridgman, “Ernest Hemingway,” in *Ernest Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda Wagner (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), 161.

²⁶⁵ Paul Morrison, *The Explanation For Everything*, 2.

²⁶⁶ Morrison’s argument draws on D.A. Miller’s understanding of the power of connotation as described in D.A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991).

Hemingway style as an idiosyncratically mannered form of writing, an affectation, is not far from that same condition. Small wonder, then, that critics have for almost a century now labored to shield Hemingway from an accusation of mannerism, protecting him from a moniker that signifies much too much about a dangerous sexuality they want nothing to do with.

If queer critics have counter-labored in turn to dissolve those protective mechanisms, queer theory has not yet been able to come up with a satisfactory response that takes into account both the nuance and the theatricality of Hemingway's stylistic performance of straightness. Gregory Woods attempts such a reading but unfortunately replicates some familiar conclusions when he explains that Hemingway style is always shaped by the writer's personal sexual anxiety. It is a restrained linguistic feat in the constant process of self-surveillance so as to remain entirely unadorned. Just as Eve Sedgwick suggests that male friendship walks a fine line that requires both demonstration of the bonds that connect men and a fierce, often homophobic policing of the line that means erotic love, so too must Hemingway style, Woods says, stretch to prove its individual merit, yet never cross over dangerously, suggestively into the ornate. What this stylistic double-bind "expresses best, in its struggle against effeminate eloquence, is the nagging anxiety which is the true condition (in both senses) of masculinity."²⁶⁷ That anxious struggle reveals, according to Woods, a text that is too eager to please, too incriminatingly concerned with plain-speaking to be believable. He claims that the restraint of Hemingway style is largely about a fear of saying too much, of giving oneself away, of being, like a closeted gay man, exposed by verbal indiscretion. As he puts it,

²⁶⁷ Gregory Woods, "The Injured Sex: Hemingway's Voice of Masculine Anxiety," in *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 170.

“to say too much might be to sound queer.”²⁶⁸ Hemingway style, according to Woods, is composed under the sign of the closet; its terrific linguistic restraint is restrained in the truest sense, not just by the author’s choice but by necessity in the context of a powerful system of social and psychological forces that coerce and threaten, especially straight men, with sexual exposure. We reward its built-in lack by accepting this anxious performance, by recognizing in the text precisely what the culture wants for us to see — a masculine, heterosexual man writing in a natural style that expresses the essence of his straight being.

What is ultimately problematic about what Woods is saying is that it falls victim to the illusion of Hemingway’s simplicity even as it accepts as fact the notion that Hemingway style is unadorned and unmannered. I have argued the opposite, that Hemingway is actually among the most stylistically idiosyncratic of writers and that his most distinguishing stylistic idiosyncrasy is a flaunted performance of straightness. Anyone who has seen any of the countless number of photographs of Hemingway standing next to an exceptionally large fish will have some idea of what I mean. Hemingway style, however, flaunts that same performance at a textual and formal level (think also of Hemingway’s almost certainly apocryphal penchant for doing all of his writing standing up, performing the act of writing erect). The style is not afraid of saying too much; rather, it cannot stop its mugging as it unflinchingly calls attention to how “straight” it is. Woods would have it that the true straightness of Hemingway’s style is a charade designed to comply with the complex discursive pressures of the closet. I argue instead that there is and never was any straight style, that Hemingway’s simulacrum is a highly innovative artifice that performs an essence of straightness, an essence that

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 171.

likewise doesn't exist. And the record of Hemingway criticism, as we have seen, gives ample evidence that a great many people have fallen under its queer charms, accepting through their own anxieties about sexuality, this simulacrum of heterosexual style. If the closet is operating anywhere at all it is not, as Woods says, in the psyche of the author, but in the reader who is so willing to swallow whole Hemingway's spectacle of the straight.

One of the most unexpected consequences of this performance of straight prose is the establishment of a reading audience that slavishly eroticizes the qualities with which that straight prose is associated. Curiously, however, that erotic response resides overwhelmingly in the appreciative commendations not of the women we might expect it to be designed to attract but in Hemingway's predominantly *male* critics.²⁶⁹ As an anonymous, and hence for all intents and purposes male, reviewer for *The New York Times* describes him in 1926, "Hemingway has a lean, pleasing, tough resilience. His language is fibrous and athletic, colloquial and fresh, hard and clean; his very prose seems to have an organic being of its own."²⁷⁰ The review shamelessly conjures up the homoerotic world of the gymnasium in which one man may appreciate the pleasing toughness and athleticism of another, but also a domain in which there is a fine line between appreciation and over-appreciation. Described as lean, hard, and clean, Hemingway is admired not, as we might think, for the masculine qualities that would appeal to a member of the "fairer sex," but rather in terms of men delighting in male beauty. All of Hemingway's hard-won straightness of prose, then, has gone in service of establishing a cohort of appreciative, drooling, homoerotic critics who surround and

²⁶⁹ I am grateful to Nadine Hubbs for her discussion with me of the ideas in this paragraph and for her suggestions of some of the ideas contained within it.

²⁷⁰ "Marital Tragedy," *The New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1926.

celebrate the author's masculine display. From Carlos Baker to Malcolm Bradbury to countless others, we see the artist worshipped again and again in these terms as critics unironically and at times uncritically praise the peacock strut of Hemingway style. If it is true that critics approve of Hemingway's "organic" simplicity – a reading whose basis in fact I think I have already discredited – as a means of celebrating the heterosexual "achievement" that style connotes, they do so in a way that makes uncertain their own perilous position in this band of Hemingway brothers. They cannot heap enough praise upon him, making Hemingway into a kind of crush object, a figure whose style they both identify with and desire. If the critical legacy of Hemingway is anything, then, I cannot help but think that as far as style is concerned, our relation as readers to Hemingway is a multifaceted and indeed internally conflicted one, pulled as it is in several directions at once by the complex demands of culture, desire and the erotically fraught relations instituted by the author's performance of simplicity.

In this chapter we have seen how the modernity's chief avatar of stylistic clarity – Ernest Hemingway – is a figure whose clarity owes a great deal more to ideological pressures than it does to any objective standard. I have shown the socially and erotically overdetermined nature of the prevailing opinion that Hemingway style expresses some organic, natural essence of clarity and straightness. In fact, as I've shown, not only is Hemingway style anything but "natural" or "clear," it is even more difficult for us to let its straightness – in every sense of the word – stand unproblematically. In the next chapter we will look at the work of Hemingway's one-time mentor, Gertrude Stein, the writer who arguably originated the type of stylistic experimentation that Hemingway would later refine in what is perhaps one of modernism's greatest acts of stylistic

thievery. Stein, though her style has much in common with Hemingway, has traditionally been read in a radically different and generally hostile way, due in no small part certainly to her openly lesbian, cosmopolitan lifestyle, and more domestic (as opposed to Hemingway's outdoors) subject matter. We will consider not only the critical reaction to Stein's style, which was by any account as far from Hemingway's as is possible, but also Stein's aggressive attempt to disarm the established practices of reading style that claimed Hemingway as a hero with her experimental, and consequently to many eyes unreadable, linguistic play.

Chapter V

Doggy Style: Gertrude Stein, Canine Discipline, and Lesbian Eroticism

Dogs which are not useful dogs are a pastime, as one woman once said to me, one has a great deal of pleasure out of dogs because one can spoil them as one cannot spoil one's children. If the children are spoiled, one's future is spoilt but dogs one can spoil without any thought of the future and that is a great pleasure.

Gertrude Stein, *Paris France*

Language, syntax, the appurtenances of "style" *perform* more truly than they *register* an erotic cathexis, a condensation or dilation of pleasure, a circuit of fantasmatic identifications that articulate desire; and as it is always one's prerogative to be bored by what someone else might find desirable (though boredom itself is never innocent or exempt from a relationship to eros), so it is always one's prerogative to find someone else's relation to language too simple or too complex, too alien or too familiar to provide a recognizably satisfactory aesthetic/erotic pleasure.

Lee Edelman, *Homographesis*

"I am I," Gertrude Stein famously wrote in "Identity A Poem," "because my little dog knows me."²⁷¹ Such a strange but confident ontological claim would seem to insist that dogs are a crucial site of identity-meaning in Stein's work. However, as Michael Trask argues in *Cruising Modernism*, the dog as a figure that appears regularly in both Stein's popular and lesser known works has received surprisingly little attention from critics for all of Stein's insistence on its importance.²⁷² Queer critics in particular have done little to question the work that dogs do in her texts, a surprising fact given that Stein herself was a devoted dog lover who made the odd move of naming her new pet with the *nom de chien* of its deceased predecessor (Basket I, Basket II), making them into the

²⁷¹ Gertrude Stein, "Identity A Poem," in *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 146.

²⁷² For instance, among the more often read Stein texts, *Three Lives*, *Paris France*, "Ida" and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* all prominently include dogs.

most famous of modernist poodles. Beyond that biographical detail, however, queer critics might be expected to find special significance in dogs because of the uncanny notion of identity they imply – the self being the self only because of a deferred recognition that doubles back to confirm the existence of the subject. It is crucial, then, that we account for Stein’s “peculiar fixation on dogs, who appear there [in her work] so frequently that their absence from Stein criticism is almost scandalous.”²⁷³ Aiming to amend this critical deficit, I attend in this chapter to the complicated and unexpected nexus of dogs, identity, and literary style that often recurs as a motif in Stein’s body of work. I will show that dogs represent in Stein one especially important metaphor for how she uses her eccentric stylistic practice to open up identity to the aesthetic play of language rather than using style, as many of her critics do, to define and pin down identity. For dogs, like style, embody for her the pleasurable erotic fascination with the play and the taming of language, a fact that is often mistaken by critics for what has been largely understood as Stein’s transparent figuration of lesbian identity as style.

