SEX, AESTHETICS, AND MODERNITY IN THE BRITISH ROMANCE OF ITALY, 1870-1914

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is about the desire for the foreign and the desire for the past. In particular, this dissertation argues that late Victorian and Edwardian writers—particularly Walter Pater, J. A. Symonds, Vernon Lee, and E. M. Forster—used narratives about travel to Italy in order to articulate non-normative sexualities in terms of the foreign, the anachronistic, and the southern. In this study, I examine a set of texts from the turn of the last century that express or attempt to make sense of same-sex desires at a time before a notion of sexual identity rooted in sexual object choice could be taken for granted. In the absence of a widely accepted model (affirmative or otherwise) for their desires or the kinds of social collectivity that they dimly intuited or explicitly longed for, these writers turned to the foreign in pursuit of new ways of being in the world. For them, Italy could be represented as a place that permitted, or even encouraged, erotic and social relations that were not possible in a supposedly deficient and oppressive modern Britain. In articulating sexuality in terms of Italy, they drew on and revised a range of nineteenth-century discourses about travel, culture, history, and art that were linked to discourses of race and evolutionism. Anchoring my analysis in the categories of space, sex, and genre, I illuminate the relations between politics and form and contend that the intra-European distinction between north and south structured Victorian discourses of history, sexuality, and aesthetics.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this dissertation was a long and often uncertain process, and many people contributed to its success. It is a pleasure to thank Lauren Goodlad, who has overseen this project from its very earliest stages, for her penetrating questions, meticulous editing skills, and unwavering support, as well as a couple of well-timed interventions. I owe a debt of gratitude to Julia Saville, who always saw the big picture and prompted me to return to the questions that initially motivated me. Matthew Hart, Hina Nazar, and Joseph Valente also provided crucial support along the way, and I would be remiss if I failed to mention the seminars that I took with Jed Esty, Antoinette Burton, and Shefali Chandra, which prompted me to take up some of the questions that eventually led to this dissertation.

Thanks also to the Graduate College and the Department of English for generous fellowship support over the last two years. The British Modernities Group at the University of Illinois was also an important and refreshing forum that provided much food for thought, as well as the opportunity to present my work to a sympathetic audience at various stages.

I could not have completed this dissertation without the support and encouragement of a remarkable group of friends and colleagues. Christy Scheuer was often the first to read my chapters when I was ready to involve another set of eyes, and her tireless encouragement and intellectual sympathy helped me to turn things around when I was foundering and to rediscover purpose and enjoyment when I had gotten lost in my notes. The last seven years are unimaginable without Kelsey Keyes, whose friendship I depended on in good times and bad. Weekly dinners at the Black Dog with Rogan Carr were also instrumental in keeping me motivated and grounded during this last year. Finally, I thank Colin Ennis, whose love and wit help me to keep thinking about what happens after the dissertation is over.
The debts owed to family are often the largest and least capable of being accounted for. Thanks to my mother for her love and unwavering encouragement; to Jacqueline Booker for opening up a new world for me when I was too young to know what I was missing; to Lorraine Harness for more practical good deeds than I can thank her for; and to my father, whose example of hard work and integrity lives past him.
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INTRODUCTION

It is as difficult ... to trace the dividing-line between the real and the romantic as to plant a milestone between north and south.
—Henry James

This dissertation is about the desire for the foreign and the desire for the past. In particular, this dissertation argues that late Victorian and Edwardian writers—particularly Walter Pater, J. A. Symonds, Vernon Lee, and E. M. Forster—used narratives about travel to Italy in order to articulate non-normative sexualities in terms of the foreign, the anachronistic, and the southern. Since Foucault’s History of Sexuality announced the emergence of the homosexual as a species during the late nineteenth century (43), a wide range of theorists, historians, and critics have taken up his provocation in order to describe the historicity of desire. In this study, I examine a set of texts from the turn of the last century that express or attempt to make sense of same-sex desires at a time before a notion of sexual identity rooted in sexual object choice could be taken for granted. In the absence of a widely accepted model (affirmative or otherwise) for their desires or the kinds of social collectivity that they dimly intuited or explicitly longed for, these well-educated and generally privileged writers turned to the foreign in pursuit of new ways of being in the world. For them, Italy could be represented as a place that permitted, or even encouraged, erotic and social relations that were not possible in a supposedly deficient and oppressive modern Britain. Thus, this homoerotic Italophile literature presents an alternative—or, in Symonds’s case, a direct response to—the medical model of homosexuality that was

1 For a sampling of works on British sexual history in particular, see Weeks, Cook, Cocks, Kaplan, Marcus, Sinfield, and Vicinus. For a sampling of works on the international or imperial contexts of sexuality, see McClintock, Aldrich, Hyam, Forman, Mosse, Puar, Grewal and Kaplan, and Wallace.
emerging at the same time. In articulating sexuality in terms of Italy, they drew on and revised a range of nineteenth-century discourses about travel, culture, history, and art that were linked to discourses of race and evolutionism.

The literary genre that these texts most struggle with in expressing their longings and fears is the romance. The structuring contradiction of the romance is made clear by Patricia Parker when she defines it as a genre that “simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object” (4). This dual movement of pursuit and digression is readily visible in these narratives about desires that almost always fail to reach their objects. Italy promises to be a queer space that puts its northern visitors in touch with beauty and the sensual body. However, for the most part, the journeys that these texts narrate end in failure, and their protagonists are often left dead or profoundly disappointed. Italy therefore takes on a dual significance: as both a revivifying garden where Britons discover themselves and as an enervating grave where they become disoriented and lose their way. British Italophile literature is thus profoundly paradoxical and profoundly self-conscious. It puts into play desires (which cannot be taken for granted or unequivocally expressed) for acts and relationships (which may not exist in the cultural lexicon) in a place whose most salient characteristics are often represented as both enticing and dangerous. These texts hold up objects of desire that they disavow and weave fantasies that they interrogate.

The encounter between a sexually repressed north and an erotically charged south is a familiar story, but how do we account for the range of responses and outcomes that this encounter engenders? How do we make sense of the ambivalent combination of desire, respect, sympathy, and chauvinism that these texts express toward Italy? Building on insights from postcolonial studies, queer theory, transnational studies, and cosmopolitan political theory, I
argue that this fascination with Italy becomes intelligible when it is understood in light of the nineteenth-century tendency to understand cultural difference in terms of differing stages of historical development. Both European and southern, Italy holds an uncertain place in nineteenth-century evolutionist narratives. Portrayed as Britain’s southern other—Catholic, politically divided, and economically underdeveloped—Italy can represent Europe’s pre-modern past or provide a cautionary projection of Britain’s future downfall. At once young and old, underdeveloped and civilized, primitive and decadent, Italy becomes a focus of British desires and fears about civilization and the erotic. In literary representations, these desires and fears cause the spaces of both Italy and Britain to exceed the status of mere background and become aural, thus changing the way characters inhabit and respond to these spaces. When texts attempt to negotiate this heady mixture, they raise fundamental questions about the relationship between the aesthetic, the erotic, and the social.

This dissertation considers a range of genres and theorizes the relation between literary form, space, temporality, and geopolitics. In particular, it examines the persistence and variability of romance across these diverse kinds of narrative. The period it covers begins in the years just after Italian unification (1861-1870), as the poetry of the Risorgimento settled down into the prose of governing and British views of Italy became more explicitly eroticized and aestheticized. In the first chapter, I argue that Walter Pater’s essay on Johann Winckelmann in Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) dramatizes the notion that appreciating, possessing, or talking about works of art from the Italian past can be ways of imagining a homoerotic community of taste. I then turn to two writers, John Addington Symonds and Vernon Lee, whose writing about art, Italy, and the Renaissance closely link them to Pater.

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2 For a sampling of works on evolutionism and primitivism, see Hoad, Bleys, Stocking, Buzard. For works particular to Italy, see Aldrich, Pemble, Siegel, and Buzard.
Chapter 2 discusses Symonds’s memoirs, letters, histories, and travel essays as they relate to his construction of Italy as a place capable of harmonizing the deeply felt contradictions that same-sex relations between men created for him. Chapter 3 uses Lee’s writings on travel and aesthetics as a lens for a reading of her *fin-de-siècle* supernatural fiction, which depicts impossible desires for androgynous figures from Italy’s past and whose gothic elements mirror and invert the characteristics of romance. Finally, chapter 4 shows how questions of desire and recognition function in terms of the interplay between romance and realism in E. M. Forster’s two Edwardian Italian novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908).

Nineteenth-century writers frequently attempted to make sense of sexuality in terms of space and time: by looking abroad and by looking to the past. Sigmund Freud famously referred to homosexuality as an “arrest of sexual development” (Hoad 141), Edward Carpenter associated homosexuality with what he called “primitive folk,” who could still be located in the native tribes of Africa and North America (Hoad 137-138, Gandhi 34-66) and Richard Burton posited what he called a “Sotadic zone,” encompassing northern Africa and southern Europe, in which sodomy was supposedly endemic (Hoad 138). Neville Hoad’s recent essay claims that “All the usual suspects in Victorian theorising of ‘homosexuality’... draw on notions of national, racial and cultural otherness” that are rooted in the discourse of evolutionism (138). This discourse was dedicated to what Johannes Fabian terms a “denial of coevalness,” or “a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream” (Fabian 17).³ When evolutionism and the study of sexuality come together, space becomes temporalized, and the peoples living in supposedly anachronistic spaces become windows onto an Edenic or savage erotic past.

³ For a classic account of the role of evolutionism in Victorian anthropology, see Stocking.
Following Fabian, I argue that sexual politics, like geopolitics, “has its ideological foundations in chronopolitics” (144).

This study is indebted to the work of Edward Said, and particularly to the idea of “imaginative geography” developed in Orientalism (54-55). Theorists since Said have done much to show that Britishness was not born in splendid isolation, but took form in relation to complex international networks of migration, imperialism, and capital. However, when postcolonial scholars treat Europe monolithically, ignoring intra-European division, they risk forgetting that “Europe” is as much a rhetorical invention as “Asia.” In shifting the focus from the opposition between East and West to the supplementary opposition between North and South, scholars like Roberto Dainotto, Lauren M. E. Goodlad, Nelson Moe, and Matthew Reynolds have illuminated the cultural and geographical divisions within Europe. As Dainotto puts it, Europe “could fathom its identity not only by opposing itself to the Orient but by matching itself against those internal elements of Western society” that were thought to lag behind in the European march of progress (54). A consideration of Victorian representations of Italy provides one way of understanding this dialectic between north and south, as well as an opportunity for rethinking articulations of cultural difference and their relationship to narratives of modernity. The south was not merely a backward other against which the industrialized and politically dominant north could differentiate itself, but also an anterior self. Britain and its others are not merely like or unlike, but temporally and spatially situated: young or old, developing or decadent, near or far, here or there. My dissertation thus contributes to a growing body of transnational and global scholarship that thinks beyond the borders of individual nations and beyond the dyad of colonizer and colonized.
A History of Picturesque Decline

By the time Pater began writing in the 1860s, there had already been a rich tradition of representations of Italy in British literature. Renaissance dramatists from Shakespeare to John Webster frequently set their plays in Italy, and their often violent plots lent inspiration to Ann Radcliffe at the end of the eighteenth century for the murderous Italian aristocrats in her gothic novels. In the nearly two hundred years between Shakespeare and Radcliffe, however, Italy’s geopolitical position had changed dramatically, due to “a radical inversion in the relations of force and cultural prestige between Italy and western Europe” during the seventeenth century (Moe 14). The Italian peninsula had been politically fragmented since the Middle Ages, but during the Renaissance it had been sufficiently powerful to consider itself the center of European civilization. Over the course of the seventeenth century, however, its separate pieces came under the domination of its neighbors—principally France, Austria, and Spain—and foreigners and Italians alike agreed that the peninsula was in decline. By the eighteenth century, it was seen as a place whose best days were behind it, but which, for the enlightened visitor, was still a valuable repository of art as well as a window onto the glories of the past. Travelers commented on its “decadence, corruption, weakness, political and moral passivity,” and Montesquieu wrote that “it seems that their only reason for existence is to mark the spot where those great cities once stood of which history has spoken so profusely” (qtd. in Moe 15). The twin ideas of Italy as the past and Italy as a museum are thus very old, but what changed with the late-eighteenth-century beginnings of the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie was an increased emphasis in the north on material progress and technological development as the measure of society. Understood in these terms, according to Nelson Moe, “Italy had not simply fallen from its
previous heights; it was *backward* with respect to the most advanced, modern societies in Europe” (17).

This shift, from being *associated* with the past to being thought of as actually *belonging* to the past, was crucial for the nineteenth-century understanding of Italy and to the texts that I discuss in this dissertation. If the status of a culture can be measured by its mastery over nature and if cultures can therefore be ranked in a hierarchical schema in which “better” cultures can be understood as further along on a temporal line and “savage” cultures as lagging behind, then to travel from an “advanced” place to a “backward” place was also to travel back in time. It was this shift that allowed Victorian anthropologist E. B. Tylor to position the Italians as a kind of threshold race between northern European modernity and the even tardier peoples of Africa and Asia (Stocking 162).

According to Roberto Dainotto, this negative evaluation of Italy was not merely a local matter, but was essential to the modern notion of what it meant to be European. The idea of Europe emerged from its opposition to the “Orient,” first in ancient Greek military conflicts with the Persians and later during the Ottoman invasion of Europe (Dainotto 18-19, 23-25); but the opposition through which Europe was defined changed during the Reformation, when the “Catholic south took, in Protestant eschatology, the place of antithesis once assigned to the Muslim of the East” (44). Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, northern Europe consolidated its hegemony; major powers exercised control over minor southern states and justified this dominance with a new philosophy of history as progress that privileged the northern Moderns over the southern Ancients. As Dainotto argues, by the eighteenth century, “it is no longer the confrontation with the exotic Other (the Persian, the Muslim, the American savage, and so on) that interests the theorists of Europe, but rather a dialectical confrontation of Europe
with itself, with its own internal Other. History, so to speak, unfolds as a geography pitting a past of Europe—the Greek and Roman south—against its most luminous and giddy present—what Paul Hazard calls ‘the light from the North’” (51). The north/south divide within Europe can then be understood as a division between Europe’s present and its past: “The south was a deficiency of Europeanness... and Europe’s Other was to be found, as in a nightmare, within Europe’s own borders” (Dainotto 55). In other words, one could measure one’s Europeanness against the non-European without actually having to leave Europe.

At the same time that the south was being positioned as modern Europe’s abject other, there were voices that questioned the values that underwrote this particular ideal of European modernity. Given the sense of modernity’s costs, many writers felt compelled to look backwards to previous stages of historical development as in the Victorian cult of the medieval or, in a more internationalist frame of mind, outward to places that supposedly still inhabited those earlier stages. In this post-Romantic re-evaluation of modernity, Italy could be seen as beautiful rather than benighted. This response does not reject the developmental model so much as it reconfigures that model’s scale of values. If Britain’s problems were thought to be symptomatic of excessive modernity, Italy’s supposed lack of modernity made it an appealing foil. For writers disoriented by technological and social changes, horrified by industrial ugliness, or suffering under the artificial restrictions of civilization, Italy promised to reorient them to the vital roots of humanity existing in harmony with nature. Having been spared industrial upheaval, Italy’s ruins and its poverty could be seen as picturesque rather than as the signs of a decaying civilization.

Italy’s supposed combination of primitive values with the best of European high culture made it especially attractive for the writers that I discuss. Italy was a land supposedly gifted with
the profusion of nature and the profusion of art—in Matthew Reynolds’s words, a “compound realm of nature and culture” (77). It was not only closer to nature, but also promised new levels of personal, aesthetic, and erotic fulfillment. If any primitive place could appeal to someone of a romantic disposition seeking to question the values of modernity and valorize the supposedly more natural and sensual people living there, then Italy was especially attractive to writers and artists because it promised a high degree of aesthetic sophistication without the standardization and repression attendant upon modernity. In seeming to synthesize nature and culture—possessing a landscape as appealing as its historic architecture and people as beautiful as its statues—Italy could become a perfect haven for the artistic temperament.

Yet, some writers warned that it was possible to have too much of a good thing. According to Montesquieu’s climatological theory of history, the hospitable climate that made Greece and Rome the early centers of European civilization eventually left them without the incentive to develop further. On the other hand, the north’s cold climate, which was initially a disadvantage, produced a certain kind of character—disciplined, hard-working, and democratic—capable of developing the strong political institutions and complex technologies that ultimately enabled the north to dominate.⁴ Ruskin captures this dynamic when he explains the difference between north and south in *The Stones of Venice*: “imagine the difference between the action of a man urging himself to his work in a snowstorm, and the action of one laid at his length on a sunny bank among cicadas and fallen olives, and you will have the key to a whole group of sympathies” (186). In this instructive diptych, the northern man lives under miserable circumstances that make his action heroic, whereas the southern man lives in a world whose olive-strewn fields promise to satisfy all desires and make concerted action unnecessary. In

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⁴ For a more complete account of the climatological theory of history that Montesquieu outlines in *The Spirit of the Laws* as it relates to Italy, see Dainotto 55-80 and Moe 23-27.
Corinne, Madame de Staël explains that even works of art in Italy are the product of nature rather than individual effort or talent: “in the South people naturally express themselves in the most poetic language; it is as if they breathe it in from the atmosphere and are inspired by the sun” (23). Italy’s fertility means that its inhabitants need not work too hard to eat; likewise, its beauty means that its inhabitants can easily produce art of comparable beauty. Therefore, doing what one wants is all that is required in order to make a beautiful life.

Predictably, such a freely given gift carries hidden costs. According to both Montesquieu and Staël, Italy has long benefited from its natural advantages without going beyond them and has therefore remained static, left further and further behind by the north’s ever-advancing pluck and ingenuity. Because, according to this view, Italy’s civilization was a spontaneous outgrowth of nature, it cost nothing and required no labor, thus disqualifying it from genuine political and material progress. According to Montesquieu, a warm climate has as many drawbacks as advantages: “More lively passions multiply crimes that will satisfy those same passions,” and “the cowardice of the peoples of warm climates has almost always made them slaves” (qtd. Dainotto 58-59). For Staël, nature itself can come to seem threatening in Italy: the Neapolitan countryside “recalls what one knows of the terrifying vegetation of Africa. These plants arouse a kind of fear; they seem to belong to a violent, overbearing nature” (188-89). Even art suffers in the absence of hard work, because the Italians “refuse to make this effort and flatter themselves that they can discover everything through the imagination, just as their fertile land produces fruit without being cultivated,” and they therefore content themselves with shallow virtuosity (27). In Byron’s words, this is Italy’s “fatal gift of beauty” (Childe IV.43), since the idyllic harmony of nature and culture that had once seemed so beguiling begins to fall apart. A too-powerful nature suppresses the personal and social cultivation that it was supposed to foster, and men and women
are left without will or character. The ultimate expression of this fatal gift are the lazzaroni of Naples, who “Do not even know their own names, and go to confession to admit sins anonymously since they cannot say what the name of the sinner is” (Staël 191).

Even if one turns away from the beauty of the olive grove or the allure of the bordello in favor of the improving study of Italy’s art and history, there are still plenty of potential dangers. The student of art in Rome is haunted by complementary fears of lack and excess, of either never being able to see it all or being overwhelmed by the attempt to do so. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun, Hilda goes to Rome in hopes of becoming a great painter, but finds she can do no more than copy the works of the masters, and in Henry James’s Roderick Hudson, Italy’s emphasis on art and style lead Roderick to achieve success as a painter at the cost of all moral feeling. George Eliot’s Dorothea goes to Rome, “the city of visible history,” for her honeymoon, but for her its history is both too visible and not visible enough; she is bewildered by its “stupendous fragmentariness” and feels crushed by “the weight of unintelligible Rome” (Middlemarch 192-93). Even the comparatively urbane protagonist of Arthur Hugh Clough’s Amours de Voyage finds Rome’s profusion less than instructive. He writes that “Rome disappoints me much; I hardly as yet understand, but / Rubbishy seems the word that most exactly would suit it,” and likens its ruins to “a marvellous mass of broken and castaway wine-pots” (I.19-20, 40). In her travel essay on Venice, Vernon Lee links that city’s historical and aesthetic saturation with a peculiar state of emotional sensitivity and exhaustion: “It brings up, with each dip of the oar, the past, or rather the might-have-been; it dissolves my energies like its own moist and shifting skies; it brings a knot into my throat and almost tears into my eyes, like a languorous waltz or a distant accordion” (Hauntings 341).
If so far in this introduction I have blurred the boundaries between nations and between periods of time, that is because Victorian writers about Italy were profoundly influenced by their Romantic predecessors. When Victorians traveled to Italy they were just as likely to carry a copy of Corinne (or, if they were disciples of Carlyle, Goethe’s Italian Journeys) as they were to consult Childe Harold. However, I would also like to make clear what I think is distinctive about the Victorian experience of Italy. First, the experience of advancing industrialization fundamentally altered the Victorian view of Italy, rendering it both more different from Britain and more necessary as its counterpoint. Second, in the age of Lyell and Darwin, evolutionary theory became a popular dimension of the Victorian worldview that emphasized and encouraged thinking about culture in long and developmental terms. Third, the high profile of the Risorgimento, the movement for Italian independence and unification, made it possible to see Italy as a culture that could potentially modernize itself, even if this sentiment fades somewhat after the successes of the 1860s.

The “Condition of England” took on special urgency for Victorian writers like Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold, and John Ruskin not only because industrialization and urbanization created spectacular upheavals in the organization of society, but also because they were thought to limit the possibilities for sensual and emotional experience, spontaneity, and imagination. Carlyle complains that the nineteenth century was “the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word,” and that individual creativity and action are quashed by the imperative to subordinate them to “rule and calculated contrivances” (42). Dickens’s Hard Times depicts industrial Coketown as an empire of fact most notable for its oppressive sameness: the town “contained several large streets all very like one another, and

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5 Thus, along with recent studies by O’Connor, Reynolds, and Siegel, I reject C. P. Brand’s contention that Victorian literature about Italy is a mere echo of the Romantics—in his words, “rather a survival of the early nineteenth-century fashion than a sign of any deep or widely-felt interest in Italy” (x).
many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another” (27), and which Coketown’s children helplessly rebel against. By contrast, in *Pictures from Italy*, Dickens describes the color and variety of Italian houses and discovers the “half-sorrowful and half-delicious” pleasure of “rambling through these places gone to sleep and basking in the sun” (65). Perhaps most relevant to my argument is Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, which used Italy as an instructive example for an England he thought was losing touch with its aesthetic and spiritual roots.

In the view of these writers, Britain’s political and industrial development came at the cost of aesthetic and social fulfillment. Material progress might have been impressive, but they thought that it had created a culture of standardization that supplanted the knowable communities of England’s past. In their view, Britain had become what James Buzard calls an “anticulture,” characterized “either as a state of arid commodification and moral apartness existing among a people whose physical adjacency mocked real community... or as a state of disastrous and inescapable interconnection” (*Disorienting* 21). As opposed to the supposedly organic harmonious communities of “traditional” society, modern society is condemned for its lack of authentic relationality, so that the social connections that do exist are felt to be either woefully inadequate or oppressive. From this perspective, civilization’s demand for sublimation ceases to enable the socialization of eros and begins to degrade it.

Italy was certainly an important source of inspiration for second-generation Romantics such as Percy Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron who so influenced Victorian Italophile literature, but the Victorians approached Italy in a significantly different way. The Romantics tended to use Italy as the background and reflection of their own psychological states rather than as an opportunity for criticizing England. Shelley’s “Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples”
captures this mood perfectly, as does the famous fourth canto of Byron’s *Childe Harold*. Having arrived in Venice, Harold sees the city as a grander image of his own sense of transience and loss: “To meditate amongst decay, and stand / A ruin amidst ruins, there to track / Fall’n states and buried greatness” (IV.25). Even in Madame de Staël’s *Corinne*, perhaps the premier Romantic narrative of the encounter between north and south, Italy seems to need Britain more than Britain needs it. The Scottish Lord Nelvil is charmed by Italy and falls in love with the half-Italian poet Corinne, but he ultimately decides that he must fulfill his duty to his father and make his life back in Great Britain, leaving Corinne as representative of Italy to pine away and die in the absence of the manly energy of the north. By contrast, Victorians like Elizabeth Barrett Browning positioned Italy in a wider historical and social context that made it even more important for Britain. In *Aurora Leigh*, Browning expands on *Corinne*’s largely aesthetic and ethical concerns, rewriting its plot in order to put Italy in dialogue with the problems of urban poverty and industrialization and even pointing the way towards Italian renewal. Most significantly, in this telling England and Italy (as represented by Aurora, a half-English and half-Italian poet, and her cousin, the hard-headed social reformer Rodney) need one another. By the end of the narrative, Aurora is back in Italy, independent but lonely, when a maimed Rodney shows up in need of her love and care.

One of the most important changes in British opinion about Italy was the increasing support for Italian independence during the 1840s and 50s, since this support granted the Italian people agency and the ability to shape their own history. Where previously Italians had been seen as childishly backwards, the possibility that Lombardy and Piedmont could act in concert with Naples in order to throw off foreign influence implied that Italy could grow up and regain its former status in European affairs, especially if it could be seen as attempting to realize the

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6 See for example O’Connor, Rudman, and Reynolds.
process of modernization and liberalization that Britain had already achieved. Liberal opposition to the authoritarian rule of the Austria-dominated north and the Bourbon-dominated south, anti-Catholic opposition to the political power of the Church in the Papal States, and the vocal advocacy of charismatic Italian exiles in London—most notably Giuseppe Mazzini—made support for the Italian Risorgimento an increasingly fashionable cause in Parliament and drawing rooms alike. From the late 1840s through the 1860s, writers as different as Arthur Hugh Clough, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Meredith, and Algernon Charles Swinburne wrote works sympathetic to Italian independence. However, after British supporters saw their goals fulfilled when Italy became an independent nation-state in 1861, the fervency of support also faded.

For the writers I discuss in this dissertation, all of whom began writing after Italian unification was a fait accompli and whose political commitments tended to be ambivalent if not lukewarm, Italian nationhood was no longer at the forefront of their imagination. All of them traveled to Italy: Pater and Forster did so only occasionally, but Symonds had a seasonal residence in Venice and Lee’s primary home was in Florence. Perhaps even more importantly, all of them knew Italy very well and spent a significant portion of their careers writing about it. Pater, Symonds, and Lee were considered experts on it in their own day and were instrumental in defining the Italian Renaissance for English audience. Only Forster, with just two major works set in Italy, could be accused of having a merely casual interest. Despite the importance of Italy to their literature, these writers were primarily interested in Italy’s past or in its present-day primitiveness rather than in its future. Although Pater’s insistence on the Italian Renaissance as a movement of liberty resonates with the Risorgimento and some of Lee’s stories can be read as indirectly supportive, neither had had much to say explicitly about Italian affairs. Symonds is

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7 For overviews of Victorian historiography of the Renaissance, see Fraser and Bullen.
generally skeptical of Italian nationhood, and only adds a somewhat perfunctory commendation of the achievement of independence at the end of his history of *The Renaissance in Italy*.

The texts I discuss in this dissertation use representations of Italy primarily to explore ideas about art, eros, and history. As a place that was supposedly less developed, Italy could be seen as closer to nature and the body. As a place more associated with the past (whether that past was arcadian, ancient, or medieval) it could present alternatives that were not available in places where modern exigencies held sway. In their capacity as privileged travelers freed from the necessity to work and—for those who could get off the regular tourist route—freed from the watchful eyes of their countrymen, these writers could imagine Italy as a place that existed outside the imperatives of productivity, self-discipline, and social restraint. Italy was a place where one could get lost in history, rediscover the pleasures of sensual beauty, or cultivate more subtle forms of sensibility. For Pater and Lee in particular, Italy was itself a queer place, existing under a different system of sexuality and offering new kinds of erotic experience.. All of the texts that I discuss in this dissertation ask whether or not erotic freedom and an aesthetic orientation to the world are compatible with the forms of social life to which Britons might already be attached through habit or affection. Travelers may be enchanted or disenchanted with Italy to varying degrees, but they must also consider how the mode of life they find there—by turns liberating or restraining, attractively pastoral or dauntingly sophisticated—is related to some other life located back at home.

**Ambiguous Spaces, Ambivalent Genres**

The erotic, ethical, and historical questions that this Italophile literature raises are deeply implicated in space, and it therefore presents an ideal case for understanding the literary
importance of place and space. Critics like Mikhail Bakhtin, Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, and Franco Moretti, among others, have demonstrated that space and place are useful interpretive categories not only for documenting ideological representations, as in postcolonial analyses of imaginative geographies, but also for bringing to light the crucial links between politics, form, and genre. As Moretti claims, “geography is not an inert container” (1); rather, an attention to space “brings to light the internal logic of narrative: the semiotic domain around which a plot coalesces and self-organizes” (5). That is, if the basic unit of a narrative is the event, and events take place in space, then the spatial organization of the narrative also determines its temporal organization. What interests me here is how certain ethical, social, and geopolitical concerns with space have effects for the treatment of space in narrative literature. Especially important to this understanding of space is Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope. According to Bakhtin, space in literature is not merely background, but causes certain things to happen in certain ways: “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). For Bakhtin, each genre has its own sense of time and causality, and each kind of time or causality requires a certain sort of space to take place in. Bakhtin’s theory suggests that space in literature is not just an object like any other, but plays a fundamental role in structuring the narrative. Whether a text imagines Italy as site of originary plenitude, disabling stasis, or disorienting perversion will have decisive effects on the development of classic literary features like plot and character.