In chapter three I argued against the thesis that Henry James’s style represents an involuntary but unmistakable expression of his deeply repressed homosexuality and that instead the late style was a deliberately worked at, determined and politically resistant aesthetic response to that very thesis that would see in it merely James’s own repression. In the work of Gertrude Stein I see a related political and aesthetic project at work, one that though it shares much with James in its resistance to the diagnostic protocols of literary criticism is nonetheless structured in a dramatically different way that much more fully depends upon the author’s own insistence on her right to the aesthetic delight in

²⁷³ Michael Trask, *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 74.

dialectical mischief that Stein's style often first unleashes and then partially attempts to re-master. While it may, then, at first seem that by putting into relief the relationship in Stein's text between dogs and style, that I am at best suggesting a strangely mismatched coupling and at worst a forced play on words, in fact style and dogs do perform similar labor in Stein's work. Moreover, as the passage that begins this chapter argues explicitly, dogs bear for Stein the constitutive weight of identity, an identity that is staged through the pleasurable double-move of what I call the unleash of language and its subsequent re-mastering in Stein's perversely imagined mode of writing. This non-disciplinary reading of her style, then, means to counteract the more common reading of Stein, a reading in which style, as an important site of identity, has been problematically pressed into the service of at least one progressive political movement – feminism – that has unfortunately often to a great degree subscribed to the troubling normalizing effects that style causes for queers or those perceived to be queers.

The bulk of this chapter will be concerned with an analysis of the scandalous activities of dogs in “The Good Anna,” the first of three stories that make up Stein's earliest major work, *Three Lives* (1909). I discuss the author's twinning of erotic play and discipline in the story by drawing on Stein's formative relationship with the then emerging fields of psychology and behaviorism. Michael Trask's rich historical and biographical work continues a prominent trend in Stein criticism by focusing on the influence of behaviorism and psychology, especially as in the work of Stein's old teacher William James, on Stein in order to show how dogs allow her to explore what Trask calls the “unruliness of consciousness.” I depart from Trask's work, though, by emphasizing the pronounced erotic valence that both dogs and style attain for Stein, a valence that she

then uses to represent the textual experience of sexuality in a way that cleverly escapes the capture of the expert discourse of stylistic diagnosis that so many of her (especially male) contemporaries were unable to avoid. To be more precise, I argue that Stein's style relies on the erotic alternation between unruliness and control – a kind of textual play – as metaphorized in the dog. And, crucially, though that textual experience does indeed implicate its author in an erotic aesthetic, it does so in a way that cannot so easily be assimilated to the simple explanation of an authorial lesbian identity as so many critics have tried to describe it. What Stein's style does is something far more complex than simply to register the outlines of a discernible lesbian identity, utilizing as it does a textual strategy that thwarts its easy assimilation into the relentless hetero/homo structuring of style.

The unfortunate fact is that one of the major trends responsible for the critical reception of her style as directly registering her lesbian identity is the feminist readings of the 1980s and 90s that reclaimed Stein and rekindled her reputation as a major modernist figure. Whereas her pupil Hemingway, despite a few staggering missteps in the late middle part of his career (*To Have and Have Not* and the underrated *Across the River and Into the Trees*) had remained critically and commercially popular for reasons I discuss in the previous chapter, Stein's prestige had been tarnished in the decades following the publication of her smash hit *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, though we must admit that she never before that had much of a readership outside of a modest circle of admirers. Yet many feminist critics saw Stein as an unrecognized master, the modernist genius who nonetheless almost always had difficulty steering her works into print and instead had to be mostly content with midwifing Hemingway's success. They wanted to

tell a different story about her, one that would reframe the critical understanding of Stein's work by reading it through the political and aesthetic lens of gender. That project, however, frequently also ran headlong into the related factor of sexuality and usually cast Stein in deeply unflattering terms because of it. This chapter focuses primarily on Stein's work as it has been received by several major feminist Stein critics and aims to provide a better, more progressive anti-homophobic critique of Stein that builds upon the work that these thinkers have done but tries to eradicate the pernicious strain of rhetoric that has historically cast Stein's sexuality in problematic ways.

Among the first and most influential of these feminist attempts to resuscitate Stein in the critical eye was Catherine Stimpson's germinal 1977 article, "The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein." In that article, Stimpson locates Stein in a particularly fraught historical moment, a time in which women were both disempowered by the prevalent notion of Cartesian dualism that would understand men to be on the side of mind and women on the side of the body, even as women had also already begun to gain access to, as Stein had, institutions of higher learning. This created a difficult position for women like Stein, Stimpson explains, since "consciousness was more liberated than the flesh. As a result, a problematic gap existed, particularly for elite women, between what they might do with their minds and what they might do with their bodies."²⁷⁴ The division of self created by this problematic gap proved to be an additional stumbling block for Stein, whose personal lesbian existence was further problematized by the gendered split of the mind and the body. As a result, Stein's

Dramatization of homosexuality is paradoxical. . . . Stein both stopped resisting her sexual impulses and found domestic pleasure in them. However, during the same period, if

²⁷⁴ Catharine Stimpson, "The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein." *Critical Inquiry* 3.3 (Spring 1977), 490.

often before meeting Toklas, she takes certain lesbian or quasi-lesbian experiences and progressively disguises and encodes them in a series of books. I would speculate that she does so for several reasons. Some of them are aesthetic: the need to avoid imitating one's self; the desire to transform apprentice materials into richer, more satisfying verbal works. Other reasons are more psychological: the need to write out hidden impulses; the wish to speak with friends without having others overhear; the desire to evade and to confound strangers, aliens, and enemies.²⁷⁵

I quote at length from this somewhat rocky and speculative explanation in order to point out two crucial things in Stimpson's reading: first, the by now familiar notion that the strangeness of Stein's work is the result of her own disguised and encoded lesbianism; and second, the coupling of aesthetic satisfaction gained with psychological repression required (a point that would be just as well at home in Freud's monograph on da Vinci, in fact).

(1) *Disguised lesbianism*. On this point Stimpson argues that on more than one occasion Stein wrote a thinly fictionalized account of her personal lesbian experience only to revise it later for publication into a more veiled self-portrait. The most famous example Stimpson gives is the suppressed novel *Q.E.D.*, which is widely assumed to be a thinly disguised autobiographical account of a lesbian love triangle in which Stein found herself involved in her college days, and its supposed revision into the less obviously autobiographical *Three Lives*. Though Stimpson was far from the first to propose the idea that Stein disguised her sexual life and used it as material for her books, as an important early voice in what would come to be a powerful feminist literary critical movement, she represents one pole of thought that helps define this school's re-imagining of Stein and her "encoded" homosexuality.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 498.

²⁷⁶ Edmund Wilson is one prominent voice that earlier espoused this point of view, according to Stimpson. See Wilson *Shores of Light* (New York, 1952), 575-86.

(2) *Aesthetic pleasure and psychological repression*. Stimpson implies that this sublimation of homosexuality is both aesthetically beneficial – it makes better art – and psychologically beneficial – it makes for a better or at least more tolerable life. And though she does not explicate that relationship, the potential for slippage between the two that is evident in Stimpson’s description will come to be virtually canonical in feminism’s understanding of Stein’s transformation of psychological material into aesthetically productive work. In other words, the supposed crisis of homosexuality that Stein is widely alleged to have suffered from had to be suppressed or repressed in various ways, leading to the creation of Stein’s remarkable stylistic achievement.

As I mentioned earlier, Stimpson seems to mainly have the thematic or narrative material of Stein’s work in mind during her discussion. In later work, however, she will extend that definition, pointing out that the negative opinion many readers have of Stein is largely due to the view that she is “guilty of a double transgression: first, and more blatantly, she subverted generic and linguistic codes; next, and more slyly, she subverted sexual codes. Both her word and her flesh violated normalities.”²⁷⁷ Here Stimpson directly implicates Stein’s style, her subversion of linguistic codes, in such a way as they become crossed with one another. Stein’s linguistic perversion and her sexual perversion collide so that they come to seem one and the same as embodied in the figure Stimpson calls “the Bad Stein.” And in that formulation, Stimpson makes clear both the problem from which much of feminist critique of the 1980s sought to rescue Stein and also the seemingly inescapable trap into which it had plunged her in the years Stimpson’s two essays bookend. In other words, where feminist critique, even the kind like Stimpson’s

²⁷⁷ Catharine Stimpson, “Gertrude Stein and the Lesbian Lie,” in *American Women’s Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, ed. Margo Culley (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 152.

that seemed to be espousing a mildly proto-gay-affirmative or at the very least mildly proto-anti-homophobic point of view, tried at first to reclaim Stein the woman by explaining her avant-garde work as a response to the respectable codes of the disempowering society in which she lived, it also often reinscribed in that very work some of the most problematically homophobic assumptions about Stein's sexual life and its presumed relationship to her aesthetic and specifically stylistic output.

Later critics, many of them following Stimpson's influential lead, would extend this line of thinking from Stimpson's tentative framing in terms of theme in order to explain what to many remains the most salient feature of Stein's work – its extraordinary style. Marianne DeKoven, for example, understands Stein's style, especially as it is represented in *Three Lives*, as “the beginning of a shift from conventional, patriarchal to experimental, anti-patriarchal modes of articulating meaning.”²⁷⁸ DeKoven also insists on locating Stein within the same patriarchal culture as Stimpson and explains how Stein uses her style to resist the inherited, patriarchal rules of meaning to produce a more feminist and consequently less straightforward form of writing. However, that project too is complicated, according to DeKoven, by the way that Stein

Simultaneously concealed and encoded in her literary work troublesome feelings about herself as a woman, about women's helplessness, and particularly about lesbianism, still very much considered by society a ‘pollutant,’ as Stimpson puts it, during most of Stein's life. But Stein did not merely stifle or deny her anger, her sense that she did not fit and that the deficiency was not hers but rather that of the structure which excluded her. In effect, Stein's rebellion was channeled from content to linguistic structure itself.²⁷⁹

All of which might sound well and good. For DeKoven's portrait of Stein is of a resilient and resisting woman, one who is angry, and legitimately so, about the asymmetry of power within that patriarchal culture. This sort of argument aligns Stein on the shared

²⁷⁸ Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 28.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

political side of that more famous feminist essayist, Virginia Woolf, who also laid out the case in *A Room of One's Own* for women's anger and their need to resist patriarchal strictures.²⁸⁰ Much more troubling, though, is DeKoven's assertion that, unlike in the case of Virginia Woolf, "Stein's anti-patriarchal rebellion was not conscious or intentional," was in effect just another unconscious intrusion (albeit a politically advantageous one) of homosexuality into the text in the form of style.²⁸¹ Which lands us once again in the difficult spot of trying to extricate Stein from the charge that her style is an involuntary expression – "not conscious or intentional" – of a conclusive homosexual essence that manifests itself in the linguistic structure of the text without the author's control. It is, as psychoanalysis would understand it, a stylistic confession revealing itself in the author's words.

Stein represents an especially thorny case for this kind of work for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that we do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater and discard the commendable work done by many of these feminist critics on behalf of that cause. Yet how do we preserve the positive feminist strides these readings have made in understanding Stein when critics also routinely insist on the problematic link between style and homosexuality? For example, what of Lisa Ruddick's claim that "as [Stein's] literary style became, in her own view, happily "dirty," repetitive, and therefore anti-Jamesian, she also became able to affirm what she formerly thought of as the dirty part of herself, her lesbian sexuality"?²⁸² The point once again does not directly indict Stein for her sexuality and seems rhetorically neutral on the subject. Ruddick insinuates a cause and effect relationship, however, that Stein's style and her

²⁸⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1989), 31-40.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² Lisa Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 5.

growing acceptance of her lesbianism evolved at an equivalent clip. The task ahead is to retain the positive elements of feminism's reclamation of Stein, notably its inclusion of gender and sexuality in literary critique while also trying to distance ourselves from its often normalizing stance on homosexuality.

In order to make this critical project successful we must first recognize that, as DeKoven says, "there is a good deal of sexual material in her [Stein's] work which is concealed or encoded," without then making the hasty move of tying that sexual material down to an expression of authorial homosexuality.²⁸³ Our first task, then, is to recover this sexual material as a recognizable feature of the text that is vital to understanding Stein's style in a way that moves beyond the standard, normalizing processes of literary stylistics with which we have become all too familiar in favor of an approach that understands Stein's work as an expressive but not repressed play with language. And it is through this recovery of sexual material and its relationship to Stein's modernist aesthetic, that is her style, that we shall see her work in a renewed way as offering, like her dogs, a radically evasive challenge to the old-fashioned finger-wagging of stylistics. For Stein as we have seen wants to dramatically reconceptualize the protocols of identity such that it might be based on something as simple as one's recognition by a pet. In other words, I will argue that by framing the topic of sexual identity as a matter of more or less inconsequential play (recall Stein's fondness for pet names, including her own self-nomination Baby Woomjums), Stein disrupts the serious scientific work of sexual classification and looses, for herself at least, the grip that the expert's gaze has upon her style as an expression of some true sexual nature. By embracing the primitive play of what Freud calls the pre-genital organization of sexuality, Stein refuses the categories of

²⁸³ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, xxiii.

grown-up sexuality and its rigid forms of taxonomy, elevating instead the pleasure of play and the celebration of triviality.²⁸⁴

On the other side of the spectrum we find that many other critics want to deny the existence of any sexual element to Stein's style at all, perhaps because of the frighteningly disarming way – to some at least – that it mobilizes style and sex as play.²⁸⁵ Richard Bridgman in one important study, for instance, describes “The Good Anna” with the appearance of innocence concerning what seems to most queer readers, I would wager, its rather overt erotic style:

‘The Good Anna,’ first of the *Three Lives* to be written, opens on a sentimental note. It describes the scoldings and mutterings of a loyal servant who is clearly intended to be endearing. A good deal of archness is expended on pet dogs too. But gradually Gertrude Stein begins to build a portrait of a conscience-ridden German-Catholic housekeeper who drives herself and those under her remorselessly, at the cost of recurrent headaches.²⁸⁶

In this summary, Bridgman notes that “a good deal of archness is expended on pet dogs” but he quickly passes over what is probably obvious to most readers of the story – its unusually child-like style and its precocious sexual naughtiness, the two of which seem to be expressions of one another. A description of plot, then, as in most of Stein's texts, is utterly insufficient. For what this story is “about” is not just the narrative of Anna, for which Bridgman's description is baldly accurate. Truly understanding what is at work in this tricky piece, then, requires a different sort of approach, one that recognizes style as a central site of meaning for the story, meaning that Stein deliberately manipulates in her role as author in a sophisticated way instead of as some sort of involuntary stylistic confession.

²⁸⁴ To be clear I don't mean to imply that Stein's work is somehow immature or regressive in the sense that psychoanalysis has traditionally understood homosexuality to be an immature sexuality. Rather I see Stein's return to the play of language as a sophisticated and strategic resistance to power.

²⁸⁵ Or, we might speculate, for the same-sex themes that dominate some of the texts.

²⁸⁶ Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 49.

Trask, like many of the feminist critics who preceded him, argues for the importance of reading Stein formally but in a way that situates that formal practice in an historical context in order to more fully comprehend the historical agents that might have influenced it. Such an approach is more uncommon than one might think since, as Harriett Scott Chessman notes, “most critics of Stein choose one of two positions toward reading Stein: either the belief in the primacy of the ‘signifier’ or the belief in the presence of a ‘signified,’ in messages that can be decoded, in however indeterminate a way.”²⁸⁷ Chessman’s point, I would argue, remains no less true today in its suggestion that most critics still wish to read Stein as being composed either of abstracted signifiers or in terms of an alternatively conservative or progressive political message – the degree to which Stein was or was not a feminist, for example. The problem with each of these approaches is that “Stein’s language is never simply not signifying or disruptive of signification. Stein’s writing mixes the figurative with the literal, the symbolic and the bodily.”²⁸⁸ An appropriate way to address this deficit would be to attend to Stein’s formalist poetics but to also try to historicize that poetics, include in it an understanding of the bodily and the symbolic, instead of reducing it down to a single precipitous and ahistorical cause – homosexuality.²⁸⁹ Trask proposes precisely such a middle-approach, one that mediates between a signifier-based and a signified-based reading that would satisfy Chessman’s complaints. To read with content in mind, he says, “allows us to move beyond the formalist accounts that have dominated discussion of [Stein’s] work”

²⁸⁷ Harriett Scott Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1989), 10.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸⁹ For a particularly powerful “formalist” reading of Stein that combines both close attention to Stein’s language as well as psychoanalytic, deconstructive and French and American feminist criticism, see Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983.

and to add both context and authorial agency to the equation²⁹⁰ What is of use about Trask's reading is that it wants to open up Stein's work in a way that allows us to ask how the style signifies in Stein's context rather than closing it off to meaning as stylistic readings often try to do. It jettisons neither form nor context and so it allows for a more nuanced appreciation of how Stein uses style to register her experience of the world, how she incorporates its influences and complexities, bodily and linguistic, as opposed to being a passive conduit through which her unconscious pours out the coded desires her conscious mind forbids.²⁹¹ It is in that respect that it is a more authentically feminist critical approach than many because it gives agency and a real voice to Stein, not simply capturing her within the confines of her own desires.

Dogs, as Trask points out, may be an especially important historical factor for Stein since the science of canine behaviorism figured prominently in the work of Stein's Harvard professor William James. And many critics have spelled out at length the influence James's work may have had on her writing.²⁹² As Trask explains, however, "though able Stein critics have explored the connection between her work and [William] James's, for instance, they have viewed it largely in formal terms, nimbly positing how Jamesian habit is transformed into the arithmetic-like prose of Stein's texts."²⁹³ What if, however, Stein were up to something different, seeking not to translate the theories of

²⁹⁰ Trask, *Cruising Modernism*, 89.

²⁹¹ As in DeKoven's opinion that "her female self-hatred was such that she was psychologically compelled to identify herself as a man in order to be a happy, sexually active person and a functioning writer." Dekoven, *A Different Language*, 36.

²⁹² See Michael Hoffman, *The Development of Abstractionism in the Writings of Gertrude Stein* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965); Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

Jamesian psychology into her form but taking a special interest in dogs for the model of play they provide for her formal strategy? Trask's larger goal is to understand the dog as test subject in the emerging field of behaviorism and the subsequent installation of the canine as the crucial 20th century emblem for "conditioning."²⁹⁴ Where I disagree with him, however, is in his attempt "to see that a particular dimension of Stein's writing is less perverse or idiosyncratic than we may have realized. More exactly, Stein's experimentations with her culture's narrative forms and generative grammar turn out to have a locatable context in an intellectual milieu that is itself thoroughly perverse."²⁹⁵ While his attempt to historicize this particular aspect of Stein's work by showing that it is culture rather than the author that is perverse is a good one, I am suspicious of the negative connotation he implies with his use of the term "perverse." What if, alternatively, we were to follow Trask's suggestive claims about the canine as a domestic figure subjected to a discourse of discipline and correction while also reserving the right to recuperate Stein's perversion? In other words, what if we were to read Stein's text not as "less perverse or idiosyncratic" but as ultimately both highly perverse *and* idiosyncratic as a way of understanding a textual perversity that is so diverse that it escapes the strict definitions of homosexuality that have so often closed around it? I argue that while Stein was indeed demonstrably influenced by the behaviorist literature she was exposed to as a student, she also channeled that understanding into her work as a

²⁹⁴ The famous "Pavlovian dog" is perhaps the most enduring modern symbol of the conceptual link between the dog and behavior modification.

²⁹⁵ Trask traces a genealogy of the canine life-narrative which he proposes as a literary analogue to the dissection of canine brains in scientific literature. For example, "William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), to take an example relevant to Stein's formative years, devotes a number of its first hundred pages to the study of dissected canine brains. This is to say nothing of the literary dissection of canine consciousness found in such diverse writers as Jack London, Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, and O. Henry. These writers all tried their hand at a genre - let's call it canine life-narrative - that threatened to overwhelm the publishing world of the early twentieth century." Trask, *Cruising Modernism*, 80.

model by which to think about the author's relationship over language. For just as dogs can be made to temporarily obey before eventually asserting their own will, so too does Stein acknowledge language as a temporarily tameable but ultimately elusive animal whose joy comes in the see-sawing of dominance and unruliness its use unleashes. And that pleasure in the incomplete, the partially mastered, the childish, is what makes Stein's text perverse according to our culture's understanding of the author's proper function, but perverse in a way I will show is genuinely both feminist and queer in a politically resistant way.