Italy is continually represented as anachronistic space, a space that somehow belongs to a previous period in time. Italy might be seen as haunted by the past, continually calling to mind
what is no longer present: the Renaissance, ancient Rome, or even ancient Greece and Arcadia. Or Italy can be represented as a space in which the past is still fully present, as when Symonds writes that “On the Mediterranean shores... the same occupations have been carried on for centuries” and “the people of the south are perfectly unchanged” from ancient times (Studies 254). Stasis is a theme that recurs in Dickens’s Pictures from Italy as well, since he imagines Italy as a place where “there is no more human progress, motion, effort, or advancement, of any kind beyond this. That the whole scheme stopped here centuries ago, and laid down to rest until the day of Judgment” (65). And Ruskin in The Stones of Venice famously imagines Venice (“a ghost upon the sands of the sea... so bereft of all but her loveliness”) as a warning of what England could become if it forgets the example of this decadent naval power (9: 17). As Dickens and Symonds suggest, Italy could be seen as “exist[ing] in a stopped, or at least slower, timescale,” more appropriate to a life of leisure and spectatorship (Reynolds 78). Conversely, as Jonah Siegel argues, authorial desire could manifest itself in the troubling speed of events in certain narratives set in Italy (121). Because of these diverse temporalizations of space, Italy often created what Reynolds characterizes as “a kink in time,” in which the “beauty of the countryside recalled Paradise, and therefore also provided a glimpse of the distant future, the Last Day” (78).

A structuring binary in the narratives I discuss is the distinction between enchanted and disenchanted space, which corresponds to the distinction between romance and realism. Because of its beautiful landscape and supposed connection to the past, Italy is often represented as an enchanted space that awakens desires for unattainable objects, and romance’s dedication to ambivalence and the pleasure of longing make it a uniquely capable vehicle for such sentiments. Northrop Frye calls romance “the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream”
(Frye 186), either through imagining an “enclosed and quietist images of bliss” (Beer 29) or the renewal of a fallen world, “the victory of fertility over the wasteland” (Frye 193). Particularly important to this fantasy is the notion of a space that reflects and shelters desire, a space from which subjectivity is not alienated. Whereas realism typically situates characters in a social space to which they dialectically relate—that is, in which people shape spaces at the same time that those spaces shape them—space in romance takes on a life of its own. Although romance has had a centuries-long career, I use it to denote a certain kind of mood as much as a genre, in which space becomes expressive of affect and desire, as it does in works by Symonds and Forster when the landscape seems to express a viewer’s desires or emotional state. Romance therefore posits a kind of magical interpenetration of observing subject and observed space. Significantly, desire in these narratives is almost always conflicted, thus giving rise to the contradictory push and pull that Patricia Parker identifies as its hallmark. When the desires that are immanent in space are repressed or unwanted, then the narrative can take on the uncanny tone of the gothic, as it does in Lee’s supernatural tales or in Symonds’s memoirs when he is confronted with sexual possibilities that he is not yet ready to acknowledge.

Most importantly, these different qualities of space in literature have significant consequences for the unfolding of narrative. As Jameson observes in *The Political Unconscious*, the space of romance is charged with significance, giving rise to spatial folds, discontinuities, and intensities that make interior experience manifest. Space overwhelms the agency of individual characters, turning them into “registering apparatus[es] for transformed states of

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8 For a brief history of the romance as a genre and the many uses to which it has been put, see Beer. For an overview of what romance meant to the Victorians, see Vaninskaya. For the relationship between romance, masculinity, and empire, see Arata 79-106. According to Vaninskaya, the romance had several different meanings for the Victorians: “Some said it was a tale of the marvellous and supernatural, of strange happenings in faraway times and places; others claimed it was a narrative of improbable events and coincidences peopled by psychologically unrealistic heroes and villains; many maintained that it was simply a book with an adventure-dominated plot and a minimum of discursiveness and didacticism” (61).
being, sudden alterations of temperature, mysterious heightenings, local intensities, sudden drops in quality, and alarming effluvia” (112). Although Jameson is describing romance in particular, he also acknowledges that genres are never pure but, rather, hybrid and sedimentary (107). At times romantic passages occur unexpectedly in an otherwise realist narrative, as they do in Symonds, or the romantic viewpoint is limited to the perspective of a character, and therefore ironized, as in Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. When realism shades into romance, as it does in these novels, space becomes cathected by memory, desire, and affect. What had previously represented disenchanted social space now takes on a magical quality. Southern space therefore becomes an agent in its own right: Italy is represented as revivifying or deadening not because of the distinct qualities of touristic experience in a geopolitically marginalized nation, but because the landscape itself exerts these effects. Thus, Symonds often interprets his moods and illnesses as a direct result of the geographical location that he occupies, and in Lee’s gothic fiction certain historically resonant spaces exert a magnetic pull on the characters that visit or inhabit them.

For many late-Victorian writers, the romance was an anachronistic genre that gratified the supposedly primitive impulses of readers. Stephen Arata discusses how a range of popular late-Victorian writers, from H. Rider Haggard to Robert Louis Stevenson, believed in the necessity of reviving romance in English literature. Summing up their views, the Victorian critic Andrew Lang contrasted what he thought of as the overly introspective novel of character (e.g., Henry James) and the overly realistic novel of society (e.g., Emile Zola) with the romance, a story “told for the story’s sake” that appealed to “the ancestral barbarism of our natures” (Lang 689). Although the romance that Lang had in mind was plot-driven and full of masculine adventure, in contrast to the texts I discuss in this dissertation, which privilege psychological
truth over narrative incident, Lang’s use of imperial space is remarkably similar to this Italophile literature’s use of Italy. As Arata argues, late-Victorian romance has “deep ideological investment in the empire as a place of renewal. Transformed into a fantasy space ‘elsewhere,’ the empire is imagined by romancers as a realm free from the various debilities of modernity” (94). Italophile literature treats Italy as a space set apart from modernity in which people rediscover themselves by confronting unthought-of desires. Like Lang, for these writers romance is a way of reconnecting to ancient roots and recovering primitive modes of perception. As Vaninskaya observes, “Romance was assumed to be native to the early stage of society” (69), which resonates with the Victorian anthropologist E. B. Tylor’s claim that the “mental condition of the lower races is the key to poetry” (2: 404). One theme to which Italophile literature continually returns is what Symonds calls the mythopoeic sense, through which primitive peoples supposedly invented their gods by projecting themselves onto the world and anthropomorphizing natural forces. By adopting a literary style that privileges intense emotional states and blurs the boundary between subject and object, these writers therefore attempt to evoke a way of seeing and feeling that is more suited to the supposedly anachronistic space of Italy.

The writers I discuss in my first and third chapters, Pater and Lee, are primarily interested in Italy as a place of art and history, and therefore participate in what Jonah Siegel calls the “art-romance tradition,” the main concerns of which are “fantasies of access to the place of creative origin [and] the related but equally fallacious promise of the experience of unmediated reality” (xiv). They explore how characters’ encounters with aesthetic and historical objects are opportunities for self-fashioning. The writers I discuss in my second and fourth chapters, Symonds and Forster, are more interested in Italian society and in the erotic and ethical consequences of relating to actual Italian people. They tend to focus more on Italy’s present,
even if that present turns out to be an expression or echo of the past.

In chapter one, I read Walter Pater as a transitional figure who mediated between Victorian Hellenism and Italophilia. I argue that his essay on Johann Winckelmann in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) is a confident if highly self-conscious exposition of the idea that the encounter with works of art or relics from the Italian past can provide the occasion for articulating homoerotic desires, identities, and communities. Pater narrates Winckelmann’s life as a triumphant journey from the sterility of the north to the sensual and aesthetic plenitude of Rome, where Winckelmann finds brilliant success as a historian of antiquity and enjoys the friendship of beautiful young men. For Pater, the encounter with privileged relics located in Italy is supposed to guarantee one’s standing in an elite homoerotic community of taste, and to go to Italy is to occupy a geographical and intellectual space that is caught between arcadia and modernity, desire and disappointment, reality and artifice. In this textually and aesthetically focused work, Pater is an elusive optimist, confident that the desirably different can be understood, appreciated, and claimed for his own through a highly self-conscious method of historical sympathy. Pater tends to focus on moments of encounter and fulfillment, but he also acknowledges the contrivance and fragility of this process of drawing on an often-invented past in order to reshape the future. His method relies on a series of paradoxes that should confound logic, but he manages to turn them to his rhetorical advantage. He suggests that one must dwell on the past in order to invent the future, look inward in order to discover the distant and the foreign, and cultivate obscure tastes in order to revolutionize society.

Another transitional figure, John Addington Symonds, is the subject of my second chapter. I read Symonds’s memoirs, letters, histories, and travel essays in order to examine how he articulates same-sex desire in relation to spaces, cultures, and texts. Feeling out of place in
modern British spaces, Symonds imagines an escape to supposedly anachronistic spaces in Italy and Switzerland where he hopes that his eccentric desires might find a provisional home. Although most commonly thought of as a Hellenist, Symonds ultimately finds the model of Hellenic paederastia untranslatable to a Victorian British idiom. Instead, he exchanges the eroticized north/south axis between Victorian Britain and Ancient Greece for another between Alpine Switzerland and coastal Venice. He imagines Davos as a pastoral community conducive to work and health, and Venice as an aesthetic fantasy conducive to spectatorship and desire. But Symonds is also beset by doubt—about himself, his desires, and any chance of reconciling them with the society in which he lives—and his memoir therefore enacts the structuring paradox of the romance plot, which continually digresses from its purported goal. Symonds is at odds with himself because he adopts a fantasy of indelible national exoticism, which simultaneously motivates his desires for Swiss peasants and Italian gondoliers while also ensuring that the relationships that he forms with them will never live up to his ideals of social integration. Caught between north and south, health and sickness, comradeship and the fetishization of difference, Symonds continually acknowledges his failures only to begin again.

Chapter three returns to Pater’s textual and aesthetic preoccupations by focusing on the tendency to see Italy as a desirable relic in Vernon Lee’s supernatural fiction. I argue that Lee draws on representations of Italy as southern, backwards, and erotically charged in order to articulate a model of queer desire as anachronistic, deviant, recursive, and melancholy. Unlike Symonds, who is continually anticipating a social collectivity in which a stable, affirmative sexual identity can emerge, Lee’s Italy frustrates desire and disrupts existing social attachments. The three stories that I discuss depict northern protagonists who travel to Italy in search of a regenerative return to origins, but the past that they find past is broken, hybrid, and artificial.
Characters repeatedly return to certain privileged places, artifacts, and memories, investing them with a life of their own and giving rise to a ghostly past that haunts them as much as they haunt it. The ghosts they encounter are manifestations of their own repressed emotions and desires, and this externalization of psychological states that is the hallmark of romance is experienced as gothic. I explain the pervasiveness of failure in Lee’s fiction by arguing that her protagonists are self-consciously ironic self-portraits, revealing the pathological elements of the approach to fantasy and desire that she describes more affirmatively in her non-fiction writings on travel and aesthetics. Because Lee continually narrates the frustrated desire to make contact with something outside of oneself—with Italy, the past, the beloved, or all three—she also tends to turn disappointment on its head, shifting the locus of pleasure from attainment and possession to the experience of longing and distance that gives rise to the imaginative play of nostalgia.

Like Symonds, E. M. Forster’s Italian novels, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908), explicitly engage with questions of cultural difference and social integration. In my final chapter, I argue that interpretations of Forster’s fiction as advocating a full embrace of nature, the body, and Italian cultural alterity miss out on the novels’ considerable ambivalence about the possibility that contact with Italy will spark successful personal and social transformations. Although Forster often represents Italy as an enlivening antidote to the sterile efficiency and hypocrisy of modern British culture, Italy is just as likely to frustrate characters’ desires as it is to fulfill them. Italy appears as a space of romance in which characters experience powerful moments of vision that render the landscape psychologically and symbolically significant and that reorient characters’ desires in unexpected and often queer ways, but they often lead to disorientation insofar as they create ruptures between a character’s desires and his or her cultural attachments. I pay particular attention to how views of people and landscapes
structure the novel and enact a volatile dialectic of desire and recognition that also corresponds to a generic and tonal tension in the novels between romance and realism. In telling the story of what happens after a young English widow marries a handsome Italian and dies in childbirth, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* narrates a journey from hope to disappointment to tragic knowledge. *A Room with a View* reaches a considerably sunnier conclusion for its English hero and heroine, but the success of its marriage plot depends on avoiding a direct confrontation with the questions of cross-cultural contact and homoerotic desire that the first novel seemed to find unresolvable.

Throughout this dissertation I argue that Italy became an important site for the articulation of queer desire in late Victorian and Edwardian literature. As a place that was represented as primitive and poetic, decadent and sensual, Italy was at once a powerful object of desire and a space that elicited and shaped desire. Anchoring my analysis in the categories of space, sex, and genre, I illuminate the relations between politics and form and contend that the intra-European distinction between north and south structured Victorian discourses of history, sexuality, and aesthetics. Although the narratives that I discuss generally end in frustration, disillusionment, and failure, they are remarkably resourceful in their commitment to imagining new ways of desiring and new forms of social collectivity. These intensely self-conscious texts continually critique the romance of Italy only to rehabilitate it in a different guise, or desire and fear Italy while also questioning the basis of their responses. While the Italy that they imagine often has more to do with the fantasies of the tourist than with any local reality, this writing also responds to deeply felt problems and attempts to imagine substantive solutions. Meditating on art, ethics, and desire, these texts are revealing examples of the historicity of sexuality and its rootedness in space and culture.
CHAPTER 1

THE EXCAVATION OF ITALY IN WALTER PATER’S “WINCKELMANN”

But his hair is turning grey, and he has not yet reached the south.
—Walter Pater, “Winckelmann”

Walter Pater participated in a nineteenth-century discourse that represented Italy as an enchanted and anachronistic southern space in which northerners (and particularly the British) rediscover the queer potentiality of the sensual body and learn to express desires that are supposedly discouraged by Britain’s cold climate and modern industrial culture. In this discourse, the journey to a supposedly primitive and sensual Italy is seen as an ideal corrective to British modernity, as well as an occasion for the articulation and enactment of non-normative sexual desires. However, for the most part the journeys that these texts narrate end in failure: Italy fails to deliver the liberatory transformation of its northern visitors, and protagonists are often left dead or profoundly disappointed. Thus, in these narratives there is a continual tension between hope for a queering transformation on the one hand and skepticism about its probability or disillusionment about its potential results on the other. This tension derives from a variety of factors: the difficulty of breaking the attachment to British cultural and sexual norms, a tendency to punish protagonists for taboo desires, xenophobic horror at the prospect of becoming “too Italian,” or, especially, a certain authorial self-consciousness about the constructedness of this fantasy of a queer Italy.

Pater’s “Winckelmann,” first published in 1867, dramatizes the notion that appreciating, possessing, or talking about works of art from the Italian past can be ways of imagining a homoerotic community of taste. I begin my dissertation with this example because it is perhaps
the most confident and self-conscious exposition of the idea that Italy’s closeness to the past, far from rendering it a moribund site of ruins and nostalgia or an object of merely historical interest, makes it the privileged point of access to sensual and aesthetic plenitude. Although “Winckelmann” is an essay that claims to tell the truth about a historical figure, I read it primarily as a carefully constructed narrative in which Pater deliberately blurs the boundaries between his own authorial consciousness, the subject that he purportedly describes, and the audience that he imagines. Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), of which the “Winckelmann” essay is part, is the most influential text on Britain’s need for the queer space of Italy written during the years just after Italian unification. “Winckelmann” in particular narrates the emancipatory journey of Johann Winckelmann, an eighteenth-century German art historian, from the inhospitable north to Rome, where he finds sensual beauty, the friendship of young men, and brilliant success as a scholar of ancient Greece. “Winckelmann” is therefore an early and rather optimistic exposition of Italy as a place that promotes the cultivation of (homo)eroticism through its hospitable climate, closeness to the past, and synthesis of nature and culture. In “Winckelmann,” Italy is a place in which to discover sexual truths through contact with works of art that evoke the past. These works of art in turn present opportunities for self-fashioning and the imagination of new forms of social collectivity. Pater tends to focus on moments of encounter and fulfillment, but he also acknowledges the contrivance and fragility of this process of drawing on an often-invented past in order to reshape the future. For example, even after Winckelmann’s triumphant arrival in Rome, there are hints that the city failed to

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9 “Winckelmann” was initially published in 1867 and later included in the 1873 edition of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. It was retained in all subsequent editions, which carried the revised title of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. For convenience, I refer to all editions merely as “*The Renaissance,*** noting differences between editions only where relevant. When parenthetically citing works by Pater, I abbreviate the titles. Thus, *R* for *The Renaissance,*** App for *Appreciations, Misc* for *Miscellaneous Studies,* and *Greek* for *Greek Studies.*
deliver all that he desired, and his violent death in Trieste marks a break in the homoerotic
tradition that Pater has taken such pains to delineate. For Pater, to go to Italy is to occupy a
geographical and intellectual space caught between arcadia and modernity, desire and
disappointment, artifice and reality.

From Wordsworth’s child worship to Thomas Carlyle’s cult of the medieval, nineteenth-
century writers often turned to the past and to supposedly simpler ways of life as an antidote to
the perceived pathologies of modernity. Since, as Roberto Dainotto claims, eighteenth-century
narratives of modernity positioned Italy, and southern Europe more generally, as Europe’s past
(Dainotto 50-55), then Italy could be especially attractive to a Romantic or post-Romantic
sensibility that wanted to re-evaluate supposedly “backward” places as unspoiled and
picturesque. Whereas English Romantics such as Shelley and Byron tended to imagine Italy as a
site of beautiful despair, Italy’s burgeoning independence movement led Victorians such as
Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Arthur Hugh Clough to see Italy as a site of renewed energy.
However, the Italian past continued to be important for Victorians including both of the
Brownings, Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and George Eliot, who helped to revive an
interest in the Italian poet Dante, self-consciously reworked Italian poetic forms, or shed new
light on the Italian Renaissance.\footnote{For the Victorian interest in Dante on the part of Carlyle, Tennyson, and not least Dante Gabriel Rossetti, see Fraser 134-150 and Milbank, \textit{Dante and the Victorians}. For other poetic interest in the Italian Renaissance, including attention to often overlooked figures such as George Meredith and Coventry Patmore, see Fraser 151-178, as well as Reynolds, \textit{Realms of Verse}.} However, after the excitement that followed the successful
unification of Italy, liberal interest in Italy began to wane. Although Victorian Britain’s
remarkably Italophilic literary culture paved the way for those such as Pater, J. A. Symonds, and
Vernon Lee, whose reputations were largely staked on their Italian scholarship, these later
writers were often more interested in Italy’s past or its present-day primitiveness rather than its
future as a nation-state. For these writers, looking to the Italian past could open up new perspectives on present-day England or provide opportunities for more closely approaching the prelapsarian harmony of so-called primitive peoples.

In contrast to Symonds (chap. 2) and E. M. Forster (chap. 4), who are interested in the social and ethical complications of homoerotic desire in a contemporary but “backward” Italy, Pater along with Vernon Lee (chap. 3) is primarily concerned with the aesthetic and historical aspects of Italy, or Italy as a repository for works of art and relics from the past. For Pater, Italy is most important for the way that its historical artifacts can be productively appreciated and put into dialogue with the present—a variation on what Jonah Siegel calls the “art-romance tradition” of writing about Italy which marks “the confluence of two related but distinct cultural phenomena, the nineteenth century’s fascination with creative genius and the same period’s insatiable appetite for tales of the European South” (5). The main preoccupations of this tradition are “fantasies of access to the place of creative origin [and] the related but equally fallacious promise of the experience of unmediated reality” (xiv). Although Siegel acknowledges the erotic significance of these narratives and traces their “thoroughgoing intertextuality” (5), he is generally more concerned with the desire for works of art rather than with any particular sexuality, and more concerned with the coherence of a literary tradition than with how these traditions simultaneously reflect and construct social groups. In this chapter, I build on Siegel’s analysis of the Italian art romance by examining how Pater uses Italy as an opportunity for articulating homoerotic desires, identities, and communities.

For Pater, Winckelmann is the most emphatic representative in The Renaissance of the attempt to recover, reanimate, and reproduce the past, and he is therefore a key figure in a Paterian tradition of writers who mediate between the past and the present, the esoteric and the
revolutionary. Pater’s Winckelmann is imagined as exceptional for his interest in a lost, under-appreciated, or misunderstood past, and this exceptionalism also makes him part of an elite minority. Through appreciating, possessing, or writing about works of art, he is able to express his own homoerotic desires and imagine a homoerotic community of taste that might share them. In his attempt to understand and historicize Greek art, Winckelmann re-performs in the eighteenth century the same revival of the sensual body that Pater sees as typical of the Renaissance, and therefore acts as one node in a relay between 15th-century Italy and 19th-century Britain, opening up new forms of aesthetic appreciation and erotic desire.

“Winckelmann” thus interrogates how the reception, possession, and circulation of texts produce forms of subjectivity and belonging.

The Diaphanous Temperament of the Renaissance

Much of the most influential criticism on Pater during the last two decades has focused on gender and sexuality. Richard Dellamora, for example, argues that Pater sought to envision “better ways of being-masculine in the world” through the exploration of aestheticism and homoeroticism (2). Likewise, Linda Dowling contends that writers such as Pater, Symonds, and Wilde used Oxford’s Plato-centric classical curriculum as the basis for a “homosexual counterdiscourse able to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms” (xiii). James Eli Adams, however, believes that “Pater’s influential recuperation of a homoerotic ‘Greek ideal’ also draws on strategies of legitimation that are central to mid-Victorian constructions of the gentleman,” meaning that his supposedly emancipatory invocation of the male body was also

\[^{11}\text{See Potolsky for an analysis of Pater in terms of reading publics and communities of taste. My analysis of Pater’s address to a public that is constituted by that very act of address is influenced by Michael Warner’s account of the queer nature of writing and the social connections that it engenders in Publics and Counterpublics, and Pater could very well be seen as an important precursor to Warner’s critique of the impoverishing influence of sexual normativity.}\]
based in an anti-democratic tradition of rooting gentlemanliness in an “organic ideal” that could not be replicated by mere social climbers (152). Like Adams, I situate Pater’s emancipatory rhetoric “in a more inclusive and equivocal relation to dominant discourses” by relating it to evolutionist historicism (152), and, like Dowling, I am interested in how Pater constructs a homosexual counterdiscourse in relation to the past of southern Europe. However, unlike Adams, I am interested in the spatial and geographical dimensions of Pater’s invocation of the male body and, unlike Dowling, I focus on the importance of Italy rather than Greece in Pater’s homoerotic imaginary.

Italy’s importance in articulating Victorian homosexuality has been largely ignored, despite the considerable Victorian interest in Italy. Italy was commonly acknowledged as the inheritor of Greek art and culture, and many supporters of Italian independence compared it to the successful struggle for Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire during the 1820s. In addition, whereas ancient Greece could often seem both spatially and temporally remote, the popularity of Italian tourism and the broad literary and aesthetic interest in Italy during the nineteenth century could make it seem more approachable. Pater often presents ancient Greece as an unattainable ideal, but in The Renaissance he imagines Italy as a hybrid space whose place in a tradition stretching from ancient Greece to Victorian Britain makes it the ideal space for the recovery of Hellenistic erotic values, even for a figure like Winckelmann who was best known as a historian of Greek art. Furthermore, “Winckelmann” is the chapter that most closely captures Pater’s attempt to recapitulate the embodied spirit of the Italian Renaissance by taking advantage of Italy’s supposedly closer relationship to eros and the past. Thus, I see Pater as a transitional figure who, like Symonds, is rooted in Victorian Hellenism, but whose most original and influential works transpose the privileged site for an articulation of same-sex desire from Greece
to Italy. In “Winckelmann,” the movement from north to south that Pater narrates is from Germany to Italy, and Winckelmann is most important to Pater for the way he reenacts the discoveries of the Italian figures that have preceded him in the volume. By privileging the creative act of recovery available to moderns over the innate perfection of the Greeks, Pater also privileges Italy, which for him is an early part of this modern tradition of recovery even while its southern anteriority also makes it worth recovering for its own sake.

Although insufficient by itself, the example of ancient Greece was crucial for Pater’s conception of the Renaissance and his articulation of same-sex desire. David DeLaura sees Pater as part of a Hellenistic tradition that “proclaimed the failure of modern society and religion and appealed to the ancient Greeks as examples of perfect humanity” (165), and he outlines a series of oppositions that this return to Hellenism was intended to transcend: “body or soul... morality and aesthetics... duty and desire... northern ‘soul’ and southern ‘form’... [and] paganism and Christianity” (167). It is also important to remember Pater’s homoerotic Hellenism was also situated within a whole web of other values. The Greeks were important not only because they represented a certain kind of sanctioned same-sex desire, but also because they supposedly enjoyed a primitive unity of perception that was no longer available to self-conscious moderns such as himself. Unlike the modern world, which, according to Pater, is beset with “its conflicting claims, its entangled interests, distracted by so many sorrows, with many preoccupations, so bewildering an experience” (R 181), the Greeks represent the “unperplexed youth of humanity” (R 167) based in their “perfect animal nature” (R 165). In “The Age of Athletic Prizemen,” Pater describes the Greek athlete as a kind of primitive, whose “essence” was “not to give expression to mind, in any antagonism to, or invasion of, the body; to mind as anything more than a function of the body, whose healthful balance of functions it may so easily
perturb;—to disavow that insidious enemy of the fairness of the bodily soul as such” (Greek 302).

Perhaps most important to Pater was what he calls their “pagan sentiment” through which the pagan Greek “makes gods in his own image” (R 160). As opposed to the “mechanical conception” of modern science, Pater identifies “an older and more spiritual” philosophy that “envisages nature rather as the unity of a living spirit or person, revealing itself in various degrees to the kindred spirit of the observer, than as a system of mechanical forces” (Greek 95). This mythopoeic faculty “grow[s] out of some universal instinctive belief that trees and flowers are indeed habitations of living spirits” (Greek 3). Pater thus envisions a primitive unity of subject and object, thought and idea, in which imagination is rooted in the sensuality of the physical world and nature itself takes a human face. The mythopoeic world is a world of full presence, in which everything is imbued with spirit and desire is not alienated from the world. This poetic sense is also quite similar to the genre of romance that I’ve defined, following Frye and Jameson, as a literary form in which subject and object become blurred, such that objects in space come to express interior psychological states and, in Jameson’s words, “the worldness of world reveals or manifests itself” (112).

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12 This “pagan sentiment” will be important for Symonds and Lee as well. Symonds refers to it as a “mythopoeic sense” (Sketches 1: 284) and Lee refers to it as the pagan’s supernatural faculty (Lee, B 76). All three derived their notion from Vico, who claims that the primitive peoples had “an innate poetic faculty” through which they anthropomorphized nature and invented their gods (Vico 144). Perhaps the most notable Victorian exponent of this primitive poetic faculty was E. B. Tylor, who argued that “among the lower races all over the world the operation of outward events on the inward mind leads not only to statement of fact, but to formation of myth.” As such, “the mental condition of the lower races is the key to poetry” (Tylor 2: 404).

13 Pater also identifies this faculty in the nature poetry of British Romantics such as Wordsworth and Shelley, a similarity which the critic Stefano Evangelista argues should not surprise us, since Pater openly reads “the ancients through a Romantic interpretative filter” and “the very category of mythopoeia... is inherently Romantic” (Evangelista, “Outward” 115).
However, from the beginning of his career, Pater insisted that it was impossible to simply return to the past, and therefore also impossible to recover the Greeks’ primitive harmony of perception, nature, and desire. Pater explains why the past is inaccessible to us in “Aesthetic Poetry,” an essay derived from his seminal 1868 review of William Morris:

In handling a subject of Greek legend, anything in the way of an actual revival must always be impossible. Such vain antiquarianism is a waste of the poet’s power. The composite experience of all the ages is part of each one of us; to deduct from that experience, to obliterate any part of it, to come face to face with the people of a past age, as if the Middle Age, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century had not been, is as impossible as to become a little child, or enter again into the womb and be born. But though it is not possible to repress a single phase of that humanity, which, because we live and move and have our being in the life of humanity, makes us what we are, it is possible to isolate such a phase, to throw it into relief, to be divided against ourselves in zeal for it... We cannot truly conceive the age: we can conceive the element it has contributed to our culture... Such an attitude towards Greece, aspiring to but never actually reaching its way of conceiving life, is what is possible for art. (App 223-24)

In other words, the Greek past is ineluctably distant because everything that has happened since then is already a part of us and cannot be subtracted. In a typical evolutionist conflation of phylogeny and ontogeny, in which earlier phases of history are likened to early phases in the growth of an individual, Pater argues that we cannot “come face to face” with ancient Greece because we cannot escape the shaping force of all the history that followed it. However, he proposes two solutions to this problem of historical access. First, since we already contain the
past, we can look inward in order to discern evidence of its perhaps buried or forgotten existence. In this respect, the past exists in a kind of collective unconscious that can be rediscovered in the present, and Pater therefore converts what was a project of seeing into the remote past into a project of seeing deeply into ourselves. Second, we can look to the authors of earlier accounts of the distant past in order to gain, at second-hand, a closer view of it, and these earlier responses can serve as way stations for historical understanding. In this schema, the study of historical ages like the Italian Renaissance, or of later figures like Winckelmann or Goethe, can become even more important than the study of the Greeks themselves, who remain inspiring but inaccessible. Thus, if it is impossible to recapture the gloriously unified subjectivity of the Greeks, then perhaps a new kind of subjectivity can take its place, one more appropriate to the “student of origins” who “must be content to follow faint traces” (Greek 112) and whose exemplars will be the artists and historians of the Italian Renaissance. Paradoxically, the importance of the origin itself ultimately takes a secondary role to the process of “aspiring to but never actually reaching” it.