If Stein produces in her work a perverse theory about the relationship between author and language, what has that other great theory of perversion – psychoanalysis – got to say about the terms in which Stein is working? Psychoanalysis as we know has been both a great enemy to queer people and critics but it has also provided remarkable tools with which to fight back against the heteronormative protocols that claim the all-knowing god's eye position on sexuality. We must try, however, to avoid “psychologizing” Stein in the way that Foucault marks the difference between psychoanalysis and psychology. One of the strengths of psychoanalysis for thinking about nonnormative sexualities is that, especially in the case of Lacan's return to Freud, it can be used as a move away from the normalizing aspects of, for example, American ego psychology. Psychoanalysis, in contrast to psychology, offers a rich, nonnormative vocabulary for understanding sexuality, especially sexualities that seem as unusual as that found in Stein's writing.²⁹⁶ And it is through combining the insights of psychoanalysis

²⁹⁶ Freud goes to great pains to explain that his choice of terminology is often based on an inherited vocabulary but that he does not wish to adopt the “moral judgment” that such a vocabulary might conventionally imply. For example, in “An Autobiographical Study,” Freud explains that “if I have described children as ‘polymorphous perverse,’ I was only using such terminology that was generally

with a formalist reading of poetics that we can appreciate a new richness of the text, that is, precisely its perversity, without imposing a normative understanding of sexuality on it. As Tim Dean says in *Beyond Sexuality*, “while neither symbol hunting nor psychobiography seem at all adequate for the interpretation of discursive practices such as poetry, nevertheless reading poems through the perspective of psychoanalytic formalism encourages one to connect distinctive syntactic patterns and structures of figuration with unconscious processes in a nonpathologizing way.”²⁹⁷ Combining a formalist and a psychoanalytic reading of literature therefore need not be inherently pathologizing. Psychoanalysis offers a comprehensive theory for understanding sexuality and sexual difference that we can usefully combine with formalist practice to produce liberating rather than normalizing readings of literature. Indeed, Dean goes so far as to say that “psychoanalysis *is* a queer theory.”²⁹⁸ Our attention, then, to the formal qualities of the text combined with an understanding of unconscious processes allows us to avoid the disciplining, or normalizing, of the text that many critics subtly, even if unintentionally, perform in favor of a more sympathetic view of the text’s perversity.²⁹⁹

current; no moral judgment was implied by the phrase. Psycho-analysis has no concern whatever with such judgments of value.” See Sigmund Freud. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. London: Hogarth Press, 1959. 20:38.

²⁹⁷ Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 183.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁹⁹ Dean describes the nonnormative aspect of his valorization of psychoanalysis as “Foucaultian” insofar as he tries to bring out the queerness inherent in psychoanalysis. While I mostly agree with Dean’s formulation of psychoanalysis itself as a queer theory, I am troubled by Dean’s ahistoricist, anti-Foucauldian tendencies. For example, Dean argues that “sexuality is only partly historical; its other dimension has to do not with nature but with the unconscious and with what Lacan calls the traumatic real - unfamiliar aspects of existence that are no more biological than they are historically produced. If the unconscious were purely a [sic] historical construct, it would be manipulable in a way that it clearly is not.” While I will agree that we do not yet have a satisfactorily comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between history and the unconscious, I am hesitant to embrace a conception of the unconscious as transhistorical, as having components that completely escape the bounds of history. To do so would be to come dangerously close to an essentialist understanding of sexuality, whether based in the unconscious or in the effects on the subject of the “traumatic real.” As the formation of the unconscious, indeed of the subject itself, is in history, it is difficult to accept Dean’s argument that sexuality is at most only partly historical. While Dean may be trying to shift the burden of an ahistorical component of sexuality away

Such an approach seems to be an especially important one for Stein since her work is among the most psychoanalyzed of modernist writers. And that approach to Stein is an understandable one given the text's unusual work with language and its presentation of what seem rather obvious Oedipal themes.³⁰⁰ As Ruddick points out, Stein would have had at least some knowledge of psychoanalysis gleaned from her brother Leo but it is likely that she was not deeply familiar with Freud. However, Ruddick rightly argues that "she made 'discoveries' in fiction that suggestively paralleled Freud's theoretical discoveries without being due to them."³⁰¹ If that is the case we might do well to think about how Stein produces a theory both of language and of perversion in her writing that could be considered a critique of psychoanalysis rather than the usual case of the other way around. What if we were to invert the usual process of psychoanalytic reading and see how Stein's own theory might tell us something more liberating and useful about psychoanalysis?

Theoretical questions now addressed, we can return to where we began our line of questioning with Stein's use of dogs in her writing. Trask opens his reading of the *less*

from an entirely transhistorical understanding of the unconscious and into the dimension of the real, the effect of that move would still be to preserve some essential component of sexuality, albeit in the effects of the real order. Though Dean calls his project Foucaultian, Foucault himself would be deeply suspicious of such a move. Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 270. For a reply to Dean on the issue of history and sexuality, see David M. Halperin, "Forgetting Foucault," in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). See also Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Butler offers an excellent reading of the formation of the subject in history and through discourse as always a subject who only comes to her subjectivity in the moment of subjection to the symbolic. Likewise, Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* that one's entry into the symbolic is contingent upon one's assumption of a "sexed" body. See Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Finally, for a rejoinder to the "historians," see Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994).

³⁰⁰ The famous opening of *The Making of Americans* with its murder of a father by a son leaps immediately to mind.

³⁰¹ Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein*, 44.

perverse Stein through her unpublished French poem “Pissez Mon Chien.” The poem reads:

Piss my dog.
Piss my dog.
Piss along the houses
If I were a concierge I would give you a kick with my foot.
Piss my dog.

Piss my dog.
Piss my dog.
If I pissed on the wall of your house you'd shoot me to death.
Piss my dog.

Piss my dog.
Piss on the streetlight
A poor tramp would be forced to clean it.
Piss my dog.³⁰²

Trask points out the disciplinary tone of this poem and the way it mandates behavior, the way it compels action. As he says, in the poem “the nature and outcome of the speech act are never in question. The address to the dog, *pissez*, takes the form of a short, terminal imperative. In this poem, there is no inferred dialogue; there is only the command, the rule, to be obeyed.”³⁰³ “Pissez Mon Chien” seems to want to enact a pure discipline that shows no trace of wavering. The speech act itself takes the form of the pure rule to

³⁰² Quoted in Trask. Gertrude Stein, “Pissez Mon Chien,” n.d., box 86, folder 1640, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The translation from the French is Trask’s. The original poem in Stein’s mangled French rendering reads:

Pissez mon chien.
Pissez mon chien.
Pissez sur le longue des maisons.
Si J’etais un concierge je vous flanquerais un coup de pied.
Pissez mon chien.

Pissez mon chien.
Pissez mon chien.
Si je pissais sur le mur de botre [sic] maison vous me tuerez avec un coup de fusil.
Pissez mon chien.

Pissex [sic] mon chien.
Pissez sur la reverbere
Un pauvre chiminot serait forcer de la nettoyer.
Pissez mon chien.

³⁰³ Trask, *Cruising Modernism*, 75.

which there is no alternative for the dog but submission or the boot. According to Trask, Stein joins this ideal of the pure rule with the figure of the canine in a way that suggests the influence of contemporary behavioral psychology.³⁰⁴ As he puts it, “the linguistic ideal for behavioral psychology is the command, and its communicative ideal is obedience compelled through the repetition of a command. In behaviorism, repetition does the work of causality.”³⁰⁵ Yet it is not entirely true that “Pissez Mon Chien” performs this direct correspondence between repetition of the pure command and causality; to say the word, to compel the rule, is not necessarily to cause submission to that rule. For we must take into account the presence of the tramp in this poem, a liminal figure who emerges from “the bottom” of the social sphere in order to mark the point of satisfaction of the speaker’s demand. This bottom derived character arises as the end toward which the dog owner’s command is directed, the logical conclusion toward which her command is leading. Even in this apparently closed system of obedience, however, there is still the suggestion of urinary non-compliance since the speaker says that the tramp “would be forced to clean it,” a conditional phrasing that leaves open the possibility that the dog will not obey and consequently there will be nothing for the tramp to clean. Despite its apparent simplicity and its incessant refrain, then, the poem proves to be a rather complex meditation on discipline, misbehaving, and the uncertainly deferred foreclosure of end-pleasure. For as long as the dog does not piss the poem can continue to indulge in the pleasurable aesthetic experience aimed at shutting itself off, yet never quite at the point of finishing.

³⁰⁴ Much of the first part of James’s *Principles of Psychology* is dedicated to this subject.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

The uncertainly utopian world of “Pissez Mon Chien,” what Trask calls a “linguistic [and] communicative ideal,” marks a pattern we find again in the world of Stein’s novel *Three Lives*. In “The Good Anna,” for instance, this utopian ideal of the dog as a figure for the closed circuit of obedience (where repetition = causality) once again becomes mixed with the perverse enjoyment of the refusal to obey. Trask begins to suggest that function his reading of Stein’s work as he describes her composition of *Three Lives* as growing out of her own translation of Flaubert’s *Trois Contes*. According to Trask, Stein

Learned to associate French with the dynamics of obedience that behaviorists sought to develop. This association factors into what readers have long experienced as the jarring stylistic inelegance of *Three Lives*. Meaning both to make and to do, for example, the French verb *faire* points to the desirability among behavioral psychologists of a constructionist theory that is simultaneously a theory of control, of *making do*. I argue that the verb “to make” shapes the basic idiom of *Three Lives* by forcing our attention to the grammar of artificial control underwriting the revisionist psychology of the new century.³⁰⁶

Faire, then, or “to make,” to compel as well as to create, is is a key component in the idea of artificial control that underwrites *Three Lives*. To place this word, with its twin meanings of dominance and creation, at the center of our understanding of the story allows us to see that making (do) and making (creating the work of art) are joined together in a linguistic knot. In other words, the creative act is dependent upon the author’s authority or control over the field of language. In order to make (create) the text the author must be able to make (do) and dominate its linguistic material. But what happens, then, if in the same way one cannot always make dogs do one likewise has limited control over language?

To the extent that this story is built on trying to tame what cannot be tamed it seems a perversely unrealizable project. Yet from the opening lines of the story it is clear

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

that “making do” is an important motive for the story’s purpose. In its opening moments, for instance, the narrator tells us that “the tradesmen of Bridgepoint learned to dread the sound of ‘Miss Mathilda,’ for with that name the good Anna always conquered. The strictest of the one price stores found that they could give things for a little less.”³⁰⁷ This opening at first seems to align “The Good Anna” with the closed circuit of discipline as fantasized in “Pissez Mon Chien.”³⁰⁸ Anna exerts her dominance, indeed conquers the tradesmen of Bridgepoint through her words. Repetition of the word itself compels submission. We hear also the language of behaviorism, as Trask claims, in the “*learned to dread*” of the tradesmen. This beginning, however, presents a unique instance of the closed-circuit model of behaviorism to which the story’s protagonist seemingly aspires. None of her other attempts at compelling perfect obedience will meet with the same unqualified success.³⁰⁹

Stein offers this opening scene in contrast to the treacherous domestic world of overtly sexual discipline, of *making*, which comprises the bulk of “The Good Anna.” We find that “Anna lived an arduous and troubled life,” a life that is arduous because of her compulsion to supervise the disobedience of those around her (3). It is the members of her household, those in the domestic space rather than the merchants of Bridgepoint, who

³⁰⁷ Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 3. All further references are to this edition and will be given by page number in the text.

³⁰⁸ Though as I’ve said, it is not an entirely closed circuit since the dog’s urinary compliance is still left in doubt by the poem’s conclusion.

³⁰⁹ Trask argues that this scene with the merchants is like most of the instances of discipline in the story in that these merchants are always in danger of slipping out of Anna’s verbal control. As he says, “if Anna ‘always conquered,’ that conquest nonetheless needs continual backing.” While I agree that that model of discipline operates in other parts of the story (namely, that sexuality confounds or exceeds discipline), I read this opening passage differently than Trask. This passage is unique in the story precisely because the tradesmen do not slip. We have no evidence that they will backslide as other characters in the story do. Instead, I read this opening as the ideal operation of Anna’s discipline, a discipline that fails in various other ways throughout the story. The tradesmen do not seem in danger of being disobedient for “the good Anna *always* conquered” them. The irony, of course, is that their strict obedience does not allow for the erotic play of discipline and is thus ultimately less erotically satisfying for Anna. Trask, *Cruising Modernism*, 98.

need to be, or so Anna thinks, constantly supervised and corrected. For example, the narrator explains that “this one little house was always very full with Miss Mathilda, an under servant, stray dogs and cats and Anna’s voice that scolded, managed, grumbled all day long” (3). Anna is, in short, the center of management in the story. In matters of sexuality, however, Anna must “scold” and “manage” only to find herself left “troubled.” Interactions that do not involve the sexual, such as Anna’s encounters with the merchants, generally fall in line with the behaviorist/experimental ideal of “Pissez.” In matters of domestic sexuality, though, Anna’s management is unable to effect the complete submission she tries so hard to achieve. She manages and corrects, but her discipline ultimately is impermanent.

Stein thus both reveals Anna’s disciplinary obsession and yet also shows how that discipline is continually confounded by sexuality. Anna’s underservant Sallie, for example, proves unruly despite Anna’s repeated remonstrations:

‘Sallie! can’t I leave you alone a minute but you must run to the door to see the butcher boy come down the street and there is Miss Mathilda calling for her shoes. Can I do everything while you go around always thinking about nothing at all? If I ain’t after you every minute you would be forgetting all the time, and I take all this pain, and when you come to me you was as ragged as a buzzard and as dirty as a dog. (4)

Sallie the servant girl is subject to Anna’s uninterrupted surveillance (“can’t I leave you alone a minute” and “if I ain’t after you every minute”) and scolding, so much so that she cannot even take a moment to admire the butcher boy. Yet she is constantly backsliding, always evading the limits of Anna’s discipline, always demanding more correction, more training. Sallie in short requires discipline in excess. Her sexuality disrupts Anna’s discipline, a phenomenon that links the servant girl with the household dogs. Sallie’s previous, untrained existence, for example, had left her “dirty as a dog.” It is that moment of being untrained that Anna recalls when Sallie inevitably disobeys. All of

Anna's efforts are to condition Sallie not to be "dirty as a dog" but to obey and ignore the butcher boy in favor of obedience to her law. It is only through the repeated failure of that discipline to take hold, however, that Anna is able to reap the perversely pleasurable reward of repetitious discipline.³¹⁰ For "truly she loved it best when she could scold" (23).

The dogs in the house similarly elude Anna's control over their sexuality. The passage that follows Anna's scolding of Sallie is a by-now familiar disciplining of the dog, Peter:

'Peter!' – her voice rose higher – 'Peter!' – Peter was the youngest and the favorite dog, - 'Peter, if you don't leave Baby alone,' – Baby was an old, blind terrier that Anna had loved for many years, – 'Peter if you don't leave Baby alone, I take a rawhide to you, you bad dog.' (4)

Again, as with Sallie, Anna compels repeatedly, as in the doubling of "Peter, if you don't leave Baby alone," and yet she is unable to achieve the idealized unity of word and causality that "Pissez" imagines. We learn that the dogs "all were under strict orders never to be bad one with the other" and that "the good Anna had high standards for canine chastity and discipline" (4). These high ideals of chastity, though, are repeatedly frustrated by both the servant girl and the pets. Even Anna's threats of physical violence, "I take a rawhide to you," are defied by the "bad" or "dirty" dog.

The threat of violence here, of taking a rawhide to the dog's backside, and implicitly a suggestion of beating the servant girl through her identification in the text with the bad or dirty dog, unites the text's discipline with the spectacle of beating. And

³¹⁰ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the pleasure that the analyst derives from her position of authority in being able to always subject the patient to more and more correction. Something analogous is happening with Anna in the pleasurable position of master, a position that is, as we know, perverse insofar as it does not seek its own effacement in end pleasure, i.e., sexual release, orgasm.

beating, as Eve Sedgwick argues, makes the backside an important cultural and psychic emblem as a kind of metonymy for discipline. According to Sedgwick:

The aptitude of the child's body to represent, among other things, the fears, furies, appetites, and losses of the people around it, back to themselves and out to others, is terrifying perhaps in the first place to them, but with a terror the child itself learns with great ease and anyway with a lot of help. And this leakage or involuntarity of meaning, the seat of this form of vulnerability, is easily located in the behind. One has, after all, behind one, by this time, something significant: the place that is signally not under one's own ocular control and also the site, by "no accident," of the memorializing outer works of an earlier struggle, bowel training, over private excitations, adopted controls, the uses of shame, and the rhythms of productivity.³¹¹

The behind is thus loaded with an "involuntarity of meaning," signifying doubly in spite of itself a space in which one is able to enact discipline, via beating, and yet also "behind one," a "place that is signally not under one's own ocular control." The behind is therefore that site which, like the dog, is most subject to the harshest form of discipline – the rhythmic stroke of physical violence – and simultaneously always suspect, always threatening to slip away from discipline. As Sedgwick says in a footnote to her article, "the near impossibility for the adult European female body of maintaining the twentieth-century disciplinary ideal of constant total muscular control, over the ambulatory rear-end, makes it especially 'meaningful' as the locus – forever hidden from one's own eyes – of an always potentially discrediting scandal."³¹² The "ambulatory rear-end" is the site, then, like the canine, of both control over the body and of slipping out of control into "potentially discrediting scandal."

Freud, of course offers another vocabulary for understanding disciplinary character through an erotic conception of the rear. According to Freud, the urge to mastery in this kind of will to power is a response to the environment produced through a

³¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Poem is Being Written," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 199.

³¹² *Ibid.*

failure to resolve the anal-sadistic stage of normal psychic development. For Freud, the subject's repeated management of those around her is a manifestation of the persistence of the anal component instinct (*Trieb*), a leftover or surplus attached to the ass that nevertheless enables the subject to disavow an interest in anality. As he says in "Character and Anal Erotism,"

Anal eroticism is one of the components of the [sexual] instinct which, in the course of development and in accordance with the education demanded by our present civilization, has become unserviceable for sexual aims. It is therefore plausible to suppose that these character-traits of orderliness, parsimony and obstinacy, which are so often prominent in people who were formerly anal erotics, are to be regarded as the first and most constant results of the sublimation of anal erotism.³¹³

Freud suggests, then, that the pleasure the child receives in the anal stage, a pleasure that arrives with the child's discovery of the erogenous potential of the anal zone (as Freud puts it, an erotogenic zone is a "seat of excitement"), becomes "unserviceable" through normal development. Sedgwick too rightly points out that the legacy of the control one learns to exert over one's backside is one that has lasting cultural and psychic significance. For the stages of psychosexual development are "normally passed through smoothly, without giving more than a hint of their existence."³¹⁴ However, "the phase of genital primacy must be preceded by a 'pregenital organization' in which sadism and anal erotism play the leading parts."³¹⁵ The normal anal-sadistic phase child resolves the component instinct (*Trieb*) and passes through it to normal sexual maturity in the form of

³¹³ Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Eroticism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 9:171. Such a person: orderly, parsimonious and obstinate, would of course colloquially come to be called "anal," that is, a "tight ass."

³¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 7:198.

³¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, "On the Transformation of Instincts With Special Reference to Anal Eroticism," in *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Joan Riviere, 5 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 2:164.

genital organization.³¹⁶ As Gayle Rubin puts it, “the child is thought to travel its organismic stages until it reaches its anatomical destiny and the missionary position.”³¹⁷

It is important to note, however, that it is “education” that anal pleasure “unserviceable” in “our present civilization.” Education disrupts the cycle of perverse anal pleasure and reroutes the child onto its anatomical (in fact, cultural) destiny.³¹⁸ Education, or training, is precisely the trope Sedgwick invokes in her description of an anal eroticism based both on correction through beating and the education of one’s behind in “toilet training.” To put it another way, the anal adult has been disciplined out of anal eroticism only to find pleasure in a different kind of discipline: the sadistic control she learns to exert over objects. Yet as Freud says, for the subject who has merely sublimated rather than resolved the anal drive, discipline returns in the form of “orderliness, parsimony and obstinacy,” all characteristic of the good Anna. Anal eroticism thus disappears in its overt form only to reemerge covertly in sadistic discipline. In this way, the erotic potential of anality is heightened for the anal erotic at

³¹⁶ For Freud’s extended explanation of the component instincts, see *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). The “sadistic” portion of the anal-sadistic phase, it is important to note, is when the child begins to view its feces as a “gift” and may often “refuse” to give that gift to its mother, thereby discovering the erotogenic potential of retaining its feces so as to stimulate the anal erotic zones. As Freud describes it in a later piece, “On the Transformation of Instincts With Special Reference to Anal Erotism” (1916), “its fæces are the infant’s first gift, a part of his body which he will give up only on persuasion by a loved person, to whom, indeed, he will make a spontaneous gift of it as a token of affection, since as a rule infants do not soil strangers.” The child’s decorous attitude toward strangers therefore increases the value of the precious fæces as a “token of affection. Freud, “On Transformation,” 168.