Given the inaccessibility of the Greeks, Pater looks back to the traces of the Italian Renaissance, a period that was itself famous for the attempt to study and revive Greek culture. By writing about these intermediate figures, Pater attempts to express and encourage a certain kind of temperament attuned to history and to homoeroticism. Though singularly influential, Pater’s essays were also part of a more general interest in the period during the nineteenth century. As Hilary Fraser has documented, representations of the Renaissance pervaded Victorian visual art and literature. This interest is perhaps unsurprising, given that the very

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14 See Williams 82-93. Williams discusses Pater’s penchant for using the responses of intermediate figures as “evidence” about a more distant past. On the theory that direct access is impossible and that past responses represent the ages standing between Pater and his object, he uses legends to mediate his more extreme distance from the object of his interpretation” (84).
notion of the Renaissance as a coherent historical period was formulated in the mid-nineteenth century. Jules Michelet coined the term in his *Histoire de France* (1855), defining it as the period in which “man found himself again” and “sounded the profound depths of his nature,” and Jacob Burckhardt’s *Die Kultur de Renaissance in Italien* (1860) established Italy rather than France as the primary geographical focus for the period (Fraser 1). John Ruskin, one of the earliest and most prominent British writers on the Italian Renaissance, famously condemned it for what he saw as its unrestrained sensuality and soulless perfection, but others, such as the Brownings and the Rossettis, proved more receptive to the sensuality of Italy in their poetry. For example, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1857), the heroine’s father discovers new sensations and romantic love in Florence and Robert Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855) celebrates the earthy naturalism of its eponymous Renaissance painter. These works prepared the way for later studies by Pater, Symonds, and Lee, who retained Ruskin’s sensual characterization of the Renaissance while inverting his evaluation of it. According to J. B. Bullen, although “Ruskin forced the reputation of the art and culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth century to their lowest point ever, he simultaneously breathed into the Renaissance a life, a poteney, and a vitality which it had never had before” (124). Hence, while Ruskin as well as later historians of the Renaissance like Pater, Symonds, and Lee “see the period as an epoch of pleasure, sensualism, and unrestrained sexuality” (Fisher 45), these later writers see sensuality as a necessary component of that period’s greatness rather than the source of its downfall.

The Renaissance for Pater is not so much a period or a style as the expression of a desire for beauty and sensual freedom that looks backwards as well as forwards. In other words, it is the expression of a particular kind of subjectivity. He defines it as
the name of a many-sided but yet united movement, in which the love of the
things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake, the desire for a more
liberal and comely way of conceiving life, make themselves felt, urging those
who experience this desire to search out first one and then another means of
intellectual or imaginative enjoyment, and directing them not only to the
discovery of old and forgotten sources of this enjoyment, but to the divination of
fresh sources thereof—new experiences, new subjects of poetry, new forms of art.

(1)

Unlike Symonds, for whom the Renaissance was rooted in political changes (as the title of his
history’s first volume, *The Age of the Despots*, makes clear), Pater’s Renaissance is an entirely
subjective and aesthetic phenomenon. On the assumption that the present is in need of a
supplement, whether that “present” is fifteenth-century Italy, eighteenth-century Germany, or
nineteenth-century Britain, Pater argues that the only way to break new ground is to excavate the
past. Only by doing so will “man” achieve “that reassertion of himself, that rehabilitation of
human nature, the body, the senses, the heart, the intelligence, which the Renaissance fulfils”

(31). Pater therefore suggests that, just as the writers and artists of the Renaissance looked
backward to the Greeks in order to discover a kind of originary sensual and intellectual
wholeness, so his readers must look back to the Italian Renaissance in order to remake
themselves and their own historical moment. Significantly, neither the past to be recovered nor
the future to be invented is pure or unmixed. Pater’s student of origins is “divided against”

15 For instance, in Pater’s review of Symonds’s history, he distinguishes the Renaissance as an aesthetic
movement from the political life of the same period: “The spirit of the Renaissance proper, of the
Renaissance as a humanistic movement” is “an assertion of liberty” marked by “a sympathy with life
himself in pursuit of the past (App 224) and gives birth to a “strange flower” like the “Italian Renaissance, which grew up from the mixture of two traditions [and] two sentiments” (R 37).

This revolutionary Renaissance temperament, attuned to the traces of the past so that they might become transformative, is in many ways a reworking of the diaphanous temperament that Pater describes in “Diaphaneità,” a paper delivered to the Old Mortality Society at Oxford in 1864. Although it remained unpublished until it was included in the posthumous Miscellaneous Studies, many of its most striking passages were later included in The Renaissance, particularly in “Winckelmann.” The diaphanous character is a queer, “unworldly type,” who “crosses rather than follows the main current of the world’s life,” whom the world “can neither use for its service, nor contemplate as an ideal” (Misc 248). Preternaturally perceptive, he is out of place and out of time. In one of the many passages from “Diaphaneità” that were copied into “Winckelmann,” the diaphanous type is described as an anachronistic “survival” from some previous age: “It is like the reminiscence of a forgotten culture that once adorned the mind; as if the mind of one... fallen into a new cycle, were beginning its spiritual progress over again, but with a certain power of anticipating its stages. It has the freshness without the shallowness of taste, the range and seriousness of culture without its strain and over-consciousness” (Misc 250). The diaphanous subject is therefore both primitive and modern, one who “remembers” what the historical past was like while also knowing what will come. Like the “student of origins” who “follow[s] faint traces,” he is remarkably attentive to every hint and glimmer: “He who is ever looking for the breaking of a light he knows not whence about him, notes with a strange heedfulness the faintest paleness in the sky” (Misc 251). Such strenuous perception is necessary because the modern subject, unlike the Greek, is no longer at home in the world. He is at an insuperable distance from the mythopoeic pagan sentiment of the Greeks, for whom everything
was harmonious and who could therefore take everything for granted, so he must be capable of discerning the trace and extrapolating its full meaning.

There are clear parallels to the diaphanous type when Pater describes Leonardo as “a lover of strange souls” who is not content with the given (R 78), the obvious, or the general, but who “learned here the art of going deep, of tracking the sources of expression to their subtlest retreats, the power of an intimate presence in the things he handled” (R 81). As a master of refined sensibility and what one might call a hermeneutics of suggestion, Leonardo “penetrated into the most secret parts of nature [and] preferred always the more to the less remote, what, seeming exceptional, was an instance of law more refined, the construction about things of a peculiar atmosphere and mixed lights” (R 86). Since this “remote beauty” was only available to “those who have sought it carefully” (82), Pater encourages his readers to themselves become such a dedicated elite. Similarly, Wincklemann, like Columbus, “had a way of estimating at once the slightest indication of land” (R 154). In praising so strenuously these powers of perception, it is as if Pater is encouraging the same qualities in his own audience, indicating to them that they must take seriously every hint or insinuation in order to comprehend his full meaning.

An audience of diaphanous subjects is therefore essential to Pater’s implicit goal of constituting a homoerotic community of taste. Linda Dowling writes that “Pater’s mode is never that of outright statement or even suggestion. It is one, rather, of a constantly beckoning and receding suggestiveness, as homoerotic themes… are constantly either raised to visibility or veiled in their explicitness within the richly various materials of Pater’s prose” (94). Given this interplay of veiling and unveiling, one might conclude, as Thaïs Morgan does, that Pater is speaking to two audiences at once. She argues that Pater attempts to interpellate a minority of
particularly attuned readers while speaking over the heads of the majority: “Officially expounding on aesthetic questions to the majority of readers,” who are presumed to be sexually normative, Pater “also talk[s] intimately with a minority group of readers who are interested in expanding the conventional limits of masculinity... by envisioning ties between the male body and beauty, homoeroticism and culture” (317). 16 Pater thus adopts an “aesthetic minoritizing discourse,” which Morgan defines as “one in which the solidarity—and the essential alikeness—of a group that perceives itself to be in a minority position is presupposed and invoked at the same time as it is being constructed in the discourse itself” (316). In other words, Pater attempts to bring into being a public organized around homoeroticism by assuming that it already exists. But in order for this minority group to hear his address, they must be as susceptible to the hint as the diaphanous type and as attuned to what lies buried in themselves as the student of origins. If Pater cannot recreate ancient Greece and its culture of same-sex desire through a direct revival, then he can imagine a public sympathetic to it by writing about the Greeks and the Renaissance figures who attempted to revive them.

In order to construct his homoerotic audience as he addresses it in writing, Pater pays particular attention to the question of temperament. Pater characterizes his own goals by quoting Goethe’s statement about Winckelmann: “One learns nothing from him... but one becomes something” (147). Initially decried for its potential to harm the morals of undergraduates, The Renaissance received its most famous compliment when Oscar Wilde described its influence on his own life: “Mr. Pater’s essays became to me ‘the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty’” (Wilde 24). Pater’s rhetoric in The Renaissance is striking for the confidence with

16 In contrast, Richard Jenkyns typifies a less admiring and rather homophobic response when he describes Pater’s rhetorical method as distasteful and duplicitous: “as he slides around within his cluster of metaphors, a soft insinuating voice seems to whisper some message that it dares not speak aloud” (148).
which he appropriates the past in order to express himself; like Morris, he “animates his subject by keeping it always close to himself” (App 223). He claims an affinity with the Renaissance figures that he writes about, assumes a shared understanding on the part of his audience, and uses this shared affinity as the basis for imagining a homoerotic community of taste. By writing the stories of Botticelli and Leonardo, Pater attempts a veiled self-portrait in which he hopes that his readers will also recognize themselves. As Gerald Monsman writes, “Pater modifies his reader’s conceptions of the past and creates his precursors anew in his own image.” (13). This was the quality in Pater’s work that particularly struck Margaret Oliphant in her well-known critique in which she faults Pater for imposing his personality on his subjects and attributing to Botticelli sentiments that “never entered into the most advanced imagination within two or three hundred years of Botticelli’s time, and was as alien to the spirit of a medieval Italian, as it is perfectly consistent with that of a delicate Oxford Don in the latter half of the nineteenth century” (Seiler 88).17 Although Oliphant quite rightly identifies Pater’s habit of straying from the historical record, this indirect autobiography is crucial for Pater’s rhetoric, since the conflation of historical subject and author suggests the possibility that the past can be at least partially reproduced in the present through a self-conscious process of self-stylization. Furthermore, in writing about these historical figures as if they were all aspects of his own personality, Pater underlines the notion that the present is a summation of the past.

Winckelmann as Primitive

As an eighteenth-century German, Johann Winckelmann may seem an odd choice to embody Pater’s late-Victorian gospel of the Renaissance. However, both the temporal and

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17 Similarly, Emilia Pattison wrote in the Westminster Review that “Mr Pater possesses to a remarkable degree an unusual power of recognising and finely discriminating delicate differences of sentiment,” but his essays are not “to be relied on for accurate statements of simple matters of fact” (72).
geographical dislocations of this essay make explicit how Pater constructs Italy as the privileged site for a homoerotic aesthetic tradition stretching from Greece to nineteenth-century Britain. Pater seems conscious of the unorthodoxy of his choice when he writes in the preface to The Renaissance that “I have added an essay on Winckelmann, as not incongruous with the studies which precede it, because Winckelmann, coming in the eighteenth century, really belongs in spirit to an earlier age... He is the last fruit of the Renaissance, and explains in a striking way its motive and tendencies” (xxiv-xxv). Yet while Winckelmann “belongs” because of his anachronistic “spirit,” whether the “earlier age” to which it refers is the Italian Renaissance or the world of ancient Greece remains somewhat ambiguous. As he does so often in The Renaissance, Pater exploits indeterminacy (temporal, spatial, and sexual) for his own purposes. At times Pater emphasizes Winckelmann’s anachronism, thus collapsing the eighteenth-century scholar’s distance from the Renaissance figures that have preceded him in the volume and the Greek culture that he studies, but elsewhere he imagines him as a contemporary, the Renaissance’s “last fruit,” in which case Winckelmann’s distance from the Renaissance, not to mention the ancient Greeks, takes on the poignancy of belatedness. Either way, Pater argues that Winckelmann’s influence continues into the present through such notable followers as Goethe and Pater himself.18

18 In many ways, Pater’s views on Greek art and history are borrowed from Winckelmann. Often considered the father of German Hellenism, Winckelmann was, according to M. Kay Flavell, “the first to attempt an overall view of classical antiquity and to introduce a historicist approach to its art” (83). Readers of Pater will easily recognize correspondences between the two when Flavell, whose essay does not so much as mention Pater, writes that Winckelmann “discovered standards of taste and an ideal of beauty which must act as a model for all subsequent periods” (89) and believed that “the work of art contains the energies of the culture from which it emanates and the observer, by virtue of his imaginative response to the work, can recreate the past in the present” (90-91). Like Winckelmann, Pater privileges the ancient Greek “standard of taste” and believes that the encounter with a work of art gives that work, and therefore also the culture from which it came, a kind of second life.
The first part of Pater’s essay narrates Winckelmann’s education, and it figures his pursuit of the past as a transition from the intellectual, sensual, and aesthetic deficiency of northern Germany to southern plenitude in Italy. Pater writes that Winckelmann “served first a painful apprenticeship in the tarnished intellectual world of Germany,” desiring more, but uncertain about what it was he desired, and lacking the means to attain it in the inhospitable north (142). From his childhood “in the dusky precincts of a German school” (142) to the University of Halle, where “there were no professors... who could satisfy his sharp, intellectual craving” (143), Winckelmann is presented as an exceptional creature, alienated from contemporaries who are unsympathetic if not outright hostile. Whereas Winckelmann wants to learn Greek, his first teacher insists that he study theology. After leaving the university, he takes up a dismal job teaching in a school: “Notwithstanding a success in dealing with children, which seems to testify to something simple and primeval in his nature, he found the work of teaching very depressing” (143-44). Although possessing the seeds of the antique south within him, he is depicted as closed-off, limited, and frustrated. Quoting Madame de Staël, Pater writes that Winckelmann “felt in himself... an ardent attraction towards the south. In German imaginations even now traces are often to be found of that love of the sun, that weariness of the north (cette fatigue du nord) which carried the northern peoples away into the countries of the south” (142). Staël and Pater associate a desire for sensual enjoyment—warmth, the sun, “a fine sky”—with a desire for the south, which is opposed to the implicit frigidity, darkness, ugliness, and sensual repression of the north. Looking forward in his narrative to the moment when Winckelmann will take up residence in Italy, Pater writes that when Winckelmann passed out of his “painful apprenticeship” in the north and “into the happy light of the antique, he had a sense of exhilaration almost physical” (142). In this narrative, Germany is depicted as modern in its
distance from nature, but also as stagnant, and Winckelmann can only hope to develop himself and to experience a fully embodied sensual life by traveling back in time to the “antique” south of Italy.

This transition from the modern north to the anachronistic south is also, crucially, narrated as a series of encounters with works of art, which both form and confirm Winckelmann’s Hellenism. These encounters will be the means through which Winckelmann develops himself and his desires in order to prepare himself for the ultimate encounter with Italy. Texts are especially important to Winckelmann in Germany because they are the only traces of the south that he has to go on, and, like the diaphanous student of origins, he is keenly sensitive to the meanings and implications of these traces. Initially, Pater tells us, “we find him... hungrily feeding on a few colourless books” (142). During this transitional period, Winckelmann “multiplied his intellectual force by detaching from it all flaccid interests” in order to devote himself to “the literature of the arts” which he studies through the night (144). Through this voluntary focus on the arts, and particularly the classical tradition, Winckelmann achieves a more genuine contact with the south. As opposed to “most of us,” for whom, in spite of “all our steps toward it, the antique world... remains faint and remote,” for Winckelmann, the antique world “early came to seem more real than the present” (142). This passage illustrates how Pater constructs an audience in the present, assuming a “we” that shares an interest in ancient Greece and has “taken many steps toward it,” yet has so far failed to achieve Winckelmann’s vivid connection to the south. Therefore, this “we” must look back to exemplary figures such as Winckelmann, Michelangelo, and Goethe.

One particularly important encounter with a work of art occurs when Winckelmann takes up a position in a library near Dresden providing his first exposure to a collection of Greek
statues. The passage brings together the temporal layers of ancient Greece, the Italian Renaissance, the German eighteenth century, and Victorian Britain in order to construct a transhistorical homoerotic community, or what Morgan calls an “aesthetic minoritizing discourse.”

And now a new channel of communion with the Greek life was opened for him. Hitherto he had handled the words only of Greek poetry, stirred indeed and roused by them, yet divining beyond the words some unexpressed pulsation of sensuous life. Suddenly he is in contact with that life, still fervent in the relics of plastic art. Filled as our culture is with the classical spirit, we can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved, when, at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil. Winckelmann here reproduces for us the earlier sentiment of the Renaissance. On a sudden the imagination feels itself free. How facile and direct, it seems to say, is this life of the senses and the understanding, when once we have apprehended it! Here, surely, is that more liberal mode of life we have been seeking so long, so near to us all the while. (146)

Most remarkable about this passage is how time and subjectivity seem to come unstuck. Whereas Winckelmann was previously limited to written texts, here the access to visual art enables a more “fervent” contact with the “life” of ancient Greece. Surprisingly, this encounter prompts Pater to reflect, not on Winckelmann’s eighteenth-century historical position but, rather, on the analogous position of Renaissance artists. Speaking from the perspective of the aforementioned “we,” Pater asserts that “we cannot imagine” or fully comprehend the emotions

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19 Whatever the implicit masculinity of this “we” at a time when women were largely excluded from participation in the universities, Pater showed that he was open to the inclusion of women, and he
of a previous century. However, the past becomes more intelligible as the identity of that “we” begins to change. Pater writes that, in coming into contact with Greek art, “Winckelmann here reproduces for us the earlier sentiment of the Renaissance.” That is, he re-enacts the sentiment of the Renaissance, but he re-enacts it “for us”—he acts both in his own time and in “ours,” so that Winckelmann is once again as accessible to us, as “facile and direct,” as ancient Greece has become to him. The last sentence seems to encompass Winckelmann, the Renaissance, as well as Pater and his readers, into a “we” that presumes not only a knowledge of Latin and Greek but also a longing for a certain kind of homoerotic freedom and passion that provides the foundation for historical understanding.

This dialectic of distance and proximity also plays out in Pater’s description of Winckelmann’s temperament. At some points, Winckelmann’s understanding and appreciation of Greek culture seems to be the result of strenuous, even painful, effort that alienates him from his surroundings, “a feverish nursing of the one motive of his life” (142). Quoting Staël again, Pater portrays Winckelmann as the first scholar who had “made himself a pagan for the purpose of penetrating antiquity,” suggesting a process of cultivation. But at other points Winckelmann seems to have been Greek all along. In the same paragraph he writes that Winckelmann’s scholarship was rooted in a “native affinity” and his own “bodily temperament,” which “reinforc[es] the purer emotions of the intellect with an almost physical excitement” (152), suggesting that Winckelmann’s Hellenism was innate. Following the circular logic of the aesthetic minoritizing discourse, in which the group identity is “presupposed and invoked at the same time as it is being constructed in the discourse itself” (Morgan 316), Pater identifies

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frequently celebrates feminine independence and eros, as Dellamora points out (132-133). Pater also offered encouragement and support to women such as Mary Robinson, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field at a time when other scholars, including J. A. Symonds, were apt to treat them with condescension if not outright hostility.
Winckelmann’s southernness as the foundation for the process of aesthetic education that supposedly produces that very same southernness. That is, what was once distant is rediscovered within himself.

Conversely, Winckelmann’s northern distance from, and resultant longing for, the south makes his encounter with the south all the more illuminating. Winckelmann’s arrival in Rome is a turning point: he is finally in contact with the intellectual, aesthetic, social, and erotic life that will permit him to produce the groundbreaking *History of Ancient Art*. He takes up residence in the artists’ quarter, where he could “overlook, far and wide, the eternal city” (150); gains a powerful patron; and makes friends with a number of handsome young Italian men. According to Pater, Winckelmann’s illumination of Greek art is unsurprising, since “Hellenism, which is the principle pre-eminently of light... has always been most effectively conceived by those who have crept into it out of an intellectual world in which the sombre elements predominate” (151). In Rome, he takes up an almost pastoral existence, showing his natural good taste and ability to effortlessly reconcile opposites: “He was simple without being niggardly; he desired to be neither poor nor rich” (151). Whereas in Germany civilization is an encumbrance, in Rome it is worn lightly as nothing more than natural grace and good taste. Pater also writes that “Winckelmann’s Roman life was simple, primeval, Greek,” thereby conflating in one sentence the “primeval,” suggesting some kind of universal primitive state, and the “Greek,” which was for Pater a quite particular form of cultural perfection (151). In these moments, Pater draws attention to the erotic desire that results from the distance between Winckelmann and the Greco-Italian south but he also stresses that such distance can be overcome.

Pater’s peculiar circularity can be explained partly by his brand of evolutionist historicism. His comments on historical change suggest a process in which present cultures
grow out of past cultures that persist in the present in vestigial form. He explains this theory while also making a special case for the role of Hellenism: “The spiritual forces of the past, which have prompted and informed the culture of a succeeding age, live, indeed, within that culture, but with an absorbed, underground life. The Hellenic element alone has not been so absorbed, or content with this underground life; from time to time it has started to the surface; culture has been drawn back to its sources to be clarified and corrected” (158). Carolyn Williams rightly suggests that “Pater’s ‘aesthetic’ historicism may be seen as the dialectical counterpoint of contemporary Social Darwinist, imperialist, and racist historicisms” (106)—shedding light on Pater’s developmental sense of history in which cultures gradually develop out of one another in a gradual move from lesser to greater complexity, replacing previous cultures but also incorporating the old within the new. Most of the time the old is an “underground,” buried substratum, supporting new developments without itself being immediately apparent, but when the cultural substratum is especially important, as with Hellenism, it assumes a molten, volcanic, and erotic aspect, ready to surge upward like the “buried fire of ancient art” rising to the “surface,” which here has both temporal and psychological connotations: not only the continually flowing surface of the present, but also the surface of the conscious mind.

This resurgent past/unconscious then makes itself apparent in certain historical periods like the Renaissance or in certain exceptional personalities such as Winckelmann’s. Pater therefore describes Winckelmann as a survival from ancient Greece, a kind of primitive whose instinctive appreciation for the anachronistic south of Greece and Italy was isolated from the rest of his personality in order to cultivate it. In a passage that is taken from “Diaphaneité,” Pater writes that Winckelmann could understand the Greeks so well because his nature was “itself like
a relic of classical antiquity, laid open by accident to our alien, modern atmosphere (175). As Adams claims, “‘The Hellenic tradition’ in this sense survives as both a historical continuum and a collective unconscious, which is remembered—recalled and reembodied—in the lives of its ‘enthusiasts’” (161). Pater explicitly draws a comparison between the excavation and rediscovery of Greek sculpture and the study of anachronistic “relics” such as Winckelmann himself. Winckelmann then becomes to Pater, and also to his readers, what Pater claims that Winckelmann was to Goethe. Pater writes that Goethe “classes [Winckelmann] with certain works of art, possessing an inexhaustible gift of suggestion, to which criticism may return again and again with renewed freshness” (141). The past is not simply past, but may be re-performed and, therefore, re-embodied in the present. Even if it cannot actually be reached, the past can be continually approached and reinterpreted. “Winckelmann” thus asks readers to make a series of comparisons: to recognize themselves as being like Winckelmann, and therefore as being also like the Italians of the Renaissance who recognized the survivals of Greek art and culture within themselves. The essay asks its readers to become who they already are by recognizing themselves in the past (and therefore also recognizing themselves as anachronistic beings), and to make this recognition the basis for a transhistorical community of aesthetic taste and sexual desire.

Pater makes clear that this reproduction of the past is not merely a matter of texts and artifacts, however passionate their reception, but also rooted in desire, the body, and social relationships. Like a Lombroso of art history, Pater writes that Winckelmann “betray[ed] his temperament even in appearance, by his olive complexion, his deep-seated, piercing eyes, his

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20 The passage from “Diaphaneité” reads: “Such a character is like a relic from the classical age, laid open by accident to our alien modern atmosphere. It has something of the clear ring, the eternal outline of the antique” (MS 219).

21 Cesare Lombroso was famous for his studies that attempted to link criminality to supposedly primitive physical types. See, for instance, Pick 109-154 and Arata 11
rapid movements” and “apprehended the subtlest principles of the Hellenic manner, not through the understanding, but by instinct or touch” (154). Winckelmann’s Greekness is therefore written on the body, and his olive-skinned, southern body becomes the outward sign of the seeds that he had to discover within. As before, though, Pater enacts a transposition from Greece to Italy, since, as Pater affirms, Winckelmann’s “affinity with Hellenism... is proved by his romantic, fervent friendships with young men”—men who in this instance are Italian, not Greek. Winckelmann’s anachronism is spiritual, embodied, and emphatically social: “These friendships, bringing him into contact with the pride of human form, and staining the thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation to the spirit of Greek sculpture” (152). Friendship is motivated by an appreciation of the male body, and this homoerotic practice results in both a keener understanding of Greek art and a temperament in tune with the Greek “spirit.”

This conflation of (inborn) nature and (artificial) culture in Winckelmann’s temperament is continued in the discussion of ancient Greece. If, as we have seen, Rome is both “primeval” and “Greek” (151), that is because it echoes the dual nature of Greek culture, which is prized for lack of self-consciousness and its unity of thought and sense. The Greeks attained this balance of mind and body in their art because “the thoughts of the Greeks about themselves, and their relation to the world generally, were ever in the happiest readiness to be transformed into objects for the senses” (163). Thought could not ever become removed from material, everyday existence because it was continually embodied and converted into sensual form. Pater identifies the keynote of this talent of the Greek spirit in the “pagan sentiment,” or what Symonds later called the “mythopoeic sense” and Vernon Lee associated with the innate poetic faculty of primitive peoples. This sentiment provides the Dionysian counterpart to the cheerful rationality that Victorians like Cardinal Newman emphasized and the “blitheness or repose” (Heiterkeit)
that Hegel identified (R 170). According to Pater, “This pagan sentiment measures the sadness with which the human mind is filled, whenever its thoughts wander far from what is here, and now,” but it is also “the secret... of his fortune,” since it aestheticizes existence by “making the earth golden and the grape fiery for him. He makes gods in his own image, gods smiling and flower-crowned, or bleeding by some sad fatality” (160). Although Pater associates this pagan sentiment with the ancient Greeks in particular, he also wants to apply it more broadly, claiming that it forms “the broad foundation, in mere human nature, of all religions as they exist for the greatest number... a paganism which existed before the Greek religion, and has lingered far onward into the Christian world, ineradicable” (160). Thus, what makes the Greeks Greek is something particular to them but also universal to everyone; the ancient Greeks just happen to be the most universal of all particular cultures.

Borrowing from Hegel’s Lectures on Fine Art, Pater lays out the development of art history: first the architecture of the Egyptians, followed by the sculpture of the ancient Greeks, the painting of the Renaissance, and the music and poetry of the modern world. Pater, like Winckelmann, privileges sculpture, because it humanizes the abstract forms of Egyptian art without attempting to express something beyond itself or become “self-analytical” like the forms that predominated afterwards (168). It therefore fulfills the “ideal in art, in which the thought does not outstrip or lie beyond the proper range of its sensible embodiment” (165). The Greeks therefore attain a perfect synthesis between mind and body, content and form, culture and nature. As opposed to the inarticulacy of the primitive or the excessive self-consciousness of the present, the “Greek mind had advanced to a particular stage of self-reflexion, but was careful not to pass beyond it” (164). Because of this perfect balance, the “art of sculpture records the first naive, unperplexed recognition of man by himself” (170). The Greek spirit is personified for Pater by
“a youth who has gained the wrestler’s prize, with hands lifted and open, in praise of the victory. Fresh, unperplexed, it is the image of man as he springs first from the sleep of nature, his white light taking no colour from any one-sided experience. He is so characterless, so far as character involves subjection to the accidental influences of life” (174-75). In other words, Pater uses this figure of the homoerotic adolescent male body as the representative of a quite modern dream of a life free of self-consciousness and contingency. He imagines a world in which personal desire is always consistent with the public good, and in which the triumphant male body is the preeminent representative for this spiritual and cultural totality.

Pater attempts to defuse any possible anxiety over the homoeroticism of Greek art by emphasizing its “sexless beauty” and Winckelmann’s sensual “serenity” (176). He writes that Winckelmann’s treatment of the “sensuous side of Greek art” is pagan in character, by which he means that for the Greek the immersion in sense does not threaten religion. Unlike the modern Christian, whose putative asceticism “discredit[s] the slightest touch of sense,” and therefore must fight against what it desires, producing “a kind of intoxication,” Winckelmann’s pagan sensuousness “does not fever the conscience: it is shameless and childlike” (177). In other words, Pater begins by setting out to acquit aesthetic sensuality from the charge of immorality, but he ends up by locating the problem in Christian prohibition rather than in sensuality itself. Pagan sensuality “does not fever the conscience,” not because it is necessarily more “pure” or in tune with spirituality than the sensuality of the present, but because it is blissfully unconscious of sensuality as a problem that needs to be solved. Its eroticism is guiltless because it is unaware of any prohibition, and therefore also free from the possibility of feeling guilt. Therefore, Pater can write that Winckelmann “fingers those pagan marbles with unsinged hands, with no sense of
shame or loss”—not because he is free of erotic desire, but because he is free of a guilt that is figured as “intoxication” (177).