³¹⁷ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 184.

³¹⁸ Lacan famously extrapolates on Freud’s maxim “anatomy is destiny” in his example of the two children on the train stopping at a station and peering out the windows at the lavatory doors. From their respective positions, the boy claims that they have arrived at “Ladies” while the girl claims they are at “Gentlemen.” With this example Lacan shows that “the signifier in fact enters the signified - namely, in a form which, since it is not immaterial, raises the question of its place in reality.” Just as the signifiers “ladies” and “gentlemen” have materially entered the signified, so too do signifiers of sexual difference enter, invest, the anatomical signified. One’s destiny, then, is not based on anatomy in some natural, biological sense, but rather biology is overwritten by the symbolic such that one’s destiny is contingent upon one’s entry into the symbolic order. See Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2002), 143.

the same time that a deep sense of shame and guilt about the original anal zone are installed in the subject through the “education demanded by our present civilization.” As Freud says, “reaction-formations, or counter-forces, such as shame, disgust and morality, are created in the mind. They are actually formed at the expense of the excitations proceeding from the erotogenic zones, and they rise like dams to oppose the later activity of the sexual instincts.”³¹⁹ For the subject overly invested by anality, then, we see that counter-forces, counter-disciplines, in the form of a superego that reprimands and corrects, come to foreclose on anal eroticism through shame, disgust or morality. For “the organic sources of anal eroticism cannot be exhausted by the establishment of genital organization,”³²⁰ they need a counter-discipline to check their progress. Such a counter-discipline in this case, however, involves a psychic sleight-of-hand that nevertheless leaves a trace of its origin in an aversion to the ass.³²¹

Stein, however, was certainly no Freudian and she was unlikely to have been familiar with the complex theories of anality that Freud spun out. Yet it does seem that Stein does independently reach some of the same conclusions about the etiology of anality as Freud does. We need only look to Anna’s corrections of the dog Peter to see her disgust at the “immorality” of the dog’s sex from behind. As we saw, for example, Anna has high standards for “canine chastity and discipline,” standards that, when frustrated, lead her to label transgressors “bad dog” (Peter) or “dirty as a dog” (Sallie). When Peter does “misbehave,” it is registered as “a sad disgrace [that] did once happen to

³¹⁹ Freud, “Character,” 171.

³²⁰ Freud, “On the Transformation,” 165.

³²¹ Anna indeed has an explicit aversion to stimulating her own backside directly. For example, we learn that “no argument could bring her to sit an evening in the empty parlour, although the smell of paint when they were fixing up the kitchen made her very sick, and tired as she always was, she would never sit down during the long talks she had with Miss Mathilda” (13). Anna resists the overt physical stimulation of the backside that would come from sitting on it and instead reroutes her desire for anal stimulation into discipline.

the family” (4), a sad disgrace in the text given the morality that bristles at the image of doggy-style sex, that is, sex from behind. The response in the text to sublimated anal instinct (*Trieb*), then, is that “cleanliness, orderliness and trustworthiness give exactly the impression of a reaction-formation against an interest in what is unclean and disturbing and should not be part of the body.”³²² The lady does it seems protest too much, even to the point of threatening to beat Peter with a rawhide. Anna’s reaction-formations against the scandal of doggy-style sex reveal precisely “an interest in what is unclean,” that is, a preoccupation with the behind and the disorderliness it represents that drives her to stamp it out all around her and yet to derive intense pleasure from that very act of banishing it.

Such abjection of anality for Anna, as well as for the apparently sympathetic narrator, makes more legible the overlapping categorization of the servant girl Sallie and the dogs. For instance, “Anna was a mother now to Sallie, a good incessant german mother who watched and scolded hard to keep the girl from any evil step. Sallie’s temptations and transgressions were much like those of naughty Peter and jolly little Rags, and Anna took the same way to keep all three from doing what was bad” (9).³²³ Sallie’s transgression, we see, is “much like” the transgressions of the dogs. There is

³²² A detailed exposition of Anna’s cleanliness, orderliness and trustworthiness is outside the scope of this paper. Such an exposition is also clearly not my purpose here insofar as I do not wish to argue merely that Anna herself is an anal pervert but rather than anality is the larger condition of the text as a whole with Anna’s idiosyncrasy as a symptom of that global perversion. It is my opinion, however, that one could easily see evidence of each of these characteristics in Anna even if we were to look only at the opening encounter with the tradesmen. Freud says that anal erotics “are noteworthy for a regular combination of the three following characteristics. They are especially *orderly*, *parsimonious*, and *obstinate*. . . . ‘Orderly’ covers the notion of bodily cleanliness, as well as that of conscientiousness in carrying out small duties and trustworthiness. Its opposite would be ‘untidy’ and ‘neglectful.’ Parsimony may appear in the exaggerated form of avarice; and obstinacy can go over into defiance, to which rage and revengefulness are easily joined.” Were we to put Anna on the couch, it would not take long to identify these traits in her as a reaction-formation against the behind. Freud, “Character,” 172, 169.

³²³ The way in which Anna’s discipline and moral attitudes come to inhabit the narrator’s voice here, as in many places in the text, suggests that the erotic economy of the text itself is tied to the issue of anal eroticism. For it is not simply that Anna herself is an anal pervert, but rather that there is a kind of primary process anality that runs throughout the text.

always the danger, then, of the servant girl offering her behind to the butcher boy, of being too much like the “dirty dog.” For while the dogs provide a model of obedience when they comply with Anna’s incessant scolding, they also provide a model for slipping back out of control, for eluding Anna’s “orderliness,” for going back for more doggy-style sex. For the dog, like the girl, can be trained to not take it from behind, yet there is always the danger that the “ambulatory rear-end” will lapse back into *coitus a tergo* with all the scandal that entails.³²⁴ To be a “good girl” in “The Good Anna” is thus to be like the dogs but not too much like the dogs. For “Anna had always a firm old world sense of what was the right way for a girl to do” (13). And for Anna, “a girl was a girl and should always act like a girl” (13), except when that girl is acting like a “good dog.”

Anna’s reiterated discipline and the category of perversion, however, (as well as the corresponding support and approval the narrator seems to give to it) might not initially seem related outside of a rigidly Freudian reading of sadistic discipline. We must recall, however, that “what Anna seeks is not domestic fulfillment but a continual administration of the disorderly creatures – the ‘stray dogs and cats and people’ as Stein refers to them.”³²⁵ As Chessman puts it, “happiness occurs in Anna’s world when she can scold” and yet “it is precisely because her ‘babies’ do *not* always ‘lie still’ that she has a story at all.”³²⁶ Anna herself is, of course, a “good girl,” and yet her frustrated attempts to discipline and to adjust ironically allow a displaced form of anal eroticism, an anal-sadistic management that will always be available because its objects will never fall

³²⁴ The dog Peter is, of course, a male dog that would presumably be the active rather than the receptive sexual partner. As a metonymy for the behind, however, doggy-style sex need not be strictly or logically operating with Peter as the receptive partner. As we know from Freud, the unconscious easily allows logical mistakes or contradictions to exist side-by-side without their losing any of their psychic efficacy. The unconscious knows no contradiction.

³²⁵ Trask, *Cruising Modernism*, 99.

³²⁶ Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance*, 27, 31.

irrevocably into line. And though “to [Anna’s] thinking, in her stubborn, faithful, german soul, this was the right way for a girl to do,” that right way is dependent upon the refusal of everyone else to subscribe to its tenets (19).

Thus far we have been following a specific narrative thread in “The Good Anna,” that of the story’s perverse use of the trope of discipline and disobedience. This perverse discipline, however, is not limited to some unique pathology in the character of Anna. To the extent that we can speculate about the genealogy of Stein’s body of work, this story is an early theorization, I contend, of the author’s role as text maker. And it is played out in the style of the story in what DeKoven identifies as the stylistic bizarreness of its tone and temporality. These two stylistic qualities utilized in this text in an early form will come to dominate Stein’s work in a more advanced and fully realized way in later texts. At this point, however, the style seems to reproduce the perverse tension of making do and failing for which the story of Anna and her dogs serves as a parable.

The story’s tone is the first stylistic element that most readers probably notice and which is often off-putting to many because of its unfamiliarity. Ruddick pins responsibility on an “obtuse narrator, one who cannot quite get a grasp on the material. The narrator seems to wish to point the story in particular directions, but keeps losing the thread.”³²⁷ DeKoven agrees, noting the “avuncular simplicity, the cheerful straightforwardness of the narrator’s tone” but arguing that “while the narrative voice of *Three Lives* is consistently innocent, straightforward, mildly jolly, and approving, the content is often grotesque, sinister, ridiculous.”³²⁸ As a consequence it is difficult to get a sense of any moral position in the story since the narrative voice is so consistently jolly,

³²⁷ Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein*, 33.

³²⁸ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 29.

even in the face of tragedy and bad behavior. Moreover, as Chessman explains, “the potential for intimacy appears ... in the relation between the narrator and the characters. ... Anna’s voice mingles with the narrator’s to such an extent that the two voices often cannot be distinguished from each other.”³²⁹ For instance, this description of Anna’s opinion of her friend Mrs. Drethen’s family is a typical stylistic mingling of the narrator’s voice and her subjects: “It was a family life the good Anna very much approved and also she was much liked by them all” (29). The rhythms of the language and its meek tone remind one of the gentle immigrant woman and her own accented speech. Notice for instance the broken construction “it was a family life the good Anna very much approved,” a formulation that suggests a speaker who hasn’t got a masterful grasp of English quite yet. The overly complex sentence takes the place of any number of simpler and more direct descriptions and is resonant of a literal translation from another language. The paratactic joint of the “and” likewise implies an incomplete mastery of the speaker’s language. The tendency occurs often as in “it was some months now that Anna had been intimate with Mrs. Drethen,” a similar sounding translation from another language (29). Yet it is perhaps the narrator’s frequent depiction of a scene in what could be Anna’s own terms that best verifies Chessman’s point. “This slackness and neglect in the running of the house,” the narrator complains, “and the indifference in this mother for the training of her young was very hard for our good Anna to endure. Of course she did her best to scold, to save for Mrs. Lehtman, and to put things in their place the way they ought to be” (24). In her tone the narrator is virtually arguing Anna’s point of view, sympathetically critiquing “the slackness and neglect” of the Lehtman house while endorsing Anna’s struggle to “put things in their place the way they ought to be.” The

³²⁹ Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance*, 24.

mingling of Anna's voice with the narrator's implicates the style in advancing the thematic agenda. For instance, Chessman points out that "the energy and persistence of [Anna's] voice may intimate an interest in such goings-on that is not purely moral. Anna appears secretly, and perhaps unconsciously, to relish the deviance of her charges. ... Immediately after her reprimands, a series of stories about the dogs and their wickedness appears. The narrator, who merges here with Anna, shows evident delight in this recounting."³³⁰ The narrator herself, then, shares too in the pleasure of surveillance and correction. The prurient interest in her voice belies the wider perversity of the story and implicates the process of storytelling itself, its very style, in the perverse goings-on.

This stylistic trend is manifested as well in the abnormal temporality of *Three Lives*. As DeKoven says, "there is no climax, no denouement: just a simple, static even, with all the participants acting in characteristic ways. Crucially, development is replaced by repetition."³³¹ We have seen this sort of perversion before, one that is characteristic of Freud's understanding insofar as perversions, unlike normal genital heterosexuality, do not work towards their own effacements. And this sort of perversion is exactly what happens in the story since the dog is "prized not because he is uniformly obedient but because his stretches of disobedience render him liable to continual correction, to a more or less constant 'adjustment' to the rules of the house."³³² The behaviorist ideal of "Pissez" or even of the merchants of Bridgepoint would be ultimately unsatisfying for the true pervert because there is no disobedience and hence no possibility for reiterated pleasure, for constant adjustment. In the unrealized fantasy of "Pissez," there is only an

³³⁰ Ibid., 31.

³³¹ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 35.

³³² Ibid., 87.

end to pleasure rather than the continuous present of a pleasure without end.³³³ That parable of repetitiousness, though, is precisely the stylistic strategy of the entirety of *Three Lives*. Paul Morrison explains the significance of such a move, noting that, “the normative teleology is endangered by any teleology that is simply for pleasure, any teleology that replaces the end-pleasure of normative procreative sexuality. Fore-pleasure is thus perverse as is any other economy [including narrative ones] in which pleasure does not work towards its own effacement.”³³⁴ The stylistic temporality of *Three Lives*, then, is by definition perverse because it denies us the standard, mature, heteronormative narrative pleasure of the novel and gives us instead an immature one, one that is for pleasure and for(e) play.

Stein will later come to define this stylistic strategy as what she calls the “continuous present.” Ruddick makes a compelling argument that Stein’s work in *Three Lives* and its use of this style marks a transition point for her in which Stein both shows her debt to James and moves away from him toward a more Freudian model of the mind. As Ruddick says, “James had come to represent to her everything she questioned about the nineteenth century, and as she went about ‘killing the nineteenth century’ through a modernist literary practice, Stein pulverized the ideals that had once drawn her to James but now repelled her.”³³⁵ So while “Stein used James to hurtle herself into a modernist literary practice that was more modern than James,”³³⁶ her work in *Three Lives* straddles

³³³ “Pissez Mon Chien” produces an effect of phallic pleasure in that the command is directed at an end: obedience. Its narrative teleology is strictly normal in that the obedience of the dog and resolution of the narrative is implied in the urgency of the command and the threat of physical violence that insures that command.

³³⁴ Paul Morrison, *The Explanation for Everything* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 62.

³³⁵ Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein*, 1.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

a dualistic conception of an opposition between James and Freud.³³⁷ It is here that I take exception with Ruddick's thesis. While Stein does seem to theorize in the story some of the same ideas about mental functioning as Freud, her style refuses the normalizing and diagnostic imperative that is inherent to much of psychoanalysis. As Morrison argues, the type of style Stein begins to produce here does not comply with the narrative demands of healthy, adult sexuality. It is instead a static, "immature," and playful embrace of the now, of the continuous present. And to that extent it is a critique of Freud, a resistance to the Freudian expectation that as we mature we resolve our language into more adult modes of communication. Stein's stylistic innovations do owe much to the contributions of Jamesian notions of psychology, yet they simultaneously seem to move toward an understanding of sexuality that is gleefully polymorphously perverse.

The idea of the continuous present itself, which is so vital to the psychic economy of *Three Lives*, is one that Stein introduces explicitly in her lecture "Composition as Explanation" (1926). In describing the process of composing the *Three Lives*, Stein says that "the composition forming around me was a prolonged present."³³⁸ She continues: "I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of the continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one, it was simple it was clear to me and nobody knew why it was done like that, I did not myself although naturally to me it was natural."³³⁹ The prolonged present she describes echoes the kind of perverse narrative teleology, on a formal level, that Morrison describes. It is a formal teleology that does not move toward

³³⁷ Ruddick's account owes an unspoken debt to Harold Bloom's infamous concept of "anxiety of influence" with Stein in the position of the son who must negotiate the tradition of her fathers in order to carve a new place in the literary world for herself.

³³⁸ Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," in *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 498.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

its conclusion, towards futurity, towards the end.³⁴⁰ It is, rather, a string of present moments. We conclude one present moment, “end it,” enjoy the pleasure of that end, and move on to another moment. As Dekoven describes it, Stein “manipulates the prose surface in *Three Lives* in order to render directly what she calls a ‘continuous present’: a notion of time, derived from William James and akin to that of Henri Bergson, as a continuous process or succession of steadily shifting present moments rather than a linear progress or march from past through present to future.”³⁴¹ Wayne Koestenbaum has applauded this feature of Stein’s writing as enabling readers to savor the present of each moment and then to move on to another pleasurable moment, a stream of prolonged, perverse, endless readerly pleasure. As he says, “you are permitted to forget a Stein sentence the moment you finish reading it. Her writing perpetually toys with its own erasure: thus it always promises the reader relief from having to memorize, to learn, to sift.”³⁴² Hence, stylistic perversion. Stein “writes against maturity, against development. Her writing is ‘a rested development.’ She rests – naps, dreams, - by enjoying the arrested state of going nowhere.”³⁴³ In this way Stein has tapped into the perverse logic of both Jamesian psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis in that the experience of a stream of moments (the Jamesian theory of consciousness) is directed at the anti-phallic pleasure of the now, not the phallic pleasure of climax or futurity. Stein, in fact, reminds

³⁴⁰ Peter Brooks considers the importance of the end to narrative in his article “Freud’s Masterplot.” *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1997): 280-300.

³⁴¹ DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 27. For a reading of Stein’s complex “interest in the power of habit” that situates her work more generally among pragmatist philosophy, see Lisi Schoenbach, “‘Peaceful and Exciting’: Habit, Shock, and Gertrude Stein’s Pragmatic Modernism.” *Modernism/Modernity* 11.2 (April 2004). Cf. William James, “The Stream of Thought,” “Habit,” and “The Perception of Time” in *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1. (New York: Dover Publications, 1950).

³⁴² Wayne Koestenbaum, “Stein is Nice.” *Parnassus* 20.1-2 (1995), 312.

³⁴³ Koestenbaum’s description of Stein’s work as writing against maturity and against development fits with the long tradition of the classification of perverts as immature and incompletely developed. In Freud, for instance, the pervert is a subject who has in one way or another failed to reach the ultimate goal of normal, genital heterosexuality. Koestenbaum’s description, then, subtly plays with the notion of a perverse *écriture* by invoking the figure of immature and undeveloped, yet utopic, writing. *Ibid.*, 299.

us that her technique is one of “a continuous present and using everything and beginning again. In [*Three Lives*] there was elaboration of the complexities of using everything and of a continuous present and of beginning again and again and again.”³⁴⁴ “Beginning again and again and again” is often taken by critics to describe the style of Stein’s notorious *The Making of Americans*. However, “beginning again and again and again” is just what *Three Lives* does: always a new present, a new beginning, a stream of ends. Stein stylistically embraces the unruliness both of a tone that is too close to its subjects and a temporality she explains she doesn’t understand. For the rigid rules of narrative she substitutes the anti-mature pleasure of play. Stein celebrates, then, not the figure of the pathetic, immature Freudian homosexual but a pair of figures far more perverse and playful – the dog and the dog lover.

Contrary to what many have described as Stein’s aversion to or even ignorance of psychoanalysis, I argue that Stein’s text enacts a sort of partial agreement with the psychoanalytic understanding of the sort of anal pleasure I have been talking about. But Stein wants to do something radically different from Freud too.³⁴⁵ Kathryn Bond Stockton describes a similar process at work in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* in which she claims that Morrison “debases” Freud, taking what she can that is useful about the mode of thinking that he set in motion but inverting its value system so as to elevate what Stockton calls “bottom values.”³⁴⁶ Stein embraces a similar system of values that allows

³⁴⁴ Stein, “Composition,” 499.