As much as Pater is invested in this image of the ancient Greek as a Rousseauian natural man, we must remind ourselves that “Winckelmann” is not really about the Greeks, but about Winckelmann’s late “Renaissance” attempt to understand and emulate their art and culture, with the full weight of eighteenth-century German philosophy behind him. By the same token, if Greece represents an Eden of perfect grace and un-self-consciousness that is ultimately unrecoverable, then Pater and his readers have much more in common with the backward-looking Italians of the Renaissance than the ancient Greeks themselves. This modern emphasis is made clear not only in the characteristically Paterian concerns of his description of Greek art, but also in certain curious statements such as the anachronistic assertion that the Greeks “were careful not to go beyond” their current state of self-consciousness, as if they foresaw the post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic, and post-Darwinian spiritual crises of a Tennyson or a Matthew Arnold and wisely decided to revert to their former ignorance. This is the Romantic notion that Geoffrey Hartman identifies as a “a return, via knowledge, to naiveté” (48). Likewise, The Renaissance as a whole celebrates the writers and artists who self-consciously sought out a return to ancient models of art and learning. As opposed to the perfect unity and completeness of the Greeks, he praises Michelangelo’s sculpture for its “incompleteness,” since it gestures beyond itself, towards the transcendent or the unspeakable (59), and Leonardo’s attempt to go beyond the limits of the “naive” Florentine school by expressing in the visual medium of painting that which transcends a purely visual representation, “aiming at an impossible effect, to do something that art, that painting, can never do” (88). Like Pater’s diaphanous type or his hypothetical student of origins, the Italians of the Renaissance straddle past and present.
Although Pater celebrates Greek sculpture for the way it “records the first naive, unperplexed recognition of man by himself” (170), it is clear that his own methods are closer to the modern arts of “painting, music, and poetry, with their endless power of complexity,” which can express “every delicacy of thought and feeling, incidental to a consciousness brooding with delight over itself” (168). In other words, Pater’s description of the capacities of modern art is really a description of his own prose style. He also urges us to “not regret that this unperplexed youth of humanity, satisfied with the vision of itself, passed, at the due moment, into a mournful maturity” (167). His perspective is that of the self-consciously modern nineteenth-century Briton looking back nostalgically at a quasi-primitive way of life that he believes he has transcended. One can recognize Pater in his description of Michelangelo, whose faithfulness to the earlier spirit of the Renaissance makes him an anachronism in the “frozen orthodoxy” of the Catholic Church under the Counter-Reformation: “So he lingers on; a revenant, as the French say, a ghost out of another age, in a world too coarse to touch his faint sensibilities very closely; dreaming, in a worn-out society, theatrical in its life, theatrical in its art, theatrical even in its devotion, on the morning of the world’s history, on the primitive form of man, on the images under which that primitive world had conceived of spiritual forces” (70). Pater’s Michelangelo, like Pater himself, is a dreamy man out of time, distancing himself from a society “worn-out” by dogma that has lost its vitality and looking backward to the “primitive world” on which he models himself and his art.

Pater therefore represents himself and the homoerotic audience that his work invokes as distanced from both an ultimately past age and an increasingly uncongenial present. In representing himself as a backward-looking anachronism, he also represents himself as being like the Italians of the Renaissance, attempting to recover through highly self-conscious means
the natural grace and unproblematized homoeroticism of the ancient Greeks. However, he also suggests at various points that even this act of Italianate recovery of the homoerotic past may be doomed to failure. Pater acknowledges that, despite Winckelmann’s success in his own day, many of his conclusions have required correction by his followers. Living before the age of modern archaeology, and in Rome rather than Greece, Winckelmann “had seen little or nothing of what we ascribe to the age of Pheidias... For the most part he had to penetrate to Greek art through copies, imitations, and later Roman art itself” (155). Thus, Winckelmann does not have direct contact with ancient Greece, but must make do with “copies” and “imitations,” looking back to an essence through those that have reinterpreted it before him. He is reviving a revival rather than the thing itself, standing at a distance like the Renaissance Italians whose ground he occupies.

At the same time, Pater also acknowledges that Winckelmann felt substantial distance from the Italy in which he takes up residence, albeit in muted form. He writes that, when Winckelmann arrived in Rome, “At first he was perplexed with the sense of being a stranger on what was to him, spiritually, native soil. ‘Unhappily,’ he cried in French, often selected by him as the vehicle of strong feeling, ‘I am one of those whom the Greeks call [too-late wise]—I have come into the world and Italy too late” (150). However, Pater’s editor Donald L. Hill has tracked down this quotation and finds certain revealing inaccuracies. Not only is the passage from a letter written in German rather than in French, as Pater states, the letter is dated “not at the time of Winckelmann’s arrival in Rome, but eleven-and-a-half years later, just before his death” (R 420). Winckelmann is represented as being, like Michelangelo and therefore like Pater himself, an anachronism who was born past his proper time. Whereas at other points that anachronistic quality seems to situate Winckelmann in ancient Greece or Italy, giving him a
certain strength of character and an eroticized intellectual and aesthetic power, in this instance it makes him homeless. Most importantly, this feeling of placelessness and disconnection was not a temporary phase that faded as Winckelmann became acclimated, but a persistent part of his Italian life.

The description of Winckelmann’s death also suggests that his erotic life may not have been as untroubled as Pater insists. In contrast to the friendships with young men that supposedly encompass aesthetic, intellectual, and erotic pursuits, his death in Trieste shows what happens when friendship and intellectual achievement become subject to excessive desire and violence. When discussing Winckelmann’s friendships, Pater writes: “He had known, he says, many young men more beautiful than Guido’s archangel” (152), and later notes that Winckelmann dies at the hands of “a man named Arcangeli” (156), as if Guido supplied both Winckelmann’s standard of male beauty and the name of his killer. After traveling to Vienna to receive an award, Winckelmann returns by way of Trieste, where he meets Arcangeli, who is only described as a “fellow-traveller.” After Winckelmann consents to let him see, “with characteristic openness,” the golden medals that he had received in Vienna, “Arcangeli’s avarice was roused”; he returns later to steal the medals, killing Winckelmann in the process (156). In this case, potential friendship turns to violence. Instead of the plentiful fulfillment that Winckelmann’s Roman Hellenism yields, here one person’s pleasure requires another’s loss.

That the stolen medals are a sign of Winckelmann’s intellectual achievements also implies that

22 Dellamora speculates that Pater may have seen Arcangeli as a species of eighteenth-century rough trade whose name suggests “an equivocal angel of either salvation or death” and who “undercuts the idealistic rhetoric in which he at times cloaks physical desire” (114). Winckelmann’s death also echoes the violent end of Pater’s imaginary portrait, “Apollo in Picardy” (rpt. in Miscellaneous Studies), in which the prior of a monastery and a young novice meet a shepherd in the French countryside. Reprising the roles of Apollo and Hyacinth, the sensual and unpredictable shepherd and the angelically beautiful novice play discus together and the novice is killed by the shepherd’s stone. In an unexpected twist, the Apollo character flees and the increasingly lecherous and incoherent monk is accused of deliberately murdering his charge.
Winckelmann’s erotically fueled aestheticism must ultimately be punished, even—or especially—when it is being honored. Most regrettable to Pater is that Winckelmann’s death means that he missed the chance to become friends with Goethe, whom he was to have met in Leipzig, and Pater describes this missed connection as an interruption and diminution of the homosocial aesthetic tradition in which both Goethe and Winckelmann are key figures.

Pater’s Winckelmann is thus full of paradoxes and contradictions. He is the innately Greek man who had to work very hard to become Greek, the southern man born in the north, and the man who found complete satisfaction in Rome while also feeling chronically homeless there. Most of all, he is the model of a life balanced between art, desire, and friendship who is killed by an admiring “fellow-traveller.” But if Winckelmann’s failures suggest the incongruities and factitiousness of Pater’s historiography, then they also point towards its openness to the participation of other readers and writers. Winckelmann’s death marks a break in Pater’s homoerotic tradition, and this incompleteness in his life therefore requires the reinterpretation of Pater and others like him who can place it in vital connection with the likes of Leonardo, Goethe, or other yet-to-be-born historians and followers of beauty. Winckelmann, in his guise as Paterian student of origins, does indeed fail to reach his goal of fully apprehending Greek art and thereby becoming Greek, but in the process he becomes something else: an Italian. Like Pico della Mirandola, the Renaissance humanist whose life’s work was “to reconcile Christianity with the religion of ancient Greece” (R 23) and (in a typical example of Paterian misquotation) “to ‘bind the ages each to each by natural piety’” (34), Winckelmann was the product of the “mixture of two traditions, two sentiments” (37). In pursuit of ancient wholeness and plenitude, he finds a historical consciousness that, in its hybridity and dividedness, is both more dynamic and less satisfying. By positioning Italy as a geographical and psychological space that is
simultaneously ancient and modern, Pater draws on representations of Italy as a primitive place with its own distinctive properties while also opening it up to future change and development. In doing so, Pater enacts a move that the writers in my following chapters will echo, away from the fetishization of Italy as such in favor of an emphasis on the processes of desire and interpretation that it engenders.
CHAPTER 2

“A SOCIETY SINGULARLY CONGENIAL TO MY PECULIAR NATURE”:

JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF DESIRE

Places exercise commanding influence in the development of certain natures. Mine is one of them.

—JAS

I cannot communicate with a man, whom I cannot locate in space.

—JAS

In 1877, John Addington Symonds reached a turning point in his life. Aged thirty-six, he suffered an acute attack of bronchitis in February of that year, and his doctor advised him to travel to Greece for the sake of its climate. Having gotten as far as Cannes, however, Symonds felt that he was too ill to make the rest of the journey, and “determined to await a coming crisis in regions which were better known to me” (Memoirs 256). Surprisingly, the crisis that he had in mind was not medical, but erotic, and he frames its solution in terms of time and space. It was, as he wrote in his Memoirs, the moment when he “abandoned Greece and turned to Lombardy” (256).

What was Greece, its monuments, its mountains, its transparent air, for a man at strife with his own soul—indifferent to antiquity for the moment, hungering after reality, careless of nature, acutely sensitive to life? Greece, for such a man, was only a wide field of experience in the solution of the now commanding problem—the problem of correlating his dominant passion with the facts of existence...

What little strength I had left must be reserved for the close battle with my
passions; and my physical resources must be dedicated to the contest which could no longer be deferred. (256)

Although discussions of Symonds’s same-sex desires and practices most frequently situate them in relation to Hellenism, here he declares that Greece, as place and ideal, is inadequate for the working out of same-sex desire and practice. For him, it belongs to the past: a field of knowledge and experience, but not of action or invention. Greece is mere scenery and idea, whereas Italy is a battleground full of “life” and “reality” on which he might resolve same-sex desire with the world in which he lives. Although Symonds’s vexed relationship to his sexuality is often interpreted as a conflict between desire and repression, here the problem that he poses is not whether to enact his desires, but, rather, how and where to enact them. In this chapter, I argue that Symonds’s conception of Italy as an anachronistic southern space was crucial to his mature understanding of his erotic and social relationships.

In thinking through this question of the spatiality of desire in Symonds’s Memoirs, I draw on Sarah Ahmed’s consideration of the spatial, social, and erotic valences of the concept of “orientation.” Her defining questions in this consideration are, “What does it mean for sexuality

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23 For a sense of the wide range of homoerotic investments in Italy, see Robert Aldrich’s informative if somewhat uncritical Seduction of the Mediterranean.

24 It would be a mistake to insist on the definitiveness of any one moment in Symonds’s notoriously self-undermining Memoirs, since they all too frequently make declarations of success or failure on one page only to retract them on the next. However, the decision to turn from Greece to Italy is, I argue, emblematic of Symonds’s abiding concern with the spatiality and temporality of desire, and points to the decisive role that Italy played in his mature sexual self-understanding. The Memoirs are a difficult text to analyze for a number of reasons. First, however much I focus on Symonds-the-persona who is narrated into being by the Memoirs, it is impossible to forget that there was also Symonds-the-man, who left numerous textual traces besides the Memoirs, traces which I use to supplement my main line of analysis. Second, the Memoirs as they have come down to us are quite fragmentary. Symonds never intended to publish during his lifetime, and the manuscript he left at the time of his death was quite rough in places. Even leaving aside the incompleteness of the only widely available edition of the Memoirs, the narrative itself is quite uneven, since Symonds often describes a certain period of his life only to return to it many dozens of pages later with a very different emphasis, or interrupts the flow of his story with comments that modify or even undermine his argument. See Heidt, “‘Let JAS words stand,’” on the makeup of the manuscripts and their several editions.
to be lived as oriented? What difference does it make ‘what’ or ‘who’ we are oriented toward in the very direction of our desire?” (543) As Ahmed makes clear, these questions do not just remind us that desire is directed towards certain objects, but also lead us to consider how sexuality might depend on “how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with” (543). In other words, orientation—sexual or otherwise—depends on a whole field of objects, as well as how others are already oriented to them. If sexuality is spatial, then it is also social, a way of relating to others and a way of being in the world. Orientations create communities and spaces, because when people are oriented to similar objects, then their actions and emotional investments become mutually intelligible. On the other hand, when people find themselves unwilling or unable to line up, then they are cut off from this shared intelligibility: they deviate.

Throughout his life, Symonds was preoccupied with how his own erotic orientation lined up with others’ and how these alignments created social spaces. His most vexing problem was not whether or not to enact his desires, but how to find a social context in which to enact them. Symonds continually felt out of place in modern Britain, and he longed for a place in which his erotic and emotional life—or, as he puts it, his “passions”—would become socially recognized and validated. Disappointed with the erotic possibilities that he found at Harrow, Oxford, and London, Symonds dreamed of reconstituting some version of Hellenic paederastia. When his tuberculosis forced him to move to Davos, Switzerland, he became convinced that a residence in the Alps (conceived of as northern, simple, and healthy) balanced by frequent trips to Venice (conceived of as southern, sensual, and vaguely illicit) could offer him the social and spatial context in which to enact his same-sex desires. In contrast to modern Britain, which Symonds characterizes in terms of what James Buzard calls an “anticulture” that is condemned for its lack of any authentic relationality, he represents both Italy and Switzerland as pre-modern, and
therefore as closer to nature and tradition. However, whereas Symonds sees Alpine Switzerland as the home of harmonious organic communities, he sees Italy as alternately primitive and decadent, offering access to the untamed roots of human sexuality while also posing a danger to his health and morals.

This abiding emphasis on place and culture means that, unlike Wilde and the decadents, Symonds was strikingly uninterested in glamorizing deviance. Instead, he was haunted by the specter of a potentially disruptive sexuality which he felt needed to be communalized, or channeled into socially acceptable forms like friendship or patronage. In terms suggested by Lisa Duggan, Symonds was quite homonormative, for the most part seeking accommodation, respectability, and inclusion rather than a radical re-envisioning of social relations (Duggan 50). Many politically minded critics have shown how this attempted consolidation of male bourgeois selfhood depended on classist exploitation, sexism, racism, orientalism, and historiographical naïveté.25 While recognizing these liabilities, I focus on how Symonds attempts to imagine an alternative to the medical model by thinking about sexuality in terms of space, social collectivity, and ethics. For Symonds, to be properly oriented required harmonizing his desires and sexual self-understanding with the society in which he lived. Since he felt that his desires were unchangeable, he could only change his understanding of them or change the society he called home. The dialectical relationship among these variables formed the drama of his life. This process of imaginative orientation and reorientation was enabling, because it articulated and legitimated his desires, but also disorienting, because the identifications that made his self-understanding possible operated through displacement, anachronism, and asymmetrical social relationships. For Symonds, to imagine things otherwise was to imagine things elsewhere.

25 For a sample, see Cook 129-133, Sedgwick 208-212, Bravmann 50-55, Clarke 141-146, and Heacox 60-65, respectively.
Although Symonds initially found a compelling model in Hellenism, he ultimately decided that it was untranslatable to a Victorian British idiom. Time and again, he stumbled on the gap between its idealizing rhetoric and the reality that confronted him, and he eventually concluded that attempting to practice paiderastia could never work for a man living in the nineteenth century. Although Symonds continually claimed to have turned from textuality to reality and from the past to the present, his solutions were themselves often fixated on textuality and the past. Instead of escaping from textuality, he turned to the poetry of Walt Whitman, and in particular to Whitman’s ideal of comradeship, a sexual model that Symonds used to reimagine Hellenic same-sex relations for the nineteenth century. And instead of turning away from the past, he determined that he could experience it most fully by going abroad. If he judged that the attempt to bring the past to the present by reinstituting paiderastia in Victorian Britain was impossible, then his solution was to bring himself to the past: to places that, according to evolutionist historical narratives, still occupied some pre-modern stage of development. In so doing, he exchanged one eroticized north/south binary between Victorian Britain and ancient Greece for another between Switzerland and Italy. Whereas in the first binary he positioned himself as a man out of time, best suited to ancient Greece but marooned in the present, in the new binary between Switzerland and Italy, both terms are figured as temporally anterior.

Although often thought of as a Hellenist whose study of Greek poetry and culture provided the impetus for his own writings on nineteenth-century homosexuality, Symonds had a life-long interest in Italy, maintained a residence there, and devoted a considerable part of his intellectual energies after 1870 to writing about it for an English audience. He first visited in 1861 at the age of twenty, and first wrote about it in 1863 for an essay on the Renaissance that won the Oxford Chancellor’s Prize. He returned almost every year of his life, and his visits
became even more frequent after settling on the Continent permanently in 1877. The product of these travels were four volumes of essays: *Sketches in Italy and Greece* (1874), *Sketches and Studies in Italy* (1879), *Italian Byways* (1883), and *Our Life in the Swiss Highlands* (1892), which was co-written with his daughter Margaret. He wrote studies of Dante, Boccaccio, and Michelangelo, and translated the poetry of Michelangelo and the Renaissance autobiographies of Benvenuto Cellini and Carlo Gozzi. His greatest work, though, was undoubtedly the magisterial *Renaissance in Italy*, which he began drafting in 1871 and published in seven volumes between 1875 and 1886. Although others had written about the Renaissance before, notably Jules Michelet, Jacob Burckhardt, and Walter Pater, Symonds was the first Englishman to write a comprehensive historical study of the period.

In his persistent fascination with the past as a means of articulating sexuality, Symonds can also be considered in terms of the backward-looking structure of feeling that Christopher Nealon calls “foundling,” or the experience of “a movement between solitary exile and collective experience” that “manifests itself in an overwhelming desire to feel historical, to convert the harrowing privacy of the inversion model into some more encompassing narrative of collective life” (Nealon 8). Because Symonds found it useful in imagining such a collectivity to turn to places like Switzerland and Italy whose temporalized spaces were thought to put them in closer touch with nature—and therefore with the desires and pleasures that civilization had gradually sublimated—he participates in imperialist discourses of romantic primitivism. Although romantic primitivism pretends to call the progressiveness of civilization into question, it also relies on narratives of historical development that ultimately privilege certain cultures while assigning the rest to what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the “waiting room of history” (8). As

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26 See also works by Bravmann, Love, and Dinshaw, as well as Freeman, a *GLQ* special issue on “Queer Temporalities.”
Neville Hoad argues, when these narratives of development are used to articulate notions of same-sex desire, they “create a disturbing consonance between ideologies of liberation and ideologies of oppression” (Hoad 133).27

This temporalization of space also has interesting literary effects. If certain spaces are suffused with the past, then writers must come to terms with how to capture this pastness. When, to quote Bakhtin, time “thickens, takes on flesh, [and] becomes artistically visible” (84), certain spaces come to be represented as qualitatively different from others, and this difference often produces certain unaccountable erotic effects. Whether located in Greece, Italy, or Switzerland, these temporalized spaces retain persistent similarities to the space of romance, which Northrop Frye called “the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream” (Frye 186), either through imagining an “enclosed and quietist images of bliss” (Beer 29) or the renewal of a fallen world, “the victory of fertility over the wasteland” (Frye 193). Particularly important to this fantasy is the notion of a space that reflects and shelters desire, a space from which subjectivity is not alienated. Especially in its pastoral strains, this romance space epitomizes a total harmony of social relations, creating what Raymond Williams calls an “enamelled world” of total presence (18). On the other hand, when the desires that are immanent in this space are repressed or unwanted, as they are for Symonds at Harrow and in London, then their appearance assumes a gothic register, threatening to unleash barely contained psychic forces and to create unbridgeable fissures between self and society.

Symonds was scarcely more successful at getting his actual sexual encounters in Italy and Switzerland to match up to his ideals than he had been in Britain. However, the way he imagines Italy and Switzerland and his relation to them renders these failures tolerable. Because Italy and Switzerland were considered unfamiliar and exotic relative to London, they were more easily

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27 See also Gandhi 47-59 and Bleys.
adaptable to Symonds’s idealizing tendencies; because they were less industrialized than Britain, the kinds of class divisions that they presented to Symonds as tourist or resident alien were less troubling. Both held the promise of an environment in which his desires—experienced so often as eccentric, solitary, or denied—would find their home, either through bodily health in the Alps or through the dangerous allure of beauty in Italy. Having failed to achieve integration in Britain, he made another attempt abroad. That is, he sought integration in just those places where he believed that he could never really be integrated, where he would always be an outsider, a tourist, or—more happily—a guest. The contradictions and slippages in this process of orientation turn out to be unresolvable, but Symonds continually acknowledged his failures only to begin again.

“We cannot be Greek now”: The Failure of Hellenism

Critics have rightly noted the centrality of Hellenism to Symonds’s articulation of his same-sex desires. In *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Linda Dowling argues that the study of Greek literature became the source of “a homosexual counterdiscourse able to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms” as “the very fountain of civic health in an English polity imperatively in need... of some authentic new source of ideas and intellectual power” (xiii, xv). Sarah Cole has also shown how Hellenism provided a powerful, if unstable, way of idealizing and institutionalizing same-sex desire in terms of valorized male friendship. However, to see Symonds primarily in terms of Hellenism tends to freeze him at a relatively early stage of his development and to deemphasize how the discourses of Hellenism, Whitmanesque comradeship, and primitivism coexisted in his writings.28 Instead, I want to pay particular attention to those moments in which, even in his earliest stages, Symonds expresses

28 For the importance of Hellenism to Victorian culture more broadly, see Richard Jenkyns.
ambivalence about Hellenism’s ability to make sense of his desires, thus setting the stage for his
turn to Italy and Switzerland. Symonds looks to Hellenism as a way of orienting his desires and
resolving certain contradictions that are experienced in social, erotic, and spatial terms, but what
he finds is that Hellenism tends to exacerbate the contradictions that they were meant to resolve.

As Cole and Oliver S. Buckton have observed, even in his most affirmative writings
Symonds expressed a high degree of anxiety about the place of sex and the body in male love.
Cole writes that Symonds’s *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) “struggles palpably with what the
writer feels is a tendency for the type of friendship he admires to be degraded” (47) and thus
foreshadows E. M. Forster’s “refusal to concede that the physical body can be controlled within
a transformative or idealizing narrative” (23). In Buckton’s view, Symonds’s need to idealize
love between men leads him to displace the unspeakable part of himself—the desiring body—
onto “a series of figures whose scarcely representable urges are characterized in ways that
Symonds demonizes and repudiates” (72). I concur with Cole and Buckton that Symonds’s
Hellenism was unstable from the beginning, and that he himself was quite conscious of this
instability. However, whereas Buckton emphasizes Symonds’s concern in the *Memoirs* with
formulating the truth of a coherent, inner self, I see Symonds as more concerned with the social
and spatial dimensions of desire. Each disillusioning episode—whether at Harrow, Oxford, or
London—leads him closer to the conclusion that Hellenic pederastia is an untenable model in
Victorian Britain.

I am most interested in the relationship between how Symonds makes sense of his desires
and how and where he imagines them being enacted. The distinction that he draws “between an
inner and real self and an outer and artificial self” is crucial to his presentation of his childhood
self (102). He writes of his years of schooling at Harrow that, “Without meaning to do so, I
came to act a part,” and thus “I allowed an outer self of commonplace cheerfulness and easy-going pliability to settle like a crust upon my inner and real character” (82). This division between private and public selves is in turn expressed in terms of a spatial binary of home and school. He associates his home in suburban Bristol with his early sexual development and the vaguely ethereal fantasies that went along with it, as opposed to the unromantic and hierarchical reality of schoolboy sex. Interestingly, he uses metaphors of performance to describe both places: whereas at Harrow he was required to “act a part” of normalcy, his home was “the stage on which [his] inner self would have to play its part” (90). Appropriately enough for a budding classicist, these early fantasies often fixate on representations of young men from mythology in his father’s art collection, and in particular on the story of Venus and Adonis. His identification with Venus “brought into relief the overwhelming attraction of masculine adolescence and its proud inaccessibility” and thus “gave form, ideality, and beauty to my previous erotic visions,” which had centered on daydreams of “shaggy and brawny sailors” (62-63). In visualizing a mythological and pastoral realm removed from ordinary experience, he begins the process of imagining an elsewhere in which to situate his desires, and this mythological space fulfills the same role that Greece, Italy, and Switzerland will later in life.

Although life at Harrow could not have been more different from this idealized space of romance, it also has a way of forcing Symonds to confront the consequences of his idealized erotic visions. In his arresting description of the “moral state of the school,” Symonds writes that

Every boy of good looks had a female name, and was recognized either as a public prostitute or as some bigger fellow’s “bitch.” Bitch was the word in common usage to indicate a boy who yielded his person to a lover. The talk in the dormitories and the studies was incredibly obscene. Here and there one could not
avoid seeing acts of onanism, mutual masturbation, the sports of naked boys in bed together. There was no refinement, no sentiment, no passion; nothing but animal lust in these occurrences. They filled me with disgust and loathing. (94)

Symonds locates the source of this disgust in the paradox that he recognizes his own desires in the acts he sees and wishes to disavow: “the earliest phase of my sexual consciousness was here objectified before my eyes; and I detested in practice what had once attracted me in fancy” (96). Whereas earlier he had been able to project himself into his fantasies seemingly without ambivalence, here the social and spatial context of the school—indiscriminate, hierarchical, supposedly without feeling—renders those desires horrifying, since it is not the beautiful and good world that he imagined. He claims that these experiences intensified the distinction between an inner and outer self, as well as the homesickness to which it was linked.

Symonds thus felt caught between a series of apparently unresolvable binaries: inner and outer, private and public, home and school, romance and reality, desire and enactment. When at age seventeen he stayed up all night reading Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, it had all the force of a conversion experience because it provided a sexual model that promised to resolve all these divisions. Whereas Harrow had produced psychological dissonance, his lyrical identification with what he read in Plato is absolute: “It was just as though the voice of my own soul spoke to me.” The appeal of the sexual model that Symonds found in Plato was its promise to bridge private desire and public social context. Plato presents paiderastia as not merely possible or tolerated, but as absolutely normative and central to Athenian society. Furthermore, his attractions are clearly textual, expressed as they are “with all the magic of unrivalled style.” However, what Symonds emphasizes is the position of male love among “the actual historical Greeks of antiquity” who “treated this love seriously, invested it with moral charm, endowed it
with sublimity” (99). The style is so magical, in fact, that “Harrow vanished into unreality” while Symonds, lost in historical reverie, “had touched solid ground” (99). What’s so emotionally convincing and seemingly real about this experience is the prospect of a world in which his desires would align with those of others and become socially significant. However, his attempts to enact this model in the already discredited present involved him in an unsustainable contradiction, now articulated as a division between the past and the present rather than the public and the private. He claims that “his soul was lodged in Hellas” (103), and imagines that “in some antenatal experience I had lived the life of a philosophical Greek lover” (99). The intensity of his lyrical identification with Plato is thus both powerful and risky, because it provided him with a vocabulary for his desires, but only by locating them at an untraversable distance.

Despite Symonds’s youthful enthusiasm, he ultimately came to believe that nothing resembling Dorian comradeship or Athenian pederastia could exist in the modern world. He sums up his lack of confidence in a diary entry composed during the bleak years following his wedding: “What is left for us modern men? We cannot be Greek now... And the Spartan laws of comradeship, the Socratic doctrine of a noble life developed out of boy-love with philosophy, how would these show in the tents of Mrs Grundy? The ages and the seasons of humanity do not repeat themselves” (Memoirs 169). The only consolation for these “dull pangs of the present,” then, is the “hasheesh” of literature and historical speculation, “illusions of the fancy and a life of self-indulgent dreaming” (Memoirs 170). Symonds continually emphasized that pederastia was an ethical, aesthetic, and erotic ideal that depended on social conditions specific to ancient Greece. Pederastia was, he writes, “a social institution, regulated by definite laws and sanctioned by the State” (“Dantesque” 63). If it ever attained the spiritual grandeur claimed for
it by some writers, it did so only through the enforcement of these laws by society, which attached value to the relationship, supervised it, and offered its encouragement, correction, or punishment as the case warranted. Thus, its translation to nineteenth-century Britain seemed impossible, especially given the low esteem in which Symonds held his own century. Like other Victorian critics such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold, Symonds diagnosed the nineteenth century as belated, transitional, and degraded by industrialization, and he sought its redemption by turning to the past even as he questioned the viability of such a turn. What, Symonds asks, could the “blear-eyed Mechanic” understand about the ancient Greeks, when he is “stifled in a hovel of our sombre northern towns, canopied through all the year with smoke, deafened with wheels that never cease to creak, stiffened by toil in one cramped posture, oblivious of the sunlight and green fields”? (“Genius” 120) Although Symonds expresses as much disdain for the factory worker as for the factory itself, he lays special blame on the provincial scope and narrow sympathies of British religious life and, echoing Matthew Arnold, “the Hebraistic culture we receive in childhood” (“Genius” fn144). Symonds thus puts himself into a bind: the only affirmative model of sexual desire between men that he has is from ancient Greece, but the conditions of modern life preclude him from acting on it. Symonds sees himself as out of place and out of time.