³⁴⁵ As such it marks a project akin to what Jose Esteban Munoz will describe as “disidentification,” that is neither identification nor refusal but a strategic response that renovates certain aspects of a discourse as a political tool for the minoritarian subject. It is, as Munoz says, “a third way of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.” Jose Esteban Munoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

³⁴⁶ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 67-

her to be “alive to certain pleasures (and certain kinds of sex) that only one’s stepping aside from conventional values can produce.”³⁴⁷ It is both a tremendously risky and tremendously rewarding position to take. By partaking of the waste, of the supposedly perverse and immature and excessive uselessness that culture excludes, one gains access to a debased pleasure that is otherwise unavailable. So when Ruddick points out that Stein’s happy description of her style as “dirty” and “repetitive” is part and parcel with her growing acceptance of her dirty lesbianism, I argue that that dirt is what Stein likes. For she enjoys her style precisely to the degree that it is dirty and repetitive, much like the behavior of any old dog.

Stein explores this fascination in what I would suggest is her great meditation on waste, *Tender Buttons*. That text, so often noted for Stein’s recycling of the waste of language’s units into a wholly new kind of poetry, does not so much represent directly but rather uses linguistic trash to discover a novel aesthetic experience. To the degree that *Tender Buttons* is a celebration of the pleasure of waste it is, I argue, continuous with the political, erotic, and aesthetic project I have been describing. For example, in a section titled “DIRT AND NOT COPPER,” Stein writes that “dirt and not copper makes a color darker. It makes the shape so heavy and makes no melody harder.”³⁴⁸ The lines do not denote anything in any conventional sense and it is nearly impossible to discern what the author’s attitude is toward what she is describing. Is it a good thing, for instance, that dirt and not copper makes a color darker or is it a bad thing? Rather than trying to translate *Tender Buttons*, however, we can understand it as playing with dirt, with the exhausted remains of the literary. For Stein uses literature’s left-overs for her

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³⁴⁷ Ibid., 72.

³⁴⁸ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1997), 5.

and her readers' aesthetic and erotic pleasure, a pleasure many have tried to define by de-trivializing its play. Margaret Dickie, for example, in an essay tellingly entitled "Recovering the Repression in Stein's Erotic Poetry," argues that "Stein's persistent use of the word 'dirt' in 'Objects' suggests that she had ambivalent feelings about her 'not ordinary' life" and that "the persistence of 'dirty' and 'dirt' admits into the erotic experience of this text a severe and unbalancing judgment."³⁴⁹ In effect, Dickie argues that *Tender Buttons* is a text that registers Stein's response to her lesbianism, a response that Dickie sees as tainted by feelings of dirtiness. I argue instead that that dirtiness is itself a celebration, a creative embrace of the values of the dog in which dirt is not something to be ashamed of but something to enjoy.

This is what Stein is getting at, I think, in *Tender Buttons* when she says, "Pain soup, suppose it is a question, suppose it is butter, real is, real is only, only excreate, only excreate a no since. A no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since when since a no since when since, a no since, a no since when since, a no since, a no, a no since a no since, a no since, a no since."³⁵⁰ What Stockton calls "bottom values" Stein refers to as "pain soup," the nourishment of the debased. And after that pain soup comes advice to "excreate, only excreate a no since," a portmanteau of create but also excrete and ex-create. For Stein the work of art comes from the bottom and its author does not so much make it as unmake it just as Stein unmakes the rules of narrative and even of signification and opts instead for the bottom's values, which read to many a resistant reader as "no since" – nonsense. It is that strange, polymorphous perversity of Stein's

³⁴⁹ Margaret Dickie, "Recovering the Repression in Stein's Erotic Poetry," in *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, eds. Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 13.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

text that paradoxically insulates her from the charges of manifest homosexuality that have dominated Stein criticism for so long. By debasing her text stylistically through a celebration of culture's waste – unproductiveness, excretion, immaturity, insubordination – Stein really does not exude an especially lesbian identity at all, but instead creates a playful authorial persona that wants nothing to do with deciding a sexual identity. As Edleman points out, style does not as a rigidly psychoanalytic definition might have it register an erotic cathexis it does not transmit via text some real historical agent's erotic desire. Instead, as Stein knows, style performs one, a performance that is partial and is revocable, that cares not about showing the truth of the author's sexual identity or her feelings about it but rather the delightful, at once totally alien, and reassuringly familiar notion that I am I because my little dog knows me.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

The voice of the present, if it is to be known, must be caught at the risk of speaking in idioms and circumlocutions sometimes shocking to the scholar and historians of logic.

Hart Crane, "General Aims and Theories"

Any individual, no matter how revolutionary he claims to be, who does not consider the position from which he himself speaks, is a counterfeit revolutionary.

Roland Barthes, "The Fatality of Culture, the Limits of Counterculture"

The ongoing task of producing a progressive literary criticism, to which I have often referred in this work, demands that we challenge our assumptions about what we think we know about literature and to humbly accept, as responsible critics, that our own, even long-established, protocols may – and often do – from time to time prove to have politically problematic implications that we have yet to recognize. It is far too easy to embrace the conceited stance of textual mastery that ensures, as we have seen, the operations of power in a culture that is as dedicated as our own to the mechanisms of normalization and to the asymmetrical application of power over the discursively vulnerable. But we must labor against this tendency that often seems to be built into literary criticism, created as it is by narcissistic human beings, and to struggle as much as we can to deliver critique from our own worst tendencies in favor of making not just critique but the wider world a better and more humane place for all.

That goal is not an easy one to achieve since so much of modern Western culture, including as we have seen certain aspects of literary criticism itself, is allied in favor of the status quo. Indeed it may even seem impossible to overturn that discourse given the

tremendous odds so often marshaled against a progressive critical agenda. “Politics,” Lee Edelman explains, “however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order.”³⁵¹ The spirit and goals of progressive critique, then, are not fulfilled by mere political rhetoric, conservative or liberal, because as Edelman explains, all political rhetoric serves to affirm structures of domination that preexist and are independent of any specific political movement. Instead of proposing a strictly political rhetoric or simply agitating for a particular political purpose, I mean this project to work toward the vital goal of denaturalization that Roland Barthes describes in the opening pages of *Mythologies*, by addressing

A feeling of impatience at the sight of ‘naturalness’ with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.³⁵²

In my view it is this still unfinished project described by Barthes that is the essential labor ahead for any work that aims to operate under the sign of progressive critique – to describe what is still hidden in the ideological construction of what goes without saying, affirming not the social structure but cutting through its obfuscations and imagining its structuring grammar differently.

Within the broader outlines of this progressive project lies the domain of sexuality, that subjectivizing principle that is, as Edelman suggests, at the heart of the social order’s self-affirming figuration of itself to itself. Sexuality is that field of subjectivity and category of analysis that literary criticism is predictably defensive about,

³⁵¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

³⁵² Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 11.

even in its most politically “liberal” moments. But we must press literary criticism to move beyond what has remained its relation to homosexuality as variously either acknowledged, tolerated, accepted, or even “celebrated” in the name of diversity of human experience. What is needed instead of such socially defensive lip-service is a radical and (what can only be) voluntary critical re-orientation of literary criticism from within, a part of which is a long overdue self-analysis of its own critical terms and methods; one of these re-evaluations (of style) I have undertaken in the preceding pages. For literary criticism as we know it has been far from unaffected by the normalizing protocols of modern Western culture. As Foucault argues in *The Use of Pleasure*, one of our culture’s prime directives is to cause “individuals to recognize themselves as subjects of a ‘sexuality,’ which was accessible to very diverse fields of knowledge and linked to a system of rules and constraints.”³⁵³ Literary criticism, as one of those “very diverse fields of knowledge,” has participated in this project, even at those times when it has claimed to resist it, insofar as it has been complicit by not turning a more critical eye toward the tools it uses – like style – that are structured by a will to knowledge about sexuality. To the degree that literary criticism retains style in its current form (and by no means should we assume that it is the only category that is tainted in this way), it takes part in a deeply troubling “hermeneutics of desire” that “individuals [are] led to practice, on themselves and on others,” and for “which their sexual behavior was doubtless the occasion, but certainly not the exclusive domain.”³⁵⁴

Nearly two decades ago, Eve Sedgwick made the case for the vital importance of hetero/homo definition to our culture and yet despite the broad influence her work has

³⁵³ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 4.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

had upon what will surely be generations of critics, the full import of what she has to say has not yet seeped all the way down to genuinely transform our literary critical practice. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick explains that “new, institutionalized taxonomic discourses – medical, legal, literary, psychological – centering on homo/heterosexual definition proliferated and crystallized with exceptional rapidity in the decades around the turn of the century, decades in which so many of the other critical nodes of the culture were being, if less suddenly and newly, nonetheless also definitively reshaped.”³⁵⁵ What Sedgwick anticipates here is the critical need for those counter-discourses that seek to complicate or overturn the culture’s structuring hetero/homo division to also look inward and see how they too have been caught by the riptide of this cultural reshaping. It is not enough, then, for literary criticism to point out instances of homophobia, for its own basic methodology – in the form of its sexualized understanding of style – is implicated in that same cultural logic. For while “modern Western culture has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge, it becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms other languages and relations by which we know.”³⁵⁶ As a language that, as we have seen, intersects in myriad ways with sexuality, literary criticism has likewise become transformed itself, transformed in way that we allow to remain in the dark at our own peril.

I do not mean to conclude on an ominous note, for while I do consider literary criticism and popular culture’s understanding of style and sexuality to be a serious and urgent matter, I also have faith that it is not a lost cause to hope it can be different. For

³⁵⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 2.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

like Sedgwick, though I have looked to the past for examples of the practice that I am describing and criticizing, I also hope “to denaturalize the present, rather than the past – in effect to render less destructively presumable ‘homosexuality as we know it today.’”³⁵⁷ It is true that we can’t change the past but we also need not allow history to be for us, like for Stephen Dedalus, a nightmare from which we cannot awake. What we can do is to progress forward, to open our eyes to our critical presumptions and to use our newfound knowledge as a way of thinking style and sexuality in a new and non-disciplinary way. For we can, as Barthes says, challenge what goes without saying and we can think and say it differently, not from within the phobically protected sanctum of common sense but from outside in the sight of a renewed kind of critique. In order to do that with style, however, we must “stand detached from it, bracketing its familiarity, in order to analyze the theoretical and practical context with which it has been associated.”³⁵⁸ Only then, I’d wager, can we successfully rethink the sexual politics of style and, as Barthes says, bring about a revolution.

³⁵⁷ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 48.

³⁵⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 3.

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