At this point Symonds can only experience same-sex desire as an anachronism, and the effects of this temporal dislocation are on vivid display in the description of his first love with Willie Dyer, the son of a tailor and a chorister three years his junior. In one of the most moving passages of the Memoirs, Symonds describes the physical climax of this relationship—a kiss, enjoyed in the dreamily pastoral setting of a clearing in the woods on the banks of the Avon. The spatial dimensions of this new relationship are quite significant. He claims that it liberated
him from “the close blind alley” of Harrow “into infinities of free and liberal experience” (103). However, the limited possibilities of enacting this fantasy as part of a larger community soon become apparent. This sense of liberation and expansion is countered by the apprehension that his love “enisled me in an enchanted garden, round which the breakers of the world of fact fretted without disturbing the delightfulness of dreaming” (102). The relationship is continuous with his Hellenic idealism, but it makes him realize that “centuries rolled between my soul’s home in Athens and the English places I was born again to live in” (106). Despite his language of opening up, the deliverance that Willie offered him was only possible at the cost of secrecy. It did not include a broader social life, but was in fact only possible because he and Willie belonged to different social spheres. He ultimately blames the rigidity of the English class system for this romantic failure, lamenting that the friendship might not have failed “had English institutions favoured equality like those I admire in Switzerland” so that Willie “might have been admitted to my father’s home” (117). Symonds here represents himself as the hapless victim of Victorian class distinctions. He contrasts the natural purity of his love with the artificial but powerful force of social boundaries, which frustrate both love and hospitality. Symonds thus foreshadows the need to look beyond national borders to places such as Italy or Switzerland where cross-class hospitality and reciprocity would be possible.

Disappointed by both Harrow and Oxford, Symonds later sets up house in London, which provided an intensely tempting and troubling space in which to situate his desires. Although Symonds associated these urban spaces with working-class culture, he also experienced them as parallel to the degraded sexual space of Harrow, since they had the uncanny habit of materializing sexual desires that he recognized as his own but wished to disavow. One particularly important event occurred when Symonds was walking between Regents Park and his
home in Norfolk Square. Just as he turned back towards the home where his pregnant wife awaits him, he saw graffiti on the side of a building, “an emphatic diagram of phallic meeting, glued together, gushing,” accompanied by the words “prick to prick, so sweet.” Symonds writes that “It was of so concentrated, so stimulative, so penetrative a character—so thoroughly the voice of vice and passion in the proletariat—that it pierced the very marrow of my soul” (187).

Although this dramatically delimited representation of genital contact seems to imply a bracketing of the social, the graffito is not nearly as contextless as might first appear. Because its location on a particular London street associates it with an underground urban sexual culture, Symonds identifies it not merely as the vandalism of a similarly deviant individual, but as the voice of an entire class. The graffito is so suggestive of an entire way of life because it makes no sense as a solitary testament; rather, its existence calls for some group—however dispersed—to recognize itself as the addressee, and therefore signals to others that the public space of the city street is also sexual space. Its effects are correspondingly disorienting, making Symonds feel “humiliated, frightened, gripped in the clutch of doom” (188). He sees it as the sign of an urban sexual culture whose participants freely enjoy one another’s bodies, unburdened by the need to sublimate “vice and passion.” But because nineteenth-century discourses of urban depravity taught him to associate this culture with poverty, scandal, and industrial ugliness, he cannot apply the same picturesque gaze to it as he will later to Italy and Switzerland. His need to disavow a sexual space to which he is drawn renders him an alien in his own city.29

Walt Whitman’s poetry, and in particular his rhetoric of democratic comradeship, provided Symonds with a means of idealizing his desire for working-class men. As Eve Sedgwick claims, “Imprecise but reverberant translations from the American to the English

29 See also Cook on the various ways in which the spaces of London’s male homosexual culture were represented. For Symonds specifically, see Cook 122-133. Important work on this theme has also been done by Kaplan, Cocks, and Upchurch.
permitted Whitman, the figure, to embody contradictory and seductive attributes that would not have been combined in an Englishman.” As a result of this “productively bad conceptual fit between English and American ideas of class,” writers like Symonds, Edward Carpenter, and E. M. Forster could use Whitman in order “to sacralize something like the English homosexual system whereby bourgeois men had sexual contacts only with virile working-class youths” (204).30 One effect of this reception was that Symonds could idealize as “democratic” sexual contacts that depended on his own fundamentally unchallenged privilege and mobility, and which frequently involved the exchange of money or other gifts for sex. These tensions play out in quite interesting ways during an 1877 visit to a male brothel, Symonds’s first. He takes pains to imagine that the brothel could become a space for comradeship: “even in that lawless godless place, permanent human relations—affections, reciprocal toleration, decencies of conduct, asking and yielding, concession and abstention—find their natural sphere” (254). Matt Cook engagingly analyzes how the “specifically urban yet insulated space” of the brothel permits Symonds to control the encounter enough to find correspondences to Whitman (131). However, Symonds does admit that the encounter may have had a quite different meaning for the prostitute: “although [the brothel] was a far more decent place than I expected, this was not the proper ground in which to plant the seeds of irresistible emotion” (255). In Symonds’s erotic imagination, classes are as firmly spatialized as nations, and a fantasy of indelible difference simultaneously motivates and frustrates both Hellenism and Whitmanesque comradeship. However, because Symonds locates his problem not in comradeship itself but in the spaces where he had attempted to enact it, comradeship proves to be a more persistent source of inspiration and distress, even as his interpretation of it changes in Italy and Switzerland.

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30 For a comprehensive look at Symonds’s interest in Whitman in the context of other late-nineteenth-century writers, see Robertson 139-197.
Harmonizing Self and Space in Italy and Switzerland

I now return to the moment at which I began, when in 1877 Symonds turned from Greece to Lombardy, and therefore also to “reality,” “life,” and “passion.” In the Memoirs, he describes the associations with peasants and laborers that he took up while traveling, “always touching human nature at its crudest and coarsest points,” through which “what the soul gained or lost... was a levelling down until it touched the groundpan of ‘pauvre humanité’” (Memoirs 257). He describes a reorientation from Hellenism and London to Italy, and from civilization to nature. A mere three months later he left England again, and ended up stopping in Davos, Switzerland, where he eventually took up permanent residence and made frequent visits to Venice. This move to a life on the Continent balanced between Italy and Switzerland initiates the final phase of the Memoirs, in which Symonds claims to have given up idealism and disabling self-analysis in favor of what he describes variously as “the framer comradeship of my later experiences,” “a new solution upon lower and more practical lines of conduct,” and a “direct appeal to life” (Memoirs 213, 214, 171). This solution of “life” in Italy and Switzerland is intended to sweep away the contradictions and ambivalences of his Hellenic idealism, and, most importantly, to provide him with a social context for his desires in which he would finally feel that he belonged. But, as we will see, this solution tends to create contradictions and ambivalences of its own.

One curious thing about the Memoirs is that, after 1878, time more or less stops. The last two chapters on Davos and Venice, encompassing the years from 1877 to 1890, both begin by narrating the origin of his friendship with a particular man, but then quickly expand outward to a general description of his life in each place, highlighting comradeship and equanimity rather than crisis and development. This shift in the temporality of narration in these chapters, along with
their position at the end of the *Memoirs*, means that, formally at least, they are presented as the
goal to which the rest of the *Memoirs* have been progressing. Although this sense of culmination
is continually undermined by Symonds’s confessions to a sense of persistent dividedness and
failure, the tone that they interrupt is that of confident self-defense. It might be worth
considering, then, what it is exactly about these places that allowed Symonds to adopt, however
uncertainly, this sense of climactic accomplishment. In other words, by what rhetorical sleight
of hand can Symonds propose that he has finally found a solution to his sexual problems in “a
society singularly congenial to [his] peculiar nature”? (*Memoirs* 259)

It turns out that Symonds found a series of solutions, none wholly successful. Like the
genre of romance, which, as Patricia Parker notes, “simultaneously quests for and postpones a
particular end, objective, or object” (4), Symonds continually announces his success on the way
to a given goal only to find himself digressing from what he intended. One way of orienting
himself and his desires was to approach Italy, and particularly its history, as an object of
scholarship. This form of orientation was perhaps most similar to Hellenism, but Symonds’s
Italy was more frankly sensual than his Greece, and he never attempted to find in it a sexual
model that could be reconstituted in the present. Since pastness was still desirable but historical
scholarship was found to be an inadequate means of attaining it, he became attuned to the
“pastness” of present-day Italy and Switzerland, embracing a picturesque gaze that harmonized
the relationship between individuals and spaces and therefore also his own relationship to his
adopted homes. Although his sense of himself as erotically integrated into these places was
never untroubled, he compensated by positioning himself as a guest and adopting the language of
hospitality. Finally, at times Symonds moved away from orienting himself to actually existing
contexts, and instead oriented himself to the *process* of creating ideal social worlds, which could theoretically be anywhere.

Because neither Italy nor Switzerland could be everything that Symonds wanted, he depicted them in dynamic tension, alternately supplementing, contradicting, or reaffirming each other. Together the two places provided a precarious balance between north and south, nature and history, health and disease. Venice, and Italy more generally, was the world abroad, associated with sensuality, aesthetic spectatorship, and illness. Like ancient Greece, it offered the possibility of erotic expression, but Italy’s supposed decadence also made it a problematic object of desire. On the other hand, Davos was his home, as England had been before, and he associated it with work and family; but because he also saw it as belonging to a more traditional way of life than England and as having less pronounced class distinctions, it offered the possibility of friendship with working-class men in a less troubling context. Whereas once Symonds had limited himself to forbidden flirtations with working-class men in Victorian England while fantasizing about the lost erotic and social world of ancient Greece, now Symonds associates both the northern and southern terms of his erotic life with the past, and therefore with a more open, natural, and socially harmonious erotic life.

Before further elaborating on the importance of Italy and Switzerland as spaces in which Symonds can continue to reimagine his erotic relationships, I would first like to turn my attention to how Symonds’s considerable intellectual engagement with Italy provided a link between his early bookish Hellenism and his later fascination with picturesque primitivism. Symonds produced a prolific body of work on Italy, including travel essays, translations of Italian works, biographies of Italian figures, and most of all his seven-volume history of the Italian Renaissance, published between 1875 and 1886. As the writer of the first comprehensive history
of the Renaissance published in English, Symonds was instrumental in introducing the concept to the English public and sparking a popular re-evaluation of the period. Will Fisher has discussed how Symonds, like Pater, retained John Ruskin’s characterization of the Renaissance as a time of sensual excess while inverting his evaluation of it, and thus brought out the “queer potentiality” of Renaissance histories by Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt (46). As the necessary counterpoint to his celebration of the pious vigor of the gothic in The Stones of Venice, Ruskin piled scorn on the Renaissance as a depraved era that turned away from the divine and the authentically human in favor of artifice and vanity. Yet, while “Ruskin forced the reputation of the art and culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth century to their lowest point ever, he simultaneously breathed into the Renaissance a life, a potency, and a vitality which it had never had before” (Bullen 124). As many critics have discussed, the Renaissance had a distinctly sexual aspect for Ruskin. In the famous passage at the end of his “Grotesque Renaissance” chapter, he writes that, after 1423, “the nation drank with deeper thirst from the fountains of forbidden pleasure, and dug for springs, hitherto unknown, in the dark places of the earth” (11: 195). Hence, while both Ruskin and Symonds “see the period as an epoch of pleasure, sensualism, and unrestrained sexuality” (Fisher 45), Symonds sees sensuality as a necessary component of that period’s greatness rather than the source of its downfall.

Despite his clear respect for the artistic and intellectual achievements of the Italian Renaissance, Symonds presents these forebears as almost primitive. Unlike Hellenism’s sublimation of the sensual, the keynote of Symonds’s study of the Italian Renaissance is the

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31 For other sources on Ruskin’s complicated intellectual investments in the Italian Renaissance, seen see Tony Tanner 67-156 and J. B. Bullen 123-155.
32 As might be expected, Symonds did not think highly of Ruskin. Writing to Robert Louis Stevenson in 1885, he disparages both Carlyle and Ruskin as “men who dyspeptically belch forth undigested gobbets of the Minor prophets or the French socialists. For heaven’s sake, let us keep ourselves pure from the abominations of those bold bad men, pampered in intellectual egotism—the one a Stoic by nature, but jaundiced—the other a Sybarite by nature, but jangled.” (Letters 3:40)
thrilling discovery of an unbroken connection to nature, pleasure, and the body. Whatever the excesses of the Italians of the Renaissance they are still youthful and unspoiled. In a remarkable panegyric, he writes that

these giants of the Renaissance were like boys in their capacity for endurance, their inordinate appetite for enjoyment. No generations, hungry, sickly, effete, critical, disillusioned, trod them down. Ennui and the fatigue that springs from skepticism, the despair of thwarted effort, were unknown. Their fresh and unperverted senses rendered them keenly alive to what was beautiful and natural. They yearned for magnificence, and instinctively comprehended splendour. At the same time the period of satiety was still far off. Everything seemed possible to their young energy; nor had a single pleasure palled upon their appetite. Born, as it were, at the moment when desires and faculties are evenly balanced, when the perceptions are not blunted nor the senses cloyed, opening their eyes for the first time on a world of wonder, these men of the Renaissance enjoyed what we may term the first transcendent springtide of the modern world. Nothing is more remarkable than the fullness of the life that throbbed in them. (1: 8)

The key element that permits this enviable plenitude is the Renaissance Italians’ temporal positioning at the childhood of a modernity as yet unwearied by its own contradictions. Symonds depicts a golden age of desire in which, the more the Italians ask for, the more that they attain. Unlimited in conception or fulfillment, they achieve an effortless harmonization of desire and possibility, a throbbing yet untroubled existence. As such, they are able to aestheticize their pleasures without enervating them, as Symonds saw himself as having done. Whatever overtones of childishness or primitivism that Symonds gives them, he continually emphasizes
that they were not victims of “coarse sensuality” (1: 239). Instead, he describes them in ways that read as analogies to his own condition, but exaggerated and celebrated instead of condemned. As he writes, “the despot not unfrequently made of vice a fine art for his amusement, and openly defied humanity” and the Italian “required the fascination of the fancy to be added to the allurement of the senses” (1: 64, 239). Thus, partaking of “the extravagant and extraordinary,” they also imparted an “imaginative excitement” and an “intellectual quality to their vices” (1: 240-241). Even as Symonds acknowledges their notorious reputation for “unnatural passions,” he also takes pains to defend them, arguing that the “Italians, as a rule, were gentle and humane,” in contrast to the genuinely cruel Spaniards (1: 240). What he most singles out for praise is their “liberal spirit of toleration”: “Italy again was the land of emancipated individuality. What [John Stuart] Mill in his Essay on Liberty desired, what seems every day more unattainable in modern life, was enjoyed by the Italians. There was no check to the growth of personality, no grinding of men down to match the average” (1: 245). In other words, Symonds imagines that Renaissance Italy was conducive to the development of unconventional or queer personalities in a way that modernity, at least in its British variety, supposedly made impossible. Balanced as they were in this interpretation between ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, the Italians also harmonized nature and culture, bodily pleasure and sophisticated art, and managed to create a society hospitable to eccentric individuals such as Symonds himself.

Although the Italian Renaissance fascinated Symonds, he did not attempt to make it the basis for an erotic model that could be revived in the present. In opposition to Walter Pater, whose essay on Winckelmann implied that the Renaissance was a state of mind that could spring up nearly anywhere, Symonds defined the Renaissance as a cultural movement firmly bound to a
particular time, even if its effects are still felt. The Renaissance, he warns, “is not to be imitated. Such imitation would, in point of fact, be not merely anachronistic but impossible.” In a possible jab at Pater, he writes that “To insist on anything so obvious would be impertinent to common sense, were we not from time to time admonished from the chair of criticism that a new Gospel, founded on the principles of the Renaissance, has been or is being preached in England” (*History* 2: 463). Having learned his lesson from Hellenism, he does not make Italian history the occasion for any personal crisis. Instead, he argues that the Renaissance should be treated as an object for criticism, or the “passion of inquiry,” rather than as an example from which to extract “a body of ethical teaching... applicable to the altered conditions of the nineteenth century” (2: 464). It is engaging, perhaps inspiring, but nothing more.

Renaissance Italy may have been an interesting reference point, but by 1877 Symonds claimed to have given up merely writing about sex in favor of enacting it. Likewise, he had also given up on recapturing the past in favor of a gospel of nature. Another way of explaining this transition would be to call it a turn from archaism to romantic primitivism, or a turn from one kind of fascination with the past to another. As Hayden White defines these two terms, archaism focuses on a particular golden age and “tends toward the idealization of real or legendary remote ancestors,” whereas romantic primitivism “seeks to idealize any group as yet unbroken to civilizational discipline” (170-171). Whereas the archaic is the particular property of a given age (for instance, the ancient Greeks), the primitive is the shared inheritance of humankind and therefore lingers on into the present (and is therefore available in any place where supposedly outmoded ways of life persist). This difference in the ownership of these different forms of pastness is why, as White goes on to explain,
in primitivist thought reform is envisaged rather as a throwing off of a burden that has become too ponderous than as a reconstitution or reconstruction of an original but subsequently lost human perfection. Primitivism simply invites men to be themselves, to give vent to their original, natural, but subsequently repressed desires, to throw off the restraints of civilization and thereby enter into a kingdom that is naturally theirs. Like archaism, then, primitivism holds up a vision of a lost world, but unlike archaism, it insists that this lost world is still latently present in modern, corrupt, and civilized man—and is there for the taking. (171)

This strand of primitivism in Symonds grows out of his Hellenism. In its emphasis on a particular culture, Symonds’s Hellenism was ostensibly an example of archaism, but in its emphasis on the naturalness of the Greeks, it contained the seeds of primitivism. In a footnote to “The Genius of Greek Art,” Symonds declares that the only “method for making the Hellenic tradition vital instead of dream-like” was “to be natural.” In other words, “we must imitate the Greeks, not by trying to reproduce their modes of life and feeling, but by approximating to their free and fearless attitude of mind” (fn144). Having concluded that these “modes of life” could not be revived in the present, he turns instead to the Hellenic “attitude of mind,” which is based not in any particular cultural form but in an attentiveness and closeness to nature. He writes that “our guides in the endeavor to restore the past”—that is, “to be natural”—can be found in a variety of locations, but are especially strong in “the sea, the hills, the plains, the sunlight of the South” (123). Having shifted his focus from Greece to nature, however, Symonds then begins to fixate on Italy, and the places whose natural beauty is supposed to most inspire us with the Greek spirit turn out to be Naples, Sorrento, and Sicily.
Italy, as a culture influenced at two key historical moments by the culture of ancient Greece, was firmly associated with the classical civilization that was such a powerful reference point for Symonds. But as a southern country possessing a hospitable climate, beautiful scenery and comparatively little industrial development, it could also seem in touch with the supposedly more innocent, unrepressed, and pleasingly backward roots of humanity. At the same time, many of these same qualities could make Italy seem artificial, effeminate, and aristocratic when what Symonds claimed to seek was nature, masculine health, and egalitarian comradeship. He often represented Italy in terms of civilization, artifice, and the aesthetic, but this civilization was represented as decadent, or even degenerate, rather than advanced or modern. It achieved greatness in imperial Rome and Renaissance Florence, but since it owed this greatness to its capacity for producing passionate natures, it also eventually succumbed to those passions. As such, Italy promised to harmonize certain troubling binaries between life and literature, past and present, reciprocity and the eroticization of difference, at the same time that it threatened to amplify them. It elicited desire, but also made this desire seem temporary and unlawful, akin to the excesses of the Renaissance.

Davos was for Symonds the “exact opposite” of Venice, its northern complement (Our Life 177). Like Britain, it was relatively safe and stolid, but unlike Britain, he characterizes it as stuck in pre-modern cyclicality, as if it could continue in its pleasant life of farming and village festivities indefinitely, without ever quite reaching the privileged if benighted condition of its neighbors. In contrast to places like Italy, where history and ruins “demand all our attention,” the Alps are “immemorially the same” because they have “no past nor present nor future,” and therefore “present a theatre whereon the soul breathes free” (Letters 1: 485). Unlike the Italians, who reached the heights of civilization early and then slid into a long senescence, the Swiss were
dull, but their innocence and health were intact. Lacking the industrial and military ambition of the British, they were content with modest comforts and domesticity, and thus didn’t produce the same dramatic inequalities of rich and poor. Far removed from London’s slums, Symonds could paint a picture of noble peasants and simple noblemen interacting on terms of perfect equality in a pastoral setting. Most of all, Switzerland was where Symonds regained his health and maintained it for the next fifteen years. Despite its bitterly cold winters, he found that it was the only place where he could stay well. He writes that “I never have the headaches and bad days of ennui or despondency which comes so often elsewhere: but strength and equability of temper seem to be inseparable from the pure air, light, and largeness of Switzerland” (*Letters* 1: 557). Although he felt intellectually isolated in Davos, and continually turned his attention towards Italy, when he actually made trips south he was prone to feeling nervous, overstimulated, and at risk of another breakdown in health. For instance, he reports from one visit that “I am weaker than I used to be, & am tremulously nervous under the influences of Italian art & history, wh[ich] have always made me feel a good deal” (2: 546).

Symonds continually stresses that the people he meets in Italy and Switzerland have an unspoiled connection with nature and the past. In doing so, he also adopts the picturesque gaze so common to nineteenth-century travelers in which, according to James Buzard, writers seek “the epiphanic moment in which the unified aesthetic essence of the place shines forth,” or the *genius loci* embodied in “a scene, balanced and complete.” This sense of wholeness and

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33 To be sure, though, in his less idealizing moments Symonds often complained of boredom and intellectual isolation in Switzerland. For instance, in 1878 he writes to H. G. Dakyns that “I begin to fear that nothing is left for me but isolation in the midst of those grey mountains, where the feet of the seasons pace so monotonously & the spirit lives in thrilling imprisonment” (*Letters* 2: 567). Ten years later, in 1888, he writes to Henry Sidgwick that “life at Davos has become for me a permanent sort of tunnel. When friends come there, as A.[rthur Sidgwick] and G[raham Dakyns] did last Christmas, I do not think they notice this, because they polarise and externalise me by their own being. But when friends are not there, I live in the worst sort of tunnel I know, which is the burrowed gallery in the middle of a marble-hard avalanche, fifty feet beneath the frozen air of Alpine winter in a stony ravine” (*Letters* 3: 1662).
saturation required that “[e]veryday features of the visited place (populations included) either fell cleanly away from the visitor’s view or arranged themselves as part of the spectacle” (188). In other words, people and places stand together in an organic aesthetic totality that, Buzard claims, prefigures the ethnographic concept of culture as a whole way of life (194). Buzard also notes that the picturesque’s attention to “the teeming historical associations” of a place “seemed to license an ignorance of the present,” and therefore of the material conditions, not to mention the poverty, of the inhabitants living there (188). Whereas in England the class difference between Symonds and his erotic contacts had troubled even as it attracted him, in Switzerland and Italy it is subsumed under an aestheticized foreignness. Furthermore, in viewing each place as an aestheticized harmonious whole instead of a contradictory and ugly modern society, Symonds could more easily imagine himself as finally finding a home for his desires, even if this feeling of belongingness also depended on the eroticization of national differences.

In his attention to understanding foreignness in terms of cultural and aesthetic wholeness, Symonds also seeks out the typical and the representative. In both Davos and Venice, he uses his friendship with a particular man to stand in for the erotic contacts he has in each place, so that the man gains a synecdochic importance as the representative of a place and culture. Furthermore, in describing his friendship with each man, Symonds also lays claim to a certain kind of cultural belonging in each place. In Davos, he befriends Christian Buol, the nineteen-year-old brother of the innkeeper where Symonds initially stays. In Venice, he befriends Angelo Fusato, a gondolier whom he initially engages as a prostitute and then employs as an occasional servant over the course of eleven years. Buol is described as athletic, reserved, and “simple hearted” (Letters 2:528), and corresponds to the ruder and more elemental version of nature that Symonds finds in the Alps. The Swiss character, Symonds writes, lacks in both sentiment and
imagination, but the Swiss are also “a law to themselves” (Our Life 224), “sturdy children of nature” (Memoirs 268) who are invigorated by the extremities of their environment and their enthusiasm for athletics. On the other hand, the lithe and mercurial Fusato is the characteristic representative of an Italy seen as ingratiatingly primitive. He not only shares the characteristics common to Venetians and gondoliers, but “showed these qualities almost in exaggeration” (Memoirs 271). He is described as “proud and sensitive, wayward as a child, ungrudging in his service, willing and good-tempered, though somewhat indolent at the same time and subject to explosions of passion” (276).

These instances of picturesque typicality are echoed whenever Symonds searches for an individual—almost always an attractive young man—to sum up and embody a given place or culture. Characteristic of all these examples is the supposition of a link between that place and the type of personality that it produces, which would eliminate any possibility of feeling alienated or out of place. In one instance of this straining after the picturesque, Symonds compares his Neapolitan waiter to a servant in a poem of Juvenal’s. In the accompanying translation, we learn that this ancient servant “will serve you a wine that came from the very mountains / Where he was born himself” and that “One and the same native land produced the wine and its server” (Letters 1: fn441). In Symonds’s world as well as Juvenal’s, it seems that the importance of goût de terroir applies as much to the boy serving the wine as to the wine itself. This sort of organic metaphor linking people and places is quite characteristic of the picturesque, since, as Nelson Moe explains, “the valorization of nature and classical ruins that characterizes the picturesque in the late eighteenth century” later expands to include “the valorization of natural man,” or the people who live in such places (66). The people begin as “accessories” to the landscape, and later take on a coequal or dominant role.
A typical specimen of the picturesque is a guide whom Symonds meets in Urbino, “handsome as an antique statue” and “absolutely ignorant in all book-learning,” who nevertheless possesses “a grace and ease of address which are rare in London drawing-rooms,” “a fine natural taste for things of beauty,” and “spontaneous eloquence” (Sketches 2: 61). It is not that he is wholly untouched by civilization, but that he is the beneficiary of a culture so “immemorial” as to become “innate” in him, achieved without effort, so that he relates to it as easily and unself-consciously as the Swiss relate to nature (and, by implication, the opposite of Symonds’s own uneasy and self-conscious relationship to desire). This guide also typifies Symonds’s concern with the pastoral, which White charmingly calls “the world of the picnic” and defines as primitivism’s positive variant. In contrast to the “savage,” in which nature is seen as a “horrible world of struggle,” the pastoral world is “Arcadian, peaceful, a place where the lion lies down with the lamb, where shepherdesses lie down with shepherds, innocently and frivolously; it is the world of the enclosed garden, where the virgin tames the unicorn” (172). This view of nature, essentially that of the “cultivated countryside,” epitomizes cyclicality, effortless communion, and the harmonious balance of nature and culture, in which shedding the trappings of civilization does not diminish one’s ability to be a gentleman.

Whereas Symonds is most likely to see this perfect balance of nature and culture in the rural north of Italy, he often finds relics of Renaissance decadence or savagery in cities and in the south. In a typical letter conveying the supposedly charming decadence of the Italians, he writes that the “apparent simplicity and real ignorance” of “the last relics of Venetian aristocracy... are quite delightful. There is one young gentleman who combines in his single person the blood of the Pesaros, Gradenigos, Donàs and Zons... who has not the faintest tincture of historical knowledge, and who cannot recognize the arms he quarters when he sees them on the façade of
the Ducal Palace” (Letters 3: 376). Symonds here positions himself as the outsider who has mastered the history and culture that the degenerate but “delightful” native has long forgotten. Elsewhere, Symonds intuits where the past has persisted with fewer changes, though with no more self-knowledge. In the central Italian town of Foligno, he meets a young man whom he lustily compares to Michelangelo’s models and Roman statues. With a mixture of desire and apprehension, he declares that it was “men like this” who “formed the Companies of Adventure [that] flooded Italy with villainy, ambition, and lawlessness in the fifteenth century... Beautiful, but inhuman; passionate, but cold; powerful, but rendered impotent for firm and lofty deeds by immorality and treason” (Sketches 2: 41). Symonds imagines this young man as a figure of the remorseless desire and action that he himself found so difficult. Whereas Symonds treats the examples that he associates with the Renaissance as either comic or forbidding, products of an impressive culture gone wrong, when he comes to the Sicilians he wavers between appreciation for their supposed similarities with the Greeks and scorn for their “barbarism” (Letters 2: 290). His view is thus quite consistent with the colloquial characterization of the Italian Mezzogiorno as “un paradiso abitato da diavoli,” or “a paradise inhabited by devils” (Moe 46). He pithily declares that “The people of Sicily are ugly and repulsive and brutish” (Letters 2: 306). Like an imperial administrator describing the most recalcitrant of subjects, he asserts that “A Sicilian is an undeveloped being without doubt, compact principally of hatreds & prejudices, with a profound admiration for conservative ignorance” (Letters 2: 290). Since he sees them as lacking in any genuine art or culture, “there is nothing for them but endurance & the fierceness of passions that delight in blood” (Letters 2: 295).

I emphasize this linking of people and places not merely to show how Symonds illustrates certain habits of ethnographic spectatorship, but also because his self-understanding so
often relied on spatial orientation. Always seeing himself as out of place and imagining the
possibility of belonging as inaccessibly distant, Symonds discovers in the picturesque the image
of a perfect coincidence between place and personality. When he recounts first meeting Angelo
Fusato, he describes him as a sort of intensification of the environment. Symonds writes that
Fusato’s eyes “had the flame and vitreous intensity of opals, as though the quintessential colour
of Venetian waters were vitalized in them and fed from inner founts of passion.” As usual,
Symonds is quite conscious of the psychological work his figurative language is performing,
since it merely expresses the extent to which figure and background were merged in his first
impressions: “This love at first sight was an affair not merely of desire and instinct but also of
imagination. He took hold of me by a hundred subtle threads of feeling, in which the powerful
and radiant manhood of the splendid animal was intertwined with sentiment for Venice, a keen
delight in the landscape of the lagoons, and something penetrative and pathetic in the man”
(272). If Fusato so completely expresses Venice, then to enter into a relationship with him is
also in some sense to lay claim to the place as well.

In “A Venetian Medley,” Symonds prefaces a description of the same incident with a
whole theory of the effect of a beautiful body in a beautiful landscape. This theory echoes his
earlier claim that the seed of ancient Greek culture lay in their mythopoeic faculty, through
which they anthropomorphized the world around them and created gods. “Nature,” Symonds
writes, is the “chief element by which we are enabled to conceive the spirit of the Greeks,” the
“key” from which their religion, art and culture were derived (“Genius” 126). When he turns

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34 Symonds’s claims about the Greeks also recall White’s discussion of Vico. “Vico portrayed the savage
as natural poet, as the source of the imaginative faculties still present in modern, civilized man, as
possessor of an aesthetic or form-giving capacity in which civilization had its origins—at least among the
pagans. It was primitive man’s ability to poetize his existence, to impose a form upon it out of aesthetic
rather than moral impulses, that allowed the pagan peoples to construct a uniquely human world of
society against their own most deeply felt animal instincts” (White 174).
to the present, he laments modern man’s inability to so easily personify and poeticize nature, but he explains how this lost faculty may be compensated for by a beautiful body seen in a picturesque way:

I have always held that in our modern life the only real equivalent for the antique mythopoeic sense... is supplied by the appearance at some felicitous moment of a man or woman who impersonates for our imagination the essence of the beauty that environs us. It seems, at such a fortunate moment, as though we had been waiting for this revelation, although perchance the want of it had not been previously felt... The landscapes we have painted on our brain, no longer lack their central figure. The life proper to the complex conditions we have studied is discovered, and every detail, judged by this standard of vitality, falls into its right relations. (Sketches 1: 284)

Always sensitive to place, Symonds attempts to imagine place in terms of personality. Just as he is struggling to imagine the eroticized body that would distill the beauty of Venice, the object towards which his desire had been tending materializes in front of him in the person of Angelo Fusato: “I felt, as I looked, that here, for me at least, the mytho-poem of the lagoons was humanized; the spirit of the salt-water lakes had appeared to me; the final touch of life emergent from nature had been given” (Sketches 1: 286). Fusato is especially important, even godlike, to Symonds here because he becomes the emblem of the beautiful body that is perfectly at home and perfectly in harmony with his place and his nature. The dreamlike nature of this appearance echoes in a wholly pleasant register the nightmarishly concrete incarnations of his desire at Harrow and in London. In manifesting Symonds’s desires so completely, the landscape becomes the space of romance. It makes a desire felt, but only by fulfilling that desire, and it therefore
harmonizes relations between spectator, object, and background. For Symonds, to connect to a place also requires a particular connection to a man who embodies that place, and vice versa. This figure will then become not merely “the central figure in a composition,” but also “the meeting point of many memories,” impressions, and desires (*Sketches* 2: 40). Thus Fusato, like Buol or any of a number of Italian and Swiss figures that Symonds portrays in his travel essays and memoirs, embodies the effortless rootedness in a place and culture that Symonds thought was impossible for a modern man and which he himself worked so hard for.

In contrast to this moment of total presence, though, Symonds elsewhere differentiates between the ancient mythopoeic sense and its modern counterpart, and the diminution of the modern form prompts him to meditate on a more elusive kind of belonging and community. Whereas this sense was native in our ancestors, “in our perplexed life” we are most likely to experience it as a “sense of want,” a “longing for emotion, ever fleeting, ever new, unrealised, unreal, insatiable” (*Sketches* 2: 131). The significance of “our perplexed life” depends, of course, on whether one takes Symonds’s “our” as being constituted by history, desire, or both. “Our perplexed life” might indicate either the belatedness and confusion of modernity or the “foundling” confusion of the incipient homosexual. In either case, it suggests a sense of collectivity based on the shared experience of being troubled by a problem that cannot quite be explained.

Despite his frequent conflations, Symonds was quite conscious of the difference between relating to another person as a spectator and relating to him as a friend or lover. This awareness is made plain in his account of himself as the well-intentioned cosmopolitan Englishman drawn to working-class foreigners. Whereas the innocent Swiss Christian Buol had seemed somewhat puzzled at the attentions of a hotel guest, Fusato takes on the role of the more sexually
sophisticated Italian and is quite accustomed to the script that Symonds enacts and attempts to rewrite. Symonds describes a long courtship, beset by the obstacles and misunderstandings caused by “the false position in which we found ourselves”: “He not unnaturally classed me with those other men to whose caprices he had sold his beauty. He could not comprehend that I meant to be his friend, to serve and help him in all reasonable ways according to my power” (Memoirs 275). Whereas Fusato understands their connection as yet another instance of the casual prostitution of the gondoliers (“the gondoliers of Venice are so accustomed to these demands that they think little of gratifying the caprice of ephemeral lovers” [Memoirs 274]), Symonds identifies his own position as that of a “friend,” invoking the “democracy” of Whitmanesque comradeship while simultaneously describing the role of the patron who looks out for the interests of his less privileged counterpart: “I gradually strove to persuade him that I was no mere light-o-love, but a man on whom he could rely—whose honour, though rooted in dishonour, might be trusted” (275). In attempting to persuade Fusato that the basis of the relationship is not purely monetary, Symonds gives Fusato more money, as if an intensification of certain conditions of prostitution would somehow transcend them. As he had before in Davos, he assists Fusato as well as his family, setting them up in business and providing for their marriages. Nevertheless, Symonds claims that, “through passion on my part” and “indulgence on his,” they did come to understand one another (276).

The foreign setting is crucial to Symonds’s reimagining of the cross-class erotics that he had found troubling in the London brothel. There, he could not shake the apprehension that the frank comradeship he imagined was nothing but a monetary transaction enabled by economic inequality. At best, he had discovered the exception to a system that must generally tend towards exploitation and degradation. In Italy and Switzerland, however, he can disassociate himself
from the context of urban depravity and rearticulate his sexuality in terms of the pastoral and the picturesque. Whereas his descriptions of Italy are often suggestive of a guilty pleasure, he finds Switzerland more conducive to projections of Whitmanesque comradeship. As noted above, the central contradiction of English appropriations of Whitman was the attempt to use Whitman’s rhetoric of democratic equality in order to idealize often exploitative relationships with working-class men. But the Switzerland that Symonds describes has already achieved social equality in a way that does not threaten his privilege as a bourgeois Englishman. “This their centuries of freedom, equal political rights, and gradually enlarged democracy have wrought, establishing a liberty which is not license, and fostering republican tendencies which remain conservative” (Our Life 224). Although they are “highly democratic in the forms of government,” they are also “aristocratic in feeling and social customs” (Our Life 284). Since this is a place where the nephews of bishops are hotel porters and the brothers of lawyers are peasants and carpenters (Memoirs 268-269), then who is to say that Symonds is not himself a member of the family?

When he meets Christian Buol, he conceives of him as “realizing... for me all I had dreamed of the democratic ideal” (Memoirs 262). As with Fusato, the friendship depends on Symonds’s patronage. It begins with the gift of a meerschaum pipe, “a pretty bauble” to which Buol reacts with “just a touch of surprise” (263), and is consolidated by Symonds’s loan of £1,000 to the Buol family. Significantly, the friendship reaches a high point when Christian agrees to accompany him to Italy. Symonds writes, “We made a most delightful journey together; and in the course of it, he showed that he was ready, out of sympathy and liking for me, to concede many innocent delights of privacy, which cost him nothing and which filled me with ineffable satisfaction” (265). Whereas he is quite plain about the sexual nature of his relationship with Fusato, he claims that, in this case, “I did not want more indeed than the blameless proximity of
his pure person” (266). Northern Switzerland, though initially less enticing, comes to seem more natural and egalitarian than Italy, a sort of base from which other attempts at comradeship can be carried out.

In orienting his desires in a foreign setting, Symonds also rearticulates his relation to these working-class men in terms of a horizontal meeting of nationalities rather than a hierarchical meeting of classes. From this perspective he is no longer a superior, but a comparatively disadvantaged foreigner or guest. When he writes that “I came to understand them and their integrity with myself” (Memoirs 257), he can speak of it as a tolerant and broad-minded cosmopolitan and not as a lecherous bourgeois slumming among the dregs of a class society. This self-positioning allows him to characterize his objectifying picturesque gaze as that of the appreciative outsider struggling to make inroads and further the cause of universal fraternity. This notion of being a guest often recurs at key moments in his self-presentation. For instance, one of the signs of his growing intimacy with Buol was the invitation to a “family party” on Christian’s birthday. “I well remember that room panelled with Cembra planks—the first of so many Büdner rooms into which I afterwards gained entrance as a welcomed honoured guest... It was like a scene out of one of Whitman’s poems, filling me with the acutest sense of a new and beautiful life, to partake in which I was invited by a friend” (263). Though an outsider, his friendship has allowed him to take on a provisional alignment with the natives of Graubünden and become the beneficiary of their hospitality, being admitted into their homes and sharing in their traditions.

In contrast, Symonds seemed to have less luck at finding satisfying hospitality in Venice. In “A Gondolier’s Wedding,” Symonds recounts his experience as an invited guest to what was possibly Fusato’s wedding (Symonds often changed the names of foreigners in his travel essays).
Although appreciative of the opportunity to spend time with men such as “the handsome, languid Luigi, who, in his best clothes, or out of them, is fit for any drawing-room” (*Sketches* 1: 292), Symonds also regrets what he sees as the polite artificiality of the event: “it struck me as a drawback that these picturesque people had put on Sunday clothes to look as much like shopkeepers as possible” (303). Instead of expressing “local character in costume or customs,” the celebration “looked so like a public dinner of middle-class people,” who “sat politely bored, expectant, trifling with their napkins, yawning, muttering nothings about the weather or their neighbours” (306). The essay is not about a common occurrence in a shared social life, as it would have been in Davos, but about the frustrated desire for authentic social connection with promisingly beautiful but ultimately aloof natives.

In the essay “Winter Nights at Davos,” however, Symonds returns to Switzerland and recounts a remarkable evening that rearticulates the themes of friendship and hospitality in a register of near dreamlike romantic intensity. The setting, once again, is the Buol family home on a holiday, this time on New Year’s Eve. On this night of renewal, he emphasizes the family’s unity and its continuity with the past. They eat and sing together, “indulg[ing] themselves but once with these unwonted dainties in the winter” (*Sketches* 1: 35). Having established this family scene, though, Symonds moves to the primary interest of the essay, the tradition in which the young men of the village go to church at midnight, one group ringing out the old year, another ringing in the new. This scene thus grows out of the sexually mixed domestic sphere, but it is resolutely public and homosocial. After waiting for the first group to finish, Symonds and the Buols go out into the snow to meet the rest of their party, and the bells soon begin to “clash and jangle” with “demonic joy” (37). He initially describes the scene as an onlooker and
explains how the bells are set going with ropes by boys standing below while men climb the
church tower to keep up the swinging manually. Having climbed almost level to the bells,

Each comrade plants one leg upon the ladder, and sets the other knee firmly
athwart the horizontal pine. Then round each other’s waist they twine left arm
and right. The two have thus become one man... With a grave rhythmic motion,
bending sideward in a close embrace, swaying and returning to their centre from
the well-knit loins, they drive the force of each strong muscle into the vexed bell.
The impact is earnest at first, but soon becomes frantic... This efflux of their
combined energies inspires them and exasperates the mighty resonance of metal
which they rule. They are lost in a trance of what approximates to dervish
passion—so thrilling is the surge of sound, so potent are the rhythms they obey...
they strain still, locked together, and forgetful of the world. At length they have
enough: then slowly, clingingly unclasp, turn round with gazing eyes, and are
resumed, sedately, into the diurnal round of common life. (39)

Just in case we missed the point, Symonds comments that this “mystery of rhythm... and blood
tingling in sympathy... lies at the root of man’s most tyrannous instinctive impulses” (40). The
erotic imagery is unmistakable. Having achieved corporeal union, they swing from their loins in
time with one another and soon reach what Symonds imagines to be Dionysian levels of fervor.
The setting of the church is less important for any particular association with Christianity than
for its ability to elevate this sensual male bonding and to associate it with the occult energies of
Eastern religion, through which this epitome of the traditional and the local becomes
spectacularly orientalized. Though momentarily “forgetful of the world” through attention to
their mutual swinging, the two men are received back into the community. Thus, the erotic and
the communal merge and proclaim themselves from the sanctified center of the town. Seemingly in a trance himself, Symonds watches all this rapturously, but the eroticism of his spectatorship and his difference from those he watches seem to trouble him. Hooded in his coat “like a monk,” he notices that a candle from the revelry “cast a grotesque shadow of him on the wall” (39), as if he had suddenly become conscious of himself as monstrous and out of place. Nevertheless, even at this moment of self-doubt, he is miraculously swept up into the action: “when his chance came, though he was but a weakling, he too climbed and for some moments hugged the beam, and felt the madness of the swinging bell” (39-40). In other words, he casts himself as the outsider at a disadvantage, and just when these differences seem to exclude him from the communal eroticism of the picturesque natives, they invite him to share in this sanctioned tradition of annual indulgence. The tradition does not become his, but he is included within it through the good graces of the Swiss and his own good will. As such, this encounter vividly epitomizes the sort of erotic and social orientation that Symonds imagines and continually seeks to enact in the Memoirs. Although it is apparent to him that he cannot achieve the total alignment of himself with the foreign settings where he lives and works, he draws on the homosocial rhetoric of comradeship and modifies it with the rather different social orientation of the guest in order to see erotic contacts with young men in terms of the reciprocal giving and receiving of hospitality.

But what of those “interruptions” I mentioned at the beginning of this section that undermine Symonds’s tone of equanimity, accomplishment, and culmination? If Symonds often claims to have found a balance between intellectual work, friendship, and sex, then where might discord lie? The problem is undoubtedly related to Symonds’s lingering shame, but when he feels it most acutely he attributes it to the asymmetry in his practice of comradeship, where an
older man desires and a younger man complies without desire. After describing the trip to Italy with Buol, Symonds falters in the writing of his own story:

I must perforce lay the pen aside, and think how desolate are the conditions under which men constituted like me live and love. Into comradeship itself does not our abnormal nature introduce an element of instability, even as it distorts marriage? Something remains amiss, unsatisfied, ill-correlated in each case. The utmost we dare expect is tolerance, acceptance, concession to our inclinations, gratitude for our goodwill and benefits, respect for our courtesy and self-control. The best we can obtain is friendship... Love for love we cannot get; and our better nature shrinks from the vision of what a love aroused in the beloved (corresponding to our love for him) would inevitably involve. (266-67)

Once again, he dilates on the momentary inability to write and the “ill-correlated” desire that threatens this process of successful self-narration. Insofar as this aside reflects doubt about his claims of having been satisfied with mere “proximity” to Buol, he seems to wish for the harmonization of his desire with the social tie that it both creates and imperils. Although he emphasizes the disparity of desire, this lack of reciprocity inevitably indicts the inequality of the relationship itself. What Symonds declares in these moments of desperation is that the kind of love that he has made his ideal is impossible for him to achieve, either because no context exists in which he could enact it successfully, or because he is destined to lose his nerve.

Given such an unsalvageable failure, one might ask how it would be possible to read the apologia of the last two chapters as something other than a desirable lie if we also recognize the despair that interrupts it. One clear difference between Symonds’s appraisal of the failure of Hellenism and of the failure to find erotic fulfillment in Switzerland and Italy is that in the latter
case his admissions that he has failed to find comradeship do not result in a generalized indictment of comradeship as an ideal. That is, even when comradeship is found wanting, his solution to the problems of comradeship is more comradeship. The ideal of comradeship proves to be so durable because of its prospective orientation to the future and to rather elusive forms of collectivity. In the *Calamus* poems that Symonds found most significant, Whitman frequently positions love between men in ways that make it absolutely foundational and necessary to any healthy society, even as it remains marginal and partially hidden. The effect of this positioning of comradeship as simultaneously everywhere and nowhere is to render the taboo of sodomy and the pathologization of inversion not just unimportant but also, paradoxically, sources of strength.

In the poem that opens this series, “In Paths Untrodden,” Whitman positions himself as absolutely original and alone, “Escaped from the life that exhibits itself” (l. 3), and it is only in this isolation that he can feel and speak freely: “here by myself away from the clank of the world,” it becomes “clear to me... that the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades” (ll. 6-8), since “in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere” (l. 10). From this privileged solitude, Whitman lays claim to an unlimited spatial reach. In “For You O Democracy,” he writes, “I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes and all over the prairies, / I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks, / By the love of comrades” (ll. 4-6).

In contrast to Hellenism, which Symonds had written could only be “archeological” (*Letters* 2: 400), Whitman’s poetry invites him to orient himself to the present and the future, and imagines that these “inseparable cities” of male love come into being through erotic contact and the circulation of discourse, Whitman’s in particular. So, whereas Symonds had earlier described same-sex desire as isolating, when he writes about Whitman’s comradeship, he envisions it the
very glue of society. Comradeship, he writes in *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, is not “a merely personal possession, delightful to the friends it links in bonds of amity,” but “a social and political virtue... destined to cement society and to render commonwealths inviolable” (99).

In this strain of comradeship, no particular failure is allowed to have too much weight because Symonds shifts away from looking for already existing places and societies in which to orient his desires and towards the process by which these communities come into being. He thus turns from the extant to the possible. Intriguingly, Symonds also adopts Whitman’s organic metaphor of same-sex love as a proliferating plant. In using this language, he paradoxically makes homosexuality’s usually troubling lack of social integration the foundation for a new kind of sexual public. Because the relationships are not institutionalized and produce no children, “the parties are left free, and the sexual flower of comradeship may spring afresh for each of them wherever favourable soil is found” (*Memoirs* 278). This sense of spatial extension is echoed elsewhere in his descriptions of his many erotic contacts taking place in a variety of public and private settings: “I have driven with them across all the mountain roads in summer and winter, gone to their balls and village theatricals, smoked and drunk with them in taverns, invited them freely to my house, slept with them in their own cottages on lonely hillsides, joined their clubs, and shared their pastimes” (*Memoirs* 267-68). Symonds’s spatial imagination is further expressed in “Paths of Life,” a sonnet sequence in which he defends comradeship as distinct from, and superior to, conventional marriage. Whereas marriage is concentrated in a single dyad for the reproduction of society, he writes that “The other, plumed like wind-borne thistle-seed, / Settles where’er it listeth, unconstrained” (*Animi Figura* 2.5-6). Whereas marriage is suited to the home and the city, comradeship

spreads
Tents on the open road, field, ocean, camp,
Where'er in brotherhood men lay their heads,
Soldier with soldier, tramp with casual tramp,
Cross and recross, meet, part, share boards and beds,
Where wayside Love still lights his beaconing lamp. (2.5-14)

Like the “sexual flower,” the “thistle-seed” is seemingly indiscriminate with regard to place, but those that Symonds singles out—like Whitman before him—are provisional and transient, and tend to be spaces of circulation: roads, oceans, camps, perhaps hotels or lodging houses. They are not so important in and of themselves but because they are spaces that lead to other spaces, and thus emphasize the prospective and the possible.

Because Symonds, like Whitman, often uses the words “comradeship” and “democracy” interchangeably, he ends up conflating two forms of relationality: one dyadic and proximate, the other political and dispersed. That is, he implies that a single relationship to one person is enough to establish a much more far-reaching relationship to many. Because Symonds does not have access to a social context in which it would be possible for an openly sexual relationship between grown men to be respectable, and because he has become conscious that it does no good to locate the possibility of this relationship in a fantasized elsewhere, he has to find some way of imagining that his series of sexual encounters add up to more than the sum of their parts, that they imply some larger community that is constituted and knowable solely through those discrete acts. He must imagine the possibility that strangers outside of his given social circle could become friends, and that his own discrete sexual acts and his own textual acts of writing and reception could in fact create an entire community, even if that community’s existence is always conjectural. Because these communities do not yet exist, they are relatively placeless.

Later in life, Symonds comes to deemphasize the importance of locating his personal utopia in a particular place and begins to devote more time bringing it to fruition through sexological research and correspondence, writing *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891) and
embarking on a collaboration with Havelock Ellis for what would become the latter’s *Sexual Inversion* (1895). Shortly after completing the *Memoirs*, and two years before his death in the spring of 1893, Symonds writes to his friend H. F. Brown declining an invitation to Venice, and comments with uncharacteristic equanimity that “The problem of life and self is not... to be solved by change of place. One place is as good as another for the soul, though some are far better for the body... On the whole, I am better satisfied with Graubünden than with any other region I have dwelt in. And that is good” (*Letters* 3: 558).

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35 *Sexual Inversion* has a complicated publication history. It was first published in German in 1895 under the title *Die konträre Geschlechtsgefühl*, and Ellis didn’t seek publication in English until 1897. However, the first 1897 edition was bought up by Symonds’s executor H. F. Brown, and the second (with Symonds’s name removed) was suppressed after becoming entangled in an obscenity trial. *Sexual Inversion* did not see a successful English publication until 1901, with an American medical publisher. See Ivan Crozier’s introduction to his critical edition of *Sexual Inversion*, especially 58-60.
CHAPTER 3
MY OWN PRIVATE ITALY: RECURSIVE DESIRES AND FANTASTIC OBJECTS IN VERNON LEE’S SUPERNATURAL FICTION

The power of wanting is also the power of creating.
—Vernon Lee, The Enchanted Woods

The protagonists of Vernon Lee’s supernatural tales are fascinated with Italy: its landscape, its art, and particularly its past. Overcome by necrophilic desires that often fixate on Italian archives, relics, and decaying works of art, these northerners head south to Italy in search of a regenerative return to origins that will reorient them towards a goal from which they have been diverted. Like Lee, they seek in the Italian past a means of “supplementing our present life by a life in the past; a life larger, richer than our own, multiplying our emotions by those of the dead” (L 29). The past that they find, however, is broken, hybrid, and artificial, and instead of setting off on a new path of development and growth, they get caught up in loops of desire and fantasy. Their steps, thoughts, and desires return repeatedly to certain privileged places, artifacts, and memories, and these recursive movements create fantasies that eventually take on a life of their own. They do not find a useable past amenable to their present aims, but a ghostly past, uncanny and unstable, that haunts them as much as they haunt it. The past itself turns out to be dead, but their psychological intensity invests it with a semblance of life. This eroticized, aestheticized, and ultimately ghostly Italy saps their willpower even as it overwhelms their senses. Under these circumstances, the picturesque spaces so beloved by the tourist turn gothic,

36 When citing Lee’s own works, I use the following system of abbreviations: BU for Beauty & Ugliness, B for Belcaro, E for Euphorion, EW for Enchanted Woods, H for Hauntings, J for Juvenilia, L for Limbo, RFS for Renaissance Fancies and Studies, and SECI for Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy.
suffused by a powerful but dreaded past. Although Italy initially seems to be a source of primitive power, this power is ultimately revealed as decadent; in its grip, characters lose the ability to move forward as they are compelled to remember and repeat. Lacking a future or a social context, their desires become queer, centering on the past, the deviant, and the ghostly.

Lee’s biography has made her work a rich, if often vexed, site for discussions about the relationships between sexuality, history, and cosmopolitanism. Born in France in 1856 to British parents, Lee criss-crossed western Europe with her family until 1873 when they settled in Florence, which Lee made her primary residence for the rest of her life. Lee’s given name was Violet Paget, but she adopted her masculine pseudonym at age eighteen when she published her first work of criticism. She kept her hair boyishly short, favored tailored black suits, never married, and had two romantic relationships with women. The first of these, with Mary Robinson, ended abruptly when Robinson became engaged in 1887, and the second gradually fell apart when Kit Anstruther-Thomson, who co-authored several works on aesthetics with Lee, began to distance herself from Lee some ten years later. Lee’s biography, along with the erotic intensity of her fiction, has led many critics to label her a lesbian, or even a “failed” lesbian, and to read her stories for evidence of this lesbianism. Burdett Gardner’s 1954 dissertation on Lee examined her oeuvre for “symptoms” of a “Lesbian” “neurosis” (Gardner 18). More charitably, the recent Lee biography by Vineta Colby describes Lee as “constantly struggling but failing to come to terms with her lesbianism” (2). Likewise, Martha Vicinus reads “Prince Alberic and the

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37 Although it would be a mistake to consider Lee “British” in any straightforward sense, a plausible case can be made for considering her a British writer based on the fact that she published the vast majority of her work with London publishers for British audiences. Hilary Fraser discusses Lee’s cosmopolitanism in terms of what Stuart Hall calls the “diasporic subject.” According to Hall, “They speak from the ‘in-between’ of different cultures, always unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of another, and thus finding ways of being both the same as and at the same time different from the others amongst which they live” (Fraser, “Interstitial” 115). As we shall see, this motif of indeterminacy is found throughout Lee’s oeuvre.
Snake Lady” as an example of “the lesbian subtext of much of her work” (“Adolescent Boy” 95-96), and Dennis Denisoff writes that in her fiction “Lee constructed a safer context for exploring in words her love and affection for other women such as Mary Robinson and Kit Anstruther-Thomson” (101). On the other hand, many critics have been resistant to any too-literal reading of the fiction as a lesbian code. Colby, for instance, argues that reading the fiction “as unconscious revelations” of “repressed lesbianism” is “unrewarding” (226), and Angela Leighton argues that the search for sexual symbolism misses “the element of play” in the stories (8), since Lee “uses the ghost story to express all the seduction and ambiguity of aestheticism itself” (2). Still others have noted the desire of critics and historians to define Lee’s sexuality and commented on the pitfalls of any such retrospective diagnosis (Psomiades 29-30, Newman 55-57).

My own approach is to maintain the centrality of sexuality to Lee’s oeuvre while also insisting on its indeterminacy. I argue that Lee draws on representations of Italy as southern, backward, and erotically charged in order to articulate a model of queer desire as anachronistic, deviant, recursive, and melancholy. I call Lee’s fiction queer because, unlike the writings of John Addington Symonds, which are continually anticipating a social collectivity in which a stable, affirmative sexual identity can emerge, Lee’s representations of desire are much more likely to be unstable, perverse, and ambivalent. The Italy of Lee’s fiction awakens powerful desires and grants exquisite pleasures, but these are seldom straightforwardly translatable into lesbianism; instead, Lee’s stories are much more likely to frustrate desire and to disrupt existing relationships. The desires that her fiction articulates are anachronistic because their objects are either located in the past or in places that are thought to occupy a previous stage of development. Whereas late-nineteenth-century writers like Edward Carpenter and Richard Burton contributed
to the definition of a homosexual identity by referring to so-called savage peoples outside of Europe, Lee turned to Europe’s south in order to explore models of queer desire that refused definition. Although the ghostly manifestations of queer desire that haunt her fiction share in the exotic and anachronistic energy of the primitive, they also tend to be highly, even eccentrically, cultivated. Italy provided a context for desire that seemed to combine the archaic and the aesthetic. However, just as ethnographic discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century produced “an ambiguous image, representing ‘homosexual deviance’ as both a degenerative syndrome away from an original, heterosexual drive, and a regression into an original, ‘polymorph’ sexuality” (Bleys 189), so do Lee’s stories raise the question of whether her characters’ taboo desires are decadent perversions of the natural order or throwbacks to a previous age of erotic authenticity.

Furthermore, whereas these amateur sexologists thought of themselves as establishing verifiable truths about an external reality, Lee insisted on the importance of fantasy as a means of knowing and imparting value to the world, even as she expressed anxiety about its limits and excesses. Despite Lee’s extensive firsthand knowledge of Italy, her writings betray little interest in the great problems of unification and national renewal that faced the fledgling nation. For Lee, Italy’s older associations with art, the past, and sexual license made it both a place much

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38 For an example of work on Carpenter, see Gandhi 34-66. For Burton, see Puri. For work on nineteenth-century ethnographic approaches to sexuality more generally, see Bleys and Hoad.

39 As Roberto Dainotto argues, beginning in the eighteenth century, European writers attempted to define themselves against the internal other of Italy and the European south rather than against the external other of Islam or the Orient: “Progress, teleology, and manifest destinies—these are the key terms of the history of universalized Europe that only begins in the eighteenth century. Yet in this history, it is no longer the confrontation with the exotic Other (the Persian, the Muslim, the American savage, and so on) that interests the theorists of Europe, but rather a dialectical confrontation of Europe with itself, with its own internal Other” (Dainotto 51). See also Dominguez, Moe, and Reynolds.

40 Martha Vicinus makes a similar point when she writes that late-nineteenth-century lesbian writers tended to prefer to set their fiction in distant locales or “enchanted gardens” rather than in wild nature: “Exotic settings were also congenial, although ‘the primitive’ was avoided for its connotations with an essentialized, maternal femininity” (Vicinus, “Adolescent” 91).
fantasized about and a place that was conducive to fantasizing. She is thus part of the tradition of self-consciously “flamboyant inverisimilitude” that Jonah Siegel argues is typical of literature about Italy written by foreigners (12), and she also makes this anti-realist tradition her subject by repeatedly narrating the process of how northerners confront Italian alterity and create fantasies that attempt to make sense of it. One of the principal benefits of such fantasies is that they provide consolation for disappointment and offer a vision of what might have been. Lee’s travel essays and stories continually narrate the frustrated desire to make contact with something outside of oneself—with Italy, the past, the beloved, or all three at once. In the essays, Lee tends to turn disappointment on its head, shifting the locus of pleasure from attainment and possession to the experience of longing and distance that gives rise to the imaginative play of nostalgia. She stresses this longing for contact when she writes that, “in certain places where only decay has altered things from what they were four centuries ago... we are subjected to receive impressions of the past” that are “startlingly life-like” (E 1: 20), “as if, by some magic, we were actually going to mix in the life of the past” (1: 21). But she insists that the fulfillment of direct contact with the desired object is impossible: this impression of the past “is in reality but a mere delusion, a deceit like those dioramas which we have all been into as children... [W]e can see, or think we see, most plainly the streets and paths, the faces and movements of that Renaissance world; but when we try to penetrate into it, we shall find that there is but a slip of solid ground beneath us, that all around is but canvas and painted wall, perspectived and lit up by our fancy” (1: 21-22). In this characteristically melancholy passage, her desire for the past comes through most clearly when she affirms its distance and inaccessibility. But, given the frequency with which she returns to this note of poignant dissatisfaction, the frustration of this desire for the past also seems to be enjoyable. Direct contact is impossible, but the continual hopeless straining
after such contact is pleasurable, because, although desire is never fulfilled and thus never dies, the desire to desire is continually satisfied.

The Dangerous Pleasures of Fantasy

If the past that we strive to know is inaccessible or knowable only through fantasy, then according to Lee we must make use of the distance that separates us from it. In an extended metaphor comparing history to landscape, Lee writes that history is always “seen from different points of view, and under different lights” by the people who actually experience it, so that to create a map of history which averages out those experiences would be to falsify those experiences (E 1: 11-12). Since the perspectives of ordinary people are lost to us, we must imagine and invent in order to make history the occasion for intellectual play.41 The distance that separates us from the past enhances the poignancy of our desires; more importantly, this distance makes the past “the one free place for our imagination” (L 40). Whereas the future, having not yet happened, is “empty,” the past is “the unreal and the yet visible.” The past is “charming” because, having once been real, it compels our belief, but, in being now absent, it also allows our imagination to project itself into the gaps in historical knowledge. The past has just enough facts to be suggestive, but not enough to impede us. What “makes the past so rich in possibilities” is the sense that that “There is more behind; there may be anything.” Far from producing a sense of limitation, the acute, poignant consciousness of distance, inaccessibility,

41 Martha Vicinus argues that Lee’s writings are representative of a late-Victorian queer trope of nostalgia. According to Vicinus, nostalgia was “an enabling approach to conflicted, awkward, or even unmentionable emotions for writers grappling with how to express different forms and experiences of love. Nostalgia enshrines love, but in a space where it can be repeatedly revisited and perhaps reshaped into a more acceptable form” (“Legion” 600). For Vicinus, this kind of recursive desire is productive and healthy, since it reshapes desire “into a more accessible form” and allows the writer to treat his or her romantic disappointments as a “a valuable lesson” about the nature of love and “regret over the passage of time” rather than “a negative experience of failure or lack” (600). However, as I will show, the redemption of loss in Lee’s fiction is never this straightforward.
and even wholesale fabrication produces instead a sense of limitlessness, of “views behind views” and “trees behind trees” that promise to go on forever so long as they remain safely out of sight (L 40). The ascetic allure of frustration is perhaps never so clear as when Lee defends the persistence of “genuine desire” over mere greed, which does “not want anything very keenly,” and therefore “always want[s] something new” (EW 316).

Whereas your genuine desires, sprung from the very marrow of the individual constitution, pounce on their fitting objects with unerring aim, and never let go of them till every scrap and vestige is enjoyed. And then return and find unguessed crumbs; and once more, and again and again—an endless feast, you might also imagine, off nothing. (EW 316-17)

The feast is “endless,” but the language of this passage also suggests the violence of desperation that would continually return to an object without hope of any new pleasure.

In the stories, this nostalgic longing for the unattainable is symbolized by the ghost. Existing in the space between life and death, truth and fantasy, belief and disbelief, the ghost embodies the fear that the other with whom her characters desire to make contact may in fact be nothing more than an illusion. At the same, this illusion also threatens to exceed the subject’s control and become an object of fear rather than an object of desire. In Lee’s fiction, recursive desires give rise to fantastic objects, and fantastic objects provoke recursive desires. These objects of desire are fantastic in the conventional sense of being the products of fantasy, but also in the literary sense developed by Tzvetan Todorov to describe literature in which characters must hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of apparently supernatural events.42

Because the truly fantastic hovers in the undecidable realm between the natural and the supernatural, it partakes of the same sense of limitlessness that inaccessible places and times

42 For a formal definition, see Todorov 33.
have for Lee. Yet, by figuring nostalgic longing as a ghost, Lee’s fiction also calls attention to the pitfalls of this sort of continual, melancholy return to the desired object. Because the fantastic breaks down the distinction between what a character really perceives and what she imagines, thus emphasizing “the fragility of the limit between matter and mind” (Todorov 120), it shares the romance’s tendency to externalize psychological states. By leaving this distinction in doubt, it also shares the romance’s narrative structure, which “simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object” (Parker 4). Unlike the romance, however, which tends to take on the form of the “wish-fulfillment dream” (Frye 186), the fantastic supernatural “always constitutes a break in the system of pre-established rules” of nature and society (Todorov 166) and is therefore more likely to be experienced as a gothic “irruption of the inadmissible” or a “brutal intrusion of mystery” into the safety and familiarity of the everyday (Todorov 28). Like nostalgia, the ghost seems to mediate between self and other, imagination and reality, possession and unattainability, but it generally ends by collapsing these distinctions with violent consequences for the characters. Because Lee’s ghosts are Italian, they underline the representation of Italy as an uncertain terrain to which characters continually return.

Italy is fascinating and frightening in Lee’s stories because for Lee it is the place where the past seems most present, and because this past carries potent if elusive meanings. Owing to its long history of successive empires and their decline, followed more recently by “a certain dignified stagnation,” “Italy makes one think of the past, whereas England, inevitably, leads one to speculate upon the future: each country is a key to what is not yet, or no longer, mere present.” Therefore, whereas “England shows its evils grimly,” Italy “hides them” (J 1: 3). Because Italy constantly reminds one of the past, it also gives rise to fantasies of repetition and return. Characters look to the Italian landscape as the index to a previously known or longed for reality,
idea, or work of art, so landscape becomes a signifier, referring to something beyond itself: to the Renaissance, ancient Rome, or even ancient Greece and Arcadia, as well as to the often contradictory values that are variably associated with them: personal freedom and moral anarchy, erotic fulfillment and Catholic repression, original purity and spiritual decay. In short, Italy is haunted by a contradictory history.

In her essays on travel, Lee describes how this referential landscape produces moments of frustrated desire that she finds all the more valuable for being frustrated. Having taken a walk in the countryside outside her home in Tuscany, she is reminded of her regret at not being with friends of hers who are traveling to Greece when, “suddenly, at a turning, there came the smell, very sweet and peculiar, of burning olive twigs; and with it, to my soul, a pang and a vision of Sicily, Greece—the real South which I shall never go to” (EW 313). Even in Tuscany, it turns out, there are places yet further “South,” although in this case their southernness would seem to owe more to the “vague recollections of the Odyssey or of Theocritus” that they evoke than to their latitudes. She describes this intuition of other places and times as an instance of the vague feeling that certain places contain within them the “samples” of some other distant place and time, “the reality, the enough utterly denied one” (EW 167). Locating this particular sample within a ravine, she writes that, “Here, not an hour’s walk from my home, it is, and at the same time tantalizingly, enchantingly, is not—Greece, Sicily, the South of the Odyssey and Theocritus” (EW 320). This referential landscape both is and is not what it means to the people who come into contact with it, and is therefore perpetually calling to mind objects of desire that cannot be possessed. Lee thus gives license to fantasy, but closes off the possibility of that fantasy ever being achieved, and this self-conscious unreality and failure make the fantasy all the more poignant. The desired object takes on the power of the Todorovian fantastic. It has power,
but it may very well be imaginary. The Italian past thus becomes the perfect object of desire because, in never being achieved, it is granted a ghostly immortality, and this enchanting identity and non-identity, being and non-being, is, I argue, exactly what makes Lee’s ghosts so appealing and powerful. The ghost is dead, but its spirit lives. It inspires belief without quelling all doubts, and therefore inhabits an in-between state; like the fantastic or the object of nostalgic longing, it exists in what Lee calls “Limbo, the Kingdom of Might-have-been” (*L* 18).

A central question for this chapter, therefore, is: Why does a fascination with Italy’s past so often end in suffering and death for Lee’s characters, especially when Lee herself had deep personal attachments to Italy that she celebrated over a lifetime of work? Most critics who have addressed the question of why Lee’s protagonists suffer for the interests that Lee herself promotes argue that Lee’s essays present the “right” way of approaching art, history, and desire, and the failures of her protagonists can be explained by demonstrating how they diverge from Lee’s own method and ideas. For example, Ruth Robbins and Stefano Evangelista argue that Lee punishes her protagonists for a sexist desire to possess and control the objects of history. 43 Nicole Fluhr offers a somewhat different approach, arguing that characters fail when they are excessively empathetic and get too close to their objects of study, which results in a “loss of self” (288), or when they are excessively distanced and therefore fail to understand the unfamiliar (291). Vicinus explains the failure of the protagonist of “Amour Dure” as the consequence of what happens “when desire for the beloved shifts from a nostalgic memory into a craving for possession” (“Legion” 609). The stories thus enact “the danger of achieving one’s desires” when nostalgia gets out of hand, but without critiquing the nostalgia—understood as distanced and self-conscious—per se. However, I argue that the characters in the stories do not exemplify

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43 See Robbins 198. According to Stefano Evangelista, “The revenges of the past narrated in *Hauntings* are Lee’s revenges on the male aesthetes’ treatment of gender in their writings” (“Vernon” 107).
“incorrect” models of historical or aesthetic appreciation, but reveal unstable or pathological elements in Lee’s approach that are hinted at in the essays but blown up to fantastic proportions in the stories. Thus, Lee’s protagonists can be read as self-consciously ironic self-portraits, which would account for the way that profound sympathy and savage critique coexist in the stories. They show what it is like to be fully immersed in the contradictions between self and other, reality and fantasy, and desire and repression, all of which Lee herself felt acutely.

Lee hints at her ambivalence about the value and danger of fantasy in her essays. She claims that an imaginative approach to Italy, history, and art is “not merely a fine field for solitary and useless delusions” (*RFS* 237), but necessary for bringing the spirit of a place and time to life. It “is a useful exercise for our sympathies, bringing us wider and more wholesome notions of justice and charity” (*RFS* 237). On the one hand, Lee advocates the study of history and foreign cultures as a means of cultivating liberal many-sidedness, encountering new perspectives in a disinterested way and thus developing possibilities within ourselves that would otherwise remain latent. On the other hand, she also acknowledges that this encounter with alterity may be nothing more than an encounter with ourselves, “a Past of our own making” (*RFS* 239). In this version of things, an imaginative approach to history has a habit of frustrating the attempt to actually make contact with anything outside of ourselves. Lee’s writings about Italy, as Siegel suggests, tend to describe “a voyage at once toward something precious and new and toward something dangerous and old” (4). Elsewhere, Lee warns of the dangers of fantasy in the form of “association,” or the “faculty by which the real presence of one object evokes the imaginary presence of other objects” (*J* 1: 30), which she calls a “degradation” (*J* 1: 44) bent on “the pushing aside... of reality to make room for the fictions of imagination and memory” (*J* 1:

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44 For a study of liberal many-sidedness and the language of aesthetics in the Victorian novel, see Thomas.
45). She laments the process by which the reality of other minds is so often replaced by our own ideas of them, “wooden monster-puppets which we carve, paint, rig out, and christen by the names of real folk—alas, alas, dear names sometimes of friends!—and stick up to gibber in our memory” (L 18). In either case, one’s own impressions, associations, and imaginings do violence to a precious but seemingly inaccessible external reality. Although she also argues for the necessity of association, claiming that the recognition, or even the misrecognition, of the already familiar allows one to gradually assimilate the unfamiliar, she expresses the Paterian anxiety that the self is trapped behind a “thick wall of personality,” “a solitary prisoner” with “its own dream of a world” (Pater 151). It is unsurprising, then, that so many of Lee’s characters begin by seeking an authentic connection with the new, the different, and the real, only to end up isolated by their own obsessions, alienated from social value and unable to distinguish reality from fantasy.

The stories also show how the imaginative play that comes out of disappointment and unattainability can lead to madness. In her stories, young historians stab themselves in the heart for the love of a Renaissance femme fatale and promising composers receive inspiration from long-dead castrati. However, these stories are most interesting when they are read as allegories of how nostalgia as a way of life can be disabling rather than as didactic lessons in how not to do nostalgia. Although nostalgia seems to provide protection from disappointment, characters who engage in this practice of returning and reshaping the past end up isolating themselves in order to maintain the privileged control over the past that nostalgia requires. While sharing nostalgia with others could very well be a form of social engagement, the repetition of the past and its telling often becomes an isolating end in itself, a solution that turns out to be no different from the problem. Despite providing consolation as well as an appealing form of intellectual,
emotional, and erotic play, nostalgia involves a turning away from the social world of the present and toward a private world of memory and artifice, awakening powerful desires that may not ultimately be containable. These nostalgic, recursive subjects haunt the charged moments of the past, and this haunting invests those moments with a power that cannot be reliably subordinated to Lee’s ideal of poignant play or Martha Vicinus’s model of instructive nostalgia. In Lee’s fiction, to build up these imaginary pasts is also to create and nourish ghosts that can haunt one as easily as one haunts them. In the stories, characters either pursue their isolating fantasies to the bitter end, resulting in madness, as in “Amour Dure” and “A Wicked Voice,” or they must face the consequences of inhabiting ways of being that seem abnormal, anachronistic, or incomprehensible to the rest of the world, as in “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady.”

Although the ghostly cathexis of the past which results from the continual refashioning of memory and desire may seem like a highly, even excessively, sophisticated form of subjectivity, Lee traces its roots back to the primitive modes of perception that she claims were practiced by the early pagans. In her essay, “Faustus and Helena: Notes on the Supernatural in Art,” she echoes Vico’s claims that the primitive peoples had “an innate poetic faculty” through which they anthropomorphized nature and invented their gods; in his words, “they lacked the power of reason, and were entirely guided by their vigorous sensations and vivid imaginations”; therefore, “whatever aroused their wonder they endowed with a substantial being based on their own ideas” and “imagined its cause as a god” (Vico 144-45). As Lee explains it, the “divinity of the earlier races... is the effect on the imagination of certain external impressions, it is those impressions brought to a focus [and] personified” (B 76). In other words, for pagans, certain objects produce such powerful impressions that they seem to take on a life of their own. Although Lee believes that the pagans’ spontaneous and creative response to their environment is no longer possible in
the modern world, she claims that this visionary impressionism can still be recaptured through various forms of imaginative aesthetic experience, such as responding to a landscape, a work of art, or the past. What all these forms have in common for Lee is the idea that the experiencing subject projects herself into the object of her attention and desire, investing it with sufficient emotional energy that it seems to take on a life of its own. The manifestation of this process that she highlights in “Faustus and Helena,” as well as in her supernatural fiction, is the ghostly, “a form of the supernatural in which, from logic and habit, we disbelieve, but which is still vital” (B 93). This “modern equivalent” of the primitive gods is rooted in powerful impressions of places: “a ghost is the sound of our steps through a ruined cloister... the bright moonlight against which the cypresses stand out like black hearse-plumes... the long-closed room of one long dead” (B 93). Likewise, the ghosts in Lee’s supernatural fiction are so associated with particular places that they seem to be emanations of their environments.

Like the pagan gods and ghosts in “Faustus and Helena,” the ghosts in Lee’s supernatural fiction are the unconscious creations of characters whose desires and fantasies continually return to the past. These hauntings are therefore two-sided: ghosts haunt characters, but only after characters haunt them. My close readings begin with two gothic tales collected in Hauntings (1890): “Amour Dure,” in which the Polish historian Spiridion Trepka travels to Umbria, where he is haunted by the ghost of a Renaissance murderess whom he loves, and “A Wicked Voice,” in which the Norwegian composer Magnus travels to Venice, where he is haunted by the ghost of an eighteenth-century castrato whom he hates. Whereas “Amour Dure” emphasizes the allure of the unattainable and shows how easily nostalgia turns into obsession, “A Wicked Voice” highlights the uncanny power of artifice and hybridity. Finally, “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” marks a shift in genre from the gothic to the fairy tale. Originally published in the Yellow
Book in 1896, the story is about a young prince who pledges to redeem a cursed fairy through his love. Like the gothic fiction, “Prince Alberic” is a fantastic tale about recursive desire for an anachronistic object that comes to life, but whereas the gothic fiction implies that this resurrection of the past is the product of hallucination, the fairy tale employs a third-person narrator that assures us that the snake lady does in fact exist within the story. This shift corresponds to Todorov’s distinction between l’étrange (“the uncanny”) and le merveilleux (“the marvelous”). According to Todorov, “either the reader admits that these apparently supernatural events are susceptible of a rational explanation, and we then shift from the fantastic to the uncanny; or else he admits their existence as such, and we find ourselves within the marvelous” (58). In my readings, then, the gothic stories become uncanny, and the fairy tale becomes marvelous. All three stories externalize desire, but whereas in the gothic fiction the ghost is foreign and threatening to the secular reality which it invades, in the fairy tale Alberic’s desires seem to create an entire world in which he temporarily resides, even if that world is ultimately not safe from external intrusion. It therefore depicts queer desire as affirmative and tragic rather than as frightening and gothic.

The Desire for the Unattainable

“Amour Dure” tells the story of Spirdion Trepka, a Pole trained by German universities in the modern, critical methods of his nation’s conquerors, who travels to Italy—first to Rome, and then to the fictional Umbrian town of Urbania—in order to bring to life the history that he has spent so much time studying from a distance. He is diverted from his ostensible purpose of writing a history of the town when he comes across the story of a Lucrezia Borgia-like figure of the sixteenth-century named Medea da Carpi, who caused the death of five lovers and became
the Duchess of Urbania before being put to death. After uncovering all traces of her in the local archive, Spiridion begins to feel the presence of the dead woman, and in a series of ritualistic but generally fruitless encounters her ghost is gradually revealed to him. Eventually, after carrying out the instructions that will enable her to finally have revenge on the man who put her to death, Spiridion is found stabbed through the heart, dead like all her previous lovers.

Spiridion, who regards himself as an enlightened Northerner, repeatedly represents Italy as anachronistic space, and he hopes that by going there he will be able to recapture the Italian past of his studies and, as we shall see, the personal past of his own childhood in Poland. His diary opens with the declaration that “I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the past” (H 41), but he is deeply disappointed when he arrives in Rome to find himself surrounded by German colleagues eager to discuss Mommsen and recommend good sauerkraut. This discovery that the traveler’s pursuit of cultural difference and novelty leads him down the well-beaten path of the tourist has been well documented by scholars of travel literature,45 but Spiridion’s national affiliations make his situation unique. He explains his failure to find the past as the result of the loss of his Polishness to German skepticism. In despair, he asks himself, “Dost thou imagine, thou miserable Spiridion, thou Pole grown into the semblance of a German pedant... that thou... canst ever come in spirit into the presence of the Past?” (H 41-42) Although his German education makes him part of the “modern, northern civilization” which he blames for its “modern scientific vandalism” of the Italian past (H 41), he thinks of his Polishness, with its associations of childlike spontaneity and imagination, as allied to Italy. At the eastern rather than the southern margin of Europe, eighteenth-century Poland was invaded by German troops just as Italy is invaded by German academics. Spiridion thus faces the paradox that, although his desire for the past grew out of his Polish sensitivity, it has

45 See, for instance, Buzard, *The Beaten Track* or Siegel, *Haunted Museum* xiv.
led him to embrace the apparatus of German critical reason, which he now believes has corroded those early feelings. In wishing to escape from what he regards as stifling German rationality and the academic culture that supports it, he attempts to realign himself with his Polish roots by seeking out a privileged relationship to the Italian past.

In addition to the geographical transitions that precede the narrative, from East to West and from north to south, once in Italy he also makes the transition from the urban to the rural, traveling from Rome to Urbania, where he finally seems to find the Italy that he had hoped for. During the journey, he exclaims, “Ah, that was Italy, it was the Past!” (42). Once again equating the southern space with the temporal past, he implies an experience of direct contact with both; but what he most prizes is the way that the spaces he travels through seem to refer to something beyond themselves. He makes particular note of the names of the villages they pass through, each of which “brought to my mind the recollection of some battle or some great act of treachery,” and relishes the view of the countryside at twilight, where he half expects to see Renaissance soldiers (42). Likewise, the people in the town, whom he regards as “degenerate” (55), are most important when they remind him of Renaissance paintings. What he values is not the presence of the object in front of him, but that object’s ability to evoke what is absent.

In Urbania itself, the spaces to which he is most drawn are the town archive and an abandoned church. Both are in some sense dedicated to remembering the past and bringing it to life, and this transition from secular to sacred space marks his transition from uncovering Medea’s history to making contact with her ghost, from research to imagination. He begins to feel her presence in the archive where he first discovers her story, glimpses her face in the street, and eventually receives an invitation written in her hand to join her at the church. Medea’s appearance raises one of the central interpretive questions of the ghost story: are we to take the
ghost as real, or as nothing more than a trick of the imagination? Or, to adopt the vocabulary of Todorov, is the story marvelous or uncanny? Although Lee’s stories are especially apt at leaving the reader in suspense on this point, and therefore remaining within the realm of the fantastic, it is clear that the ghosts that populate them are to be understood in psychological terms—as Lee would put it, as “spurious ghosts” that “exist... only in our minds” (H 40, 38).

This notion of the “spurious ghost” corresponds to the pagan gods that Lee thought grew out of intense impressions, and also to Lee’s writings on psychological aesthetics, in which the viewer invests the art work with his or her own feelings and sensations. Of particular importance is the concept of “empathy,” or Einfühlung—literally, “feeling into,” as distinguished from the “feeling with” of Mitfühlung, or “sympathy” (Lee, BU 18). Although empathy aims at understanding another, it relies on the “projection of our own life into what we see” (BU 17). Like Vico’s primitive poetic sense, then, the aesthetic experience of empathy involves the attribution of our own feelings and sensations to the perceived object in order to conceive of it as having an independent consciousness. In the words of Rudolf Lotze, whom Lee quotes, “We project ourselves... into the forms of the tree, identifying our life with that of the slender shoots which swell and stretch forth, feeling in our soul the delight of the branches which droop and poise delicately in mid-air... And by such feelings we transform the inert masses of a building into so many limbs of a living body, a body experiencing inner strains which we transport back into ourselves” (BU 17-18). In this model, intense aesthetic contemplation endows its objects with a ghostly existence.46

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46 Thus, although I follow Nicole Fluhr’s compelling reading in seeing the stories as dealing with the boundaries “between past and present and... between individuals,” I differ with her interpretation of the meaning of empathy in Lee’s work, and therefore with her claim that the stories “emphasize the cataclysmic consequences for subjectivity that ensue when one person seeks to know another” (Fluhr 287). In her discussion of the concept of empathy that Lee borrowed from German for her work on aesthetic philosophy, Fluhr argues that empathy is “the process by which one merges with another’s
If we read Spiridion’s experience of Medea as analogous to this species of aesthetic projection and to the mythopoetic faculty of the pagans, then it makes sense to regard her ghost as the product of his own needs and desires, amplified by his continual returns to her history and to the places that he most associates with her. As we learn from his diary, his desire for Medea seems to pre-exist his discovery of her existence, since he writes that, “Even before coming here I felt attracted by the strange figure of a woman” (45). He postpones his academic research about the town in favor of finding out everything he can about Medea, and soon comes to feel a deep sympathy with her that seems to derive from the daily replication of his professional routine: “in my walks, my mornings in the Archives, my solitary evenings, I catch myself thinking over the woman... And still it seems to me that I understand her so well; so much better than my facts warrant” (55-56). In other words, he has created a powerful fantasy out of his obsessive interest, and his image of her is both his opposite and his ideal self. A woman of extraordinary beauty, intelligence, and ambition, she is one of the last in a tradition of Italian villains dreamt up by the Elizabethan dramatists and given a second lease on life in the gothic romances of Ann Radcliffe. In contrast to his feelings of powerlessness in a stifling milieu, Medea continually remakes her position in the world, and seems to have no qualms about hurting others in order to do so. He learns from the records that she seduced men when she had something to gain and killed them after they served their purpose, and by this method eventually became the duchess and sole ruler of Urbania. Her ambition recalls Jacob Burckhart’s famous assertion that it was during the Renaissance that the “veil” of social feeling that dominated the personality and so fully comprehends that other object” (289). However, Lee’s own definition of *Einfühlung* suggests the opposite.

Lee offers her own explanation of this lineage in “The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists” (1884), where she speculates that the English writers who traveled to Italy at the end of the sixteenth century were so shocked by the violence and sensuality of late Renaissance Italy that they invented a prototype of the ruthless Italian villain that was totally at odds with the Italians’ own view of themselves as cheerful and urbane. For a reading of the essay’s extravagant sexual imagery, see Wiley.
medieval period “first melted into air” at the same time that the “subjective side asserted itself with corresponding emphasis: man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such” (Burckhardt 100). The result of this throwing off of the medieval yoke resulted in great art, but also in what Lee claims was the “loss of all moral standard, of all fixed public feeling” (E 1: 47), as if in freeing themselves of this accumulated tradition the Italians of the Renaissance had returned to a quasi-primitive state.\footnote{Lee’s reading of the Renaissance echoes John Addington Symonds’s, whose magisterial seven-volume \textit{Renaissance in Italy} was published between 1875 and 1886. Hilary Fraser has pointed out that, although Lee’s debts to Pater are well known, the impassioned prose of her historical essays owes much more to Symonds (Fraser, \textit{Victorians} 225). Symonds resented her for what he saw as her liberal borrowings from his own ideas, and remarked in a letter that “she pitchforks immediately the slightest hint into the robust & original but rather hasty & coarsely-grinding mill of her brain” (Symonds, \textit{Letters} 2: 833).} In the power that accrues to Medea as part of this radically anti-social outlook, she compensates for frustrations that are national as well as social; in contrast to his own quasi-colonized subject position, her “one passion is conquest and empire” (H 56). He excuses her murders, imagining that the men whom she killed did not see her value and attempted to hold her back, just as he sees himself as a man of powerful desires and abilities who has been checked by his academic training and professional responsibilities. As such, he finds that her embodiment of a certain kind of Renaissance Italian individuality seems to enact a solution to his own lost Polishness. However, Medea’s quasi-primitive energy is not the childish innocence that Spiridion nostalgically associates with his Polish childhood, but corrupt, amoral, and decadent. It is also significant that, as soon as Medea reaches her goal of becoming the ruler of Urbania, she becomes increasingly isolated, “surrounded in the mountain citadel of Urbania like a scorpion surrounded by flames” (48), and thus prefigures Spiridion’s own ultimately embattled, solitary, and desperate position.

The repeated encounters through which Medea becomes increasingly present to Spiridion dramatize the pleasures of inaccessibility and suspense. Like the “long, torturous, imperfectly
understood, half-visible *approaches* to the center of suspense” that Judith Wilt sees as typical of the gothic (Wilt 10), and the “inability to arrive at a prized but ever-deferred goal” that Siegel, following Parker, sees as typical of the romance (Siegel 7), these encounters “advance” the plot by stretching it out and deferring its resolution. In continually bringing the object of desire before him (and us), they attest to its value and desirability. They require him to pursue her and to prove his desire, and the pursuit itself seems to strengthen her, making both of them ready for the longed-for contact. Spiridion implies that his own desires have produced her when he asks, “Why should she not return to the earth, if she knows that it contains a man who thinks of, desires, only her?” (*H* 69). His night visit to San Giovanni Decollato, a church which he later discovers has been shut up and abandoned for as long as anyone can remember, becomes a game of hard-to-get that would be comical if it weren’t so spooky. He finds it closed and dark, but when he walks away he hears organ music and voices. He returns, and once again it is dark, but this time he hears music coming from the next street over, which of course also turns out to be empty. Again and again, the direct approach fails, and he is forced to circle around the object of his desire: “Thus backwards and forwards, the sounds always beckoning, as it were, one way, only to beckon me back, vainly, to the other” (67). What is most tantalizing is the space which is not merely empty, but whose lack points towards an absent presence. Eventually working himself up to a panic, he throws himself against the front door, and finds to his surprise that the church is unlocked and full of worshippers in Renaissance garb. He spots Medea’s face, but as soon as she allows herself to be seen she flees the church and disappears. The same thing happens twice more with only minor variations; the second time she leaves him a rose on the church steps that turns into dust the following morning, and the third time she leaves him a letter with instructions to destroy a statue of the duke who had her put to death shortly after replacing
In a bit of tangled gothic metaphysics, Spiridion explains that before the duke’s death he had a silver statuette representing his soul soldered inside his statue, with the purpose of securing the sleep of his soul until Judgment Day, at which point it would go to heaven and finally be assured of a safe distance from Medea’s in hell. Thus, if the statuette is destroyed, his soul will once more be vulnerable to Medea’s revenge.

Some critics have explained Spiridion’s death following his destruction of the statue as punishment for some sort of overreaching, but his attitude is most remarkable for its ostentatious abjection. According to Peter Christensen, Spiridion prefers women from history because, unlike the women of the present, they cannot make demands on him that will disrupt his fantasies about them (Christensen 36). According to Ruth Robbins and Stefano Evangelista, this predilection for fantasy testifies to his masculinist need to objectify and control, and Lee’s punishment of him reflects her anger at the male writers who dominated Victorian aesthetic discourse (Robbins 198; Evangelista 107). However, instead of seeing Spiridion as simply an object of Lee’s critique, I read him as struggling with the same attractions and dangers that made an imaginative approach to the Italian past so fascinating to Lee. While Spiridion’s fascination with Medea clearly points to the feminization of the past as an object of patriarchal knowledge, he continually rejects the pretense of possession and proximity to Medea. Although he comes to believe that he has a special role to play for her, he disowns any claim on her and explicitly acknowledges his willingness to submit to her will even to the point of death. As he puts it, “the possession of a woman like Medea is a happiness too great for a mortal man” (H 57). He believes that his service to her is reward enough, and that only his death can make him worthy of

49 As it happens, the rose that Medea leaves for Spiridion echoes the rose that Anstruther-Thomson left on Lee’s pillow when Lee was mourning Robinson’s loss. In her self-reflexive essay on the evidentiary status of letters in historical studies of sexuality, Newman writes of her own disappointment when this rose, which Phyllis Mannocchi in her bibliography describes as being preserved in an envelope among Lee’s letters in the Colby College archive, turns out to have gone missing. (Newman 52-53)
it: “All those who loved Medea da Carpi, who loved and who served her, died... and I shall die also” (71-72). He recognizes himself as only the last in a series of doomed lovers, and is pleased to repeat their fatal encounters.

For Spiridion, to be fulfilled is also to die, or to enter an atemporal world in which deprivation and possession merge, such that, to paraphrase Lee, he does reach the object of his desire and, at the same time, tantalizingly, does not. On the night before he goes out to destroy the statue and thus to make contact with Medea’s liberated soul, he poses the paradox of whether “life for me [shall] mean the love of a dead woman” (71), and he writes that as he walks through the streets “all seems a dream; everything vague and unsubstantial about me, as if time had ceased, nothing could happen, my own desires and hopes were all dead, my self absorbed into I know not what passive dreamland” (74). Just as the fulfillment of contact is figured here as loss and death, the Italian town on Christmas Eve is figured as an echo of Spiridion’s Polish childhood:

there returned to me—I know not why—the recollection, almost the sensation, of those Christmas Eves long ago at Posen and Breslau, when I walked as a child along the wide streets, peeping into the windows where they were beginning to light the tapers of the Christmas-trees, and wondering whether I too, on returning home, should be let into a wonderful room all blazing with lights and gilded nuts and glass beads. (74)

In this quiet moment before the story’s climax, time and space become increasingly slippery. Just as Medea’s ghost both is and is not dead, the town is and is not Poland. The description of this nostalgic familial intimacy and warmth is meant to contrast with Spiridion’s present isolation, but, even in the fullness of the memory, he thinks of himself as watching pleasures that
he can only anticipate; as a child, he hoped that his home would match up to these furtively observed scenes, just as the other “children are waiting with beating hearts behind a door, to be told the Christ-child has been” (74). At the same time that these memories of intimacy and contact raise the mood of expectation, his own experience of time seems to slow down, and the vandalism and death that he foresees entail an abandonment of futurity and social attachments.

Medea’s insignia, “Amour Dure—Dure Amour,” or “love lasts, cruel love,” is especially significant here. What endures is not love understood as union and fulfillment, but as the ongoing need for an object that is lost or unattainable. In the story, the endurance of that intensity is maintained through Spiridion’s fantasies that rely on privacy, return, and repetition, fantasies in which desire never reaches its object, and therefore persists. Instead of continuing indefinitely, though, these desires eventually build to such a point that Spiridion is willing to die for them. In this cyclical world of melancholy, recursive desire, he increasingly concentrates on his own private obsessions and memories, but this solipsism leads paradoxically to the diminution of his own ego. The whole of his subjectivity with its own values and interests becomes subsumed in Medea’s. She gives him the strength to turn his own timidity into impetuosity as he steals his tools, schemes in private, and destroys the statue in the public square.

In destroying the representation of the man who sought to contain and control her, he also kills himself, or at least the self that ever thought of living without Medea. This death could be read as the fitting conclusion to a fable about the danger of achieving one’s desires, but it could also be read as implicating the dangerous isolation of recursive fantasies that continually circle back without hope.
The Desire for the Indeterminate

If “Amour Dure” is about the dangers of not achieving what one wants, then “A Wicked Voice” is about the danger of achieving what one doesn’t want to want. In the first story, inaccessibility leads to a process of recursive, melancholy desire that invests the desired object with a destructive power and isolates the desiring subject. In the second, to simultaneously desire and not desire something produces objects that are similarly ambivalent, such as the eighteenth-century castrato Zaffirino, whose defining lack is also the uncanny signifier of his power. Whereas the Renaissance in “Amour Dure” was typified by the quasi-primitive energy that animated Medea’s anti-social ideals of domination and escape, the Italian eighteenth century is here embodied by Zaffirino’s decadence and over-refinement. Magnus, the story’s conflicted protagonist, is a Norwegian composer who attempts to write a Wagnerian opera called Ogier the Dane based on Norse myth, but he is diverted from his plan by the poisonous atmosphere of Venice and by the ghost of Zaffirino that haunts it. Magnus seeks out one form of the past that is ancient, northern, pure, and regenerative, but he is instead consumed by another form that is relatively recent, southern, perverse, and corrupting. Instead of recovering a masculine national essence once and for all in an enduring work of art, he can only imitate the highly ornamental style of the eighteenth century, which he regards as effeminate, sensual, and artificial. Ironically, he can only mitigate the pain of this musical repetition through a narrative repetition—as he puts it, by “going over and over again in my mind the tale of my miseries” (156), even though this retelling produces no lasting cure. It merely allows him to relive the delicious loss of control. He hypothesizes that the strength of his compulsion is due to the strength of his hatred and the energy with which he went about cultivating it: “is it not because I have studied with the doggedness of hatred this corrupt and corrupting music of the past, seeking for every little
peculiarity of style and every biographical trifle merely to display its vileness” (155-156). It would be possible to say that this is a story about the return of the repressed, but that would imply that his interest in the music of the eighteenth century has been hidden from view, when in fact he has been most assiduous in cataloging what disgusts him. Instead of festering in the dark, his interest in this perverse music seems to have gained its power from the most careful, even loving, attention.

Lee herself was an enthusiastic if occasionally ambivalent proponent of eighteenth-century vocal music. She first made her reputation as a writer with Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy (1880), a work on Italian music and literature. In her retrospective 1907 preface, she writes that these subjects were for her youthful self “the hay-loft, the tool-house, the remote lumber-room full of discarded mysteries and of lurking ghosts, where a half-grown young prig might satisfy, in unsuspicious gravity, mere childlike instincts of make-believe and romance” (SECI xvi). Carlo Caballero argues that Lee used “A Wicked Voice” to launch an indirect attack on Wagner for his scorn of the eighteenth-century music that she loved, and that in doing so she also acknowledged in her fiction the “sexual mutability” of eighteenth-century opera that she tended to ignore in her essays (Caballero 404). In her essays, Lee contrasts the “invigorating classicism” of eighteenth-century music with Wagner, who “conveniently serves to exemplify everything dangerous and morbid in modern art, an art that tends to derange the listener’s soul” (Caballero 396). However, Magnus in “A Wicked Voice” reverses these positions, claiming that Wagner is rational and pure, and that eighteenth-century music is maddening and corrupt. By writing a story about a Wagnerian composer’s enslavement to the ghost of an eighteenth-century castrato, Lee “effectively turns the haunting power of the old vocal art she so treasured against the insolent German composer who aimed to obviate it” and “persecutes Wagner with what he
would repress (a particular culture of the voice)—namely, the culture of “eighteenth-century Italian opera, with all its meretricious indulgence of singers and voices” (Caballero 401).

The story that Magnus tells of his downfall contains two other stories that echo and prefigure the main plot. The first is the one he intends to write himself, the story of Ogier the Dane, but this heroic story is gradually overtaken by the second, a fanciful tale about the demise of an eighteenth-century noblewoman which he overhears from a fellow boarder. Ogier is one of Charlemagne’s crusaders, but his return from battle is interrupted by “the arts of an enchantress” (163), and he only realizes that he has been diverted from his purpose when he arrives “home” to a place made utterly unfamiliar by the passage of hundreds of years. He is thus rendered an anachronism, and his only consolation is the memorialization that comes from a compassionate minstrel. The other story, considerably less heroic and marked by stutters and pompous repetitions, is told by the poor Count Alvise, who is trying to gain the attentions of a rich American mother and daughter for the sake of his son. The story is about the Count’s great aunt, the Procuratesa Vendramin, who lived at the same time as Zaffirino and initially ridiculed his cult of personality. After accidentally hearing him once, though, she became sick with the desire to hear him again. When Zaffirino, who was rumored to have struck a deal with the devil, consented to sing for her in her country villa, the repetition of his performance began by reviving her, but ended with her death. Magnus does not believe that anything as vapid as the singer or the Count’s story could seduce anyone, but despite his skepticism, they act on his body, raising his heartbeat and causing him to sweat. Most of all, though, he finds himself unexpectedly fascinated by the singer’s portrait, which he recalls at key moments in the story: “That effeminate, fat face of his is almost beautiful, with an odd smile, brazen and cruel. I have seen

50 Caballero points out that Vendramin is also the name of the Italian palazzo where Wagner died in 1883 while completing *Parsifal* (400).
faces like this, if not in real life, at least in my boyish romantic dreams, when I read Swinburne and Baudelaire, the faces of wicked, vindictive women” (162). The face is surprisingly attractive, but only because it appears to contain its feminine opposite and to recall the unformed fantasies of his youth. It represents both the object of his hatred and the object of his earliest desires.

The castrato is a stubbornly unstable signifier, eluding both Magnus and the story’s critics. When, after a series of frustrated approaches, Magnus finally hears Zaffirino sing, he describes the voice through a series of negations:

They were long-drawn-out notes, of intense but peculiar sweetness, a man’s voice which had much of a woman’s, but more even of a chorister’s, but a chorister’s voice without its limpidity and innocence; its youthfulness was veiled, muffled, as it were, in a sort of downy vagueness, as if a passion of tears withheld. (170)

Each attempt to categorize the voice merely produces further qualifications that only contradict that attempt—like a man’s voice but also like a woman’s, like a child’s but without innocence.

Because Magnus still isn’t sure whether or not the ghost is real, this appearance is indeterminate in the literary sense discussed by Todorov, but also in an erotic sense, because Magnus cannot resolve the ghost’s gender. Magnus’s repressed desire for Zaffirino brings to mind the predicament of the closeted male homosexual, but given Lee’s own biography one might venture to propose, as Catherine Maxwell does, that the relationship is a “stand in for a disguised lesbianism” (960). As with most representations of deviant sexuality in Lee’s stories, there is probably some truth in this, but it ignores the indeterminacy that is one of Zaffirino’s most salient features, and it is also insufficient to explain just how much the story depends on the fear of losing an emphatically masculine psycho-corporeal integrity. This phallic loss makes
Zaffirino an object of disgust to Magnus, but what is most troubling is that, as Caballero points out, Zaffirino is powerful not in spite of his castration, but because of it: his “vocal endowment comes at the price of sexual mutilation” and he “surrenders his soul to the devil so as to augment this endowment with supernatural powers,” just as “Magnus loses his individual creativity to uncanny gifts in imitating ‘the great dead masters’” (391). Although Zaffirino’s loss implies a renunciation of the erotic in favor of the aesthetic, it has the opposite effect, since the voice itself seems to become a sexual organ and Zaffirino is a maestro of eliciting desire. The castration also produces a loss of categorizability that seems to allow him to occupy and draw upon the powers of all the categories at once. Like the pleasure of the unattainable, the pleasure of the undecidable lies in the paradoxical tendency of the desired object to take on increasingly more significance as the possibility of knowing it decreases.

As the story’s representative of Italy’s erotic and aesthetic power, Zaffirino recalls Italy’s own losses over the centuries. In Lee’s reading of Italian history in Euphorion, Italy’s greatness was also its downfall, but its destructive glory allowed for its influence on the rest of Europe. During the Renaissance, Italy was “seething with good and evil” and “moving on towards civilizations and towards chaos” (E 1: 29). In the wake of its resultant political collapse in the sixteenth century, Italy was conquered and reconquered, and its “vast storehouse” of art and culture was laid open and scattered, fertilizing the nations that invaded it and molding them in its own image (45). Italy’s loss was thus also its power, lending “that strange, anomalous civilization” of the Italian Renaissance a “life in death, and death in life” (30). If we mix the metaphors of story and essay, it would be possible to say that post-Renaissance Italy is “castrated” in the same sense as Zaffirino’s ghost. Although they are dead, and therefore lack
the ability to act on the world directly, they nevertheless exert great power over those who come to them.

By the time Magnus arrives in Venice, though, it would appear that Italy’s storehouse of inspiration has been somewhat picked over. Its spaces are most remarkable for decay and lack, and are thus doubly “castrated,” first by invading armies and then by invading connoisseurs. But this sense of something missing is also overwhelming. As Lee wrote in a later essay on Venice, “It brings up, with each dip of the oar, the past, or rather the might-have-been; it dissolves my energies like its own moist and shifting skies; it brings a knot into my throat and almost tears into my eyes, like a languorous waltz or a distant accordion” (H 341). In this anachronistic space, the past is absent, but endlessly referred to, and its simultaneous presence and non-presence is painful and paralyzing. As in the stories of Ogier and the great aunt, Magnus’s first (indirect) encounter with his enchanter diverts him from his chosen task. He had hoped that the city’s associations with the past would inspire him to finish his opera, but instead it substitutes its own past for the Norse past that he had hoped to uncover. Far from being a stimulating influence, Venice is described as infernal and corrupting, more a manifestation of the eighteenth-century music with which Magnus associates it than a real place: it produces “a moral malaria, distilled, as I thought, from those languishing melodies, those cooing vocalisations which I had found in the musty music-books of a century ago” (156). It “puts all my ideas into hopeless confusion” and seems to secrete a “miasma of long-dead melodies” (163). This past-haunted space diverts him from his chosen path and makes action impossible.

As he wanders the city’s canals, spaces defined by presences that are absent yet powerful, he continually hears the hints of a voice that he will later recognize as Zaffirino’s. In his words,

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51 For a detailed reading of writers from Byron to Pound (though not Lee) and their engagements with Venice and sexuality, see Tanner.
he “awaited its coming as a lover awaits its beloved” (165). In haunting the anachronistic spaces that are most associated with Zaffirino’s “long-dead melodies,” he gradually evokes them. He repeatedly begins to hear the voice, which he misrecognizes as the beginnings of the theme that he has been seeking for Ogier, only to have it fade away. When he finally hears the voice openly and clearly from some mysterious source outside his window, it is as far as possible from the “savage... heroic, funereal” music that he hoped to write, but it has become deeply familiar and gratifying (170). He even has a dream that begins as Ogier’s story and ends by recapitulating the Count’s story about his great aunt’s demise. After hearing the voice so clearly, he becomes completely unable to work. Advised by his doctor that Venice’s heat and bad air are responsible for his illness, Magnus takes up the Count’s offer of a stay at his ancestral home in hopes that the “excellent air,” “peaceable surroundings,” and “delightful occupations of a rural life” will help to rehabilitate him (171). In another of the story’s gothic reversals, the Villa Mistra turns out to be the very place where the Count’s great aunt was killed. Unsurprisingly, then, the country is no escape from what ailed him in Venice, but an intensification of it.

The story’s final act begins when he once again hears the mysterious voice while looking out a window. To his surprise, though, the source of the voice is inside the house, and he seeks it out by following labyrinthine hallways into the house’s largely abandoned interior. As we saw earlier, the encounter with the different and new often turns out to be an encounter with one’s own self. Moving deeper into the past and his own private world of memory and fantasy, he stumbles into the gallery of a large room, where he witnesses the scene that he had already dreamed about, in which Zaffirino kills the Count’s great aunt. In arriving at this feared and longed-for scene of contact, he recognizes the “voluptuous” voice that had “persecuted” him since Venice and realizes that his hatred was in fact desire: “I recognised now what seemed to
have been hidden from me till then, that this voice was what I cared most for in all the wide world” (179). Magnus describes his own response as a loss of selfhood: “I felt my body melt even as wax in the sunshine, and it seemed to me that I too was turning fluid and vaporous, in order to mingle with these sounds.” At the song’s climax, however, Zaffirino shows his “cruel and mocking” face by coming out of the shadows, and this sight spoils Magnus’s pleasure and produces in him the sudden desire to rush downstairs and interrupt the voice that “was killing this woman, and killing me also” (180). But the door is locked, and when he finally pushes his way through there is nothing but an empty room with a broken harpsichord, where he is “blinded by a flood of blue moonlight.” He feels a sudden urge to complete the phrase that Zaffirino left undone, but when he opens the harpsichord, he only hears the “jingle-jangle of broken strings, laughable and dreadful” (180). The place that has drawn him inexorably to it with a gravity of its own turns out to be a vacancy which is nevertheless capable of causing him a profound loss: first, and temporarily, of vision, and then of his independent creativity.

Magnus’s encounter with his ghost is fundamentally different from Spiridion’s, so the nature of his loss is correspondingly different. Whereas Spiridion experiences direct contact between himself and Medea and then dies, Magnus’s encounter is mediated through the figure of the great aunt and he survives. But in recognizing his desire and pain in the figure of the coquettish and ailing woman rather than in the myth of the heroically belated Dane, Magnus is effectively castrated. Furthermore, because his encounter is interrupted when he rebels against his desire, that desire is never fulfilled. Nor can he accept his desires, because only the hatred that initially disguised desire can still provide him with the compromised sense of selfhood that he clings to. Magnus explains his split self in terms of a division between his “free” reason and his “enslaved” “aesthetic inspiration,” and compares himself to the werewolves he first heard
about from his Norwegian nanny, who told him that if a man becomes aware of the impending transformation he might be able to prevent it. Since Magnus knows that he is acting against his will, and thus only “half-bewitched,” he locates his limited agency in his power to hate the music that he composes.

Hating what he can nevertheless not separate himself from, Magnus turns into a sort of ghostly anachronism like Ogier and Zaffirino before him. He is forced to imitate and repeat the feminized style of an earlier century, which we learn has neither an audience to listen to it nor performers trained to sing it. His compulsion is therefore isolating, turning him against himself and the present, causing people to associate him with “the miserable singing-masters of the past” rather than with Wagner, “the great master of the Future” (155). His compelled creativity continually recalls to him the scene of his own loss and interrupted fulfillment. In reliving this experience, Magnus occupies three roles at once: Zaffirino’s creative power, the old woman’s loss, and his own mingled desire and fear. On the one hand, the desire is never fulfilled and so never dies, but this iterative immortality requires him to lose his creative independence, just as Zaffirino lost the bodily symbol of his masculinity. Both become conflicted figures whose hybridity is also a source of ambivalent power: the Wagnerian who writes classical operetta and the man who sings like a woman. One might say that the loss of the testes also represents the loss of the ability to consummate desire, or the loss that makes possible the endless, melancholy spinning out of desire for what is unachievable, a spinning out that brings him no closer to that object, but which produces unlicensed pleasures that are no less intense for being trifles. The recursive fantasy and desire that Lee so treasured is deeply desirable as well as hateful because it leads to a melancholic subject at war with itself and out of alignment with society.
Tragic Desire

“Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady” (1896) marks a shift from the gothic fiction collected in *Hauntings* (1890) to the Wildean fairy tales that would later be collected in *Pope Jacynth and Other Tales* (1907). Set in late seventeenth-century Tuscany, it ostensibly describes the failure of the ducal family of Luna and that (fictional) province’s annexation by the Holy Roman Empire when the current Duke and his grandson die, but this historical prologue soon gives way to a fairy tale about desire and its failure. Whereas in the gothic stories the past’s characteristic figures are sinister ghosts who destroy the protagonists, in “Prince Alberic” the past is represented by the beneficent fairy Oriana, who was cursed to appear as a snake for twenty-three hours of the day, and her and Alberic’s downfall is caused by hostile external forces. The story moves from the limiting reality of the Red Palace, where Alberic spends his childhood with his negligent grandfather the Duke; to the wish-fulfillment dream of the Castle of the Sparkling Waters, where Alberic spends his adolescence under Oriana’s loving tutelage; and then back to the Red Palace, where the Duke and his three treacherous advisors attempt to force Alberic into a suitable marriage and eventually cause his death. As in many of Lee’s stories, characters react to a stifling present by turning to the representations of the past that still exist, but “Prince Alberic” dreams of the possibility of escaping from both the normative imperative to futurity and from the backward-looking obsessions of the perpetually unfinished archive by imagining a third place that realizes the archive’s erotic promise. However, the archive turns out to be fragile, and the reality that it describes is ultimately neither autonomous nor habitable.

The story is also different from most of the stories in *Hauntings* because, instead of its protagonist coming from outside Italy, Alberic comes from a space within Italy that is dominated by foreigners. The story is therefore also one of the rare instances in which Lee seems to
comment on Italian politics. Although nominally independent, Alberic’s grandfather the Duke is beholden to his three advisors, each of which represents a major power on the peninsula: the Jester acts for the Holy Roman Emperor, the Dwarf for the King of Spain, and the Jesuit, of course, for the Pope (H 196). As such, the Red Palace represents a compromised and decadent Italy, focused on trivialities and compromised by forces from without. On the other hand, the Castle of the Sparkling Waters represents original plenitude and autonomy; it was the ancestral home of the fictional House of Luna, as well as “its principal bulwark against invasion” (191). Because Alberic’s death leads to the duchy’s annexation by the Holy Roman Empire, his queer love for Oriana is also allied to Italian independence. That the story was written some thirty-five years after the unification of the peninsula in 1861 might suggest that Lee had in mind the failed 1848 revolution of Giuseppe Mazzini, who, like Alberic, was also known for his feminine good looks.\footnote{52 For more on British interest in the Italian Risorgimento in general and Mazzini in particular, see O’Connor.}

The Red Palace represents the real that Alberic must ultimately submit to, but it is a reality that the story describes as produced by a degraded society, in contrast to the deeply felt authenticity of the Castle of the Sparkling Waters, associated with a noble if faded past, nature, and the maternal and romantic bond between Alberic and Oriana. Whereas Oriana is the presiding spirit of the Sparkling Waters, Alberic sees the “Duke and the [Red] Palace as the personification and visible manifestation of each other” (189). Both man and place are represented as giving priority to novelty, artificiality, and display over genuine feeling and the natural world. The Duke’s effeminate over-cultivation clearly echoes late Victorian satires of the aesthetic movement, including Lee’s own in Mrs. Brown (1884). He wears a wig and makeup in order to keep up a fiction of perpetual youth, prides himself on his “enlightened mind and
delicate taste” (184), and puts on lavish ballets in which he himself stars. His signature
“improvements” to the palace are an artificial grotto populated by various exotic animals
sculpted out of improbably colored rare marbles. Given all his redecorating and entertaining, it
is unsurprising that he has little time to devote to the education of his grandson and heir, but this
neglect turns out to be beneficial. Although Alberic’s development seems to have been delayed,
since his contact with the world is limited and what he has seen has been distasteful, his taste has
not been distorted, and he lives largely undisturbed in one of the less visited wings of the palace
where the Duke’s modernizing influence is slow to reach.

Bereft of any other interesting object, Alberic gives all of his attention to a faded
medieval tapestry depicting his ancestor Alberic the Blond standing next to a woman with the
tail of a snake. This unlikely work of art is the sole item in an archive testifying to a better and
more expansive alternative to Alberic’s limited existence, and it becomes “his whole world”
(188). To use Lee’s vocabulary, the tapestry is the “sample” of another place and time, “the
reality, the enough utterly denied one” (EW 167). It becomes the center of his imaginative
universe and mediates his experience of the rest of the world, since it is only through studying its
border of intertwined flora and fauna that he becomes interested in their real counterparts. What
comes to occupy most of his attention, though, is the heavily faded pair of figures in the center of
the tapestry, a knight and a lady, which “seemed like ghosts, sometimes emerging then receding
again into vagueness. Indeed, it was only as he grew bigger that Alberic began to see any figures
at all; and then, for a long time he would lose sight of them. But little by little, when the light
was strong, he could see them always” (186). It is as if these ghostly figures take on visible form
only through Alberic’s painstaking concentration over many years, and over time he grows to
love them. This queer fantasy is interrupted when one day the Duke remembers his
responsibilities for educating his grandson and finding him a suitable wife. His first step is to replace the old tapestry with a new one, but Alberic rebels against the imperative of futurity to “grow up” and slashes the replacement, for which he is exiled to the Castle of the Sparkling Waters.

If the tapestry is the “sample” of a better world, then the Castle of the Sparkling Waters is that world. It represents authentic nature and reality, but a reality enchanted and queered. When Alberic arrives, he sees the world of the tapestry reflected before his eyes, as though “the tapestry had been removed to this spot, and become a reality in which he himself was running about” (192). He is confronted with the sudden possibility that his fantasies might actually be big enough to live in. By going back into the past, to this “original cradle” of the family that reflects the “barbarous days of the goths” (191, 193), Alberic meets Oriana, and finds in her both a godmother capable of providing him with the education that he has been denied and the lover that he thought he hadn’t wanted. Unlike the gothic stories that, I argue, lean towards the Todorovian uncanny, where contact with the fantastic object of desire is really only contact with the inadmissible and destructive parts of oneself, in this story doubt yields to certainty and the fantastic yields to the marvelous. That the world of his desire now surrounds him also suggests the possibility of some larger social context for his love of Oriana, but the pair are in fact virtually alone and the castle is a ruin, long since abandoned and used as a quarry. All that remains of it are its surrounding walls, the gate house where Alberic lives with a family of peasants, and a few smaller buildings. The castle’s dilapidated state foreshadows its fragility as a dwelling place for unsanctioned love, while also echoing the broken and indeterminate character of Lee’s ghosts and other fantastic objects.
Nevertheless, the anachronistic and ruined space of the castle does provide a temporary shelter for Alberic where he can begin to grow and develop independent from the duke and his advisors. The autochthonous and maternal Oriana occupies the “very centre,” “citadel,” and highest point of the former castle, in a “white shining house with columns and windows, which seemed to drag him upwards” (193). On the day of his arrival, Alberic seeks it out, where he meets first a snake and then Oriana. The invitingly vaginal well is “very deep” and its “inner sides were covered, as far as you could see, with long delicate weeds like pale green hair” (195). Its description also seems to prepare us for the hesitation of the fantastic, since it plays with the distinction between subject and object, internal and external, and imaginary and real. First Alberic is startled by the appearance of a face in the well, only to remember that “it must be his own reflection, and felt ashamed. So, to give himself courage, he bent over again, and sang his own name to the image. But instead of his own boyish voice he was answered by wonderful tones, high and deep alternately, running through the notes of long, long cadence” (195). He sends out himself, but receives instead something strange and enticing, both “high and deep,” masculine and feminine, which the figure of the boy stands between. When the snake appears, with “a rustle as of silk” that suggests Oriana’s green dress (194), he shows concern for it by trying to warm it up in his pocket (195). The phallic woman thus meets the vaginal boy.

If this were a ghost story, then the meeting that occurs shortly thereafter between Alberic and Oriana herself would be the climax, and, having spent its energy on this terrifying encounter, the story would have little else to do. According to Peter Penzoldt, “the structure of the ideal ghost story may be represented as a rising line which leads to the culminating point... which is obviously the appearance of the ghost” (qtd in Todorov 86). However, the story is quick to insist that it will follow a different trajectory. Having frightened the young prince by laying a hand on
his shoulder, Oriana immediately reassures him that, “I am not a ghost, but alive like you; and I am, though you do not know it, your Godmother” (202). She declares that we are dealing with a story about wish-fulfillment and development, not obsession and violence. At this point, the story temporarily abandons the “rising line” of the fantastic and shifts to a summary of Alberic’s education and growth in a pastoral setting: “And thus his Godmother had come every evening at sunset... and had taught the poor solitary prince to play (for he had never played) and to read, and to manage a horse, and, above all, to love” (202). Especially if we take “play” to include the imaginative play that Lee so valued, then it is significant that it is here the first step in an education that leads to intimacy with another. Oriana also gives him three gifts that attest to his growing maturity and mobility: a wardrobe for the fashioning of a public self, books and maps for greater knowledge of the world, and a horse for the exploration of that world. Under her tutelage, he grows into a handsome and princely young man.

Despite their growing intimacy, Alberic treats his godmother’s hybrid identity with discretion bordering on avoidance. Ever since hearing the names of his ancestor and the Snake Lady from his nurse, he came to “conceive an inexplicable shyness, almost a dread, of knowing more” on the subject (201). He suspects that his godmother is the Snake Lady from the tapestry and knows that his ancestor Alberic the Blond also loved her, but refrains from asking her or anyone else, “although the story, he felt quite sure, must be well known among the ruins of Alberic the Blond’s own castle” (201-202). Although the supernatural is not in question here the way it is in the gothic stories, the fantastic returns once again because Alberic hesitates to accept what he thinks he knows, and, after the growth and development rendered in the imperfect tense, we begin another rising line of suspense. As he becomes “a full-grown and gallant-looking youth,” he thinks about “the story of his ancestor and the Lady Oriana... more than ever, and it
began to haunt his dreams” (204). His ambivalence recalls the simultaneous desire and dread that characterized the encounter with the ghost in “Amour Dure” and “A Wicked Voice”: “the greater his craving to know, the greater grew a strange certainty that the knowing would be accompanied by evil” (204). That is, Alberic doesn’t doubt the existence of his godmother or the story of the Snake Lady; rather, he doubts their shared identity. His hesitation is not motivated by the belief that it would be logically impossible for a woman to be both a snake and a fairy, but by the belief that it could be shameful or dangerous.

As in his first encounter with his godmother, though, dread and terror turn out to be temporary; these negative emotions almost seem to attach more to his ignorance than to his knowledge. He finally persuades a traveling minstrel to tell him the story of his ancestor and Oriana, and learns that he is merely recapitulating a drama that has been played out twice before by his ancestors. The minstrel tells him that the Fairy Oriana was imprisoned in the body of a snake, and that she can only be released if a man kisses her three times and remains faithful to her for ten years. Although this ten years could be seen as a grueling trial, it also leaves open the possibility, lacking in the other stories, that the continual, recursive devotion to the object of desire will eventually reach its end and reward. The first and second Alberics had attempted the ordeal, but both failed before their ten years were up. Although the third Alberic had already begun “to take his unknown ancestor as a model, and in a confused way, to identify himself with him” (203), a repetition that he associated with his growing abilities, the minstrel’s story produces a feeling of alienation. He feels as though he is in a dream, and “did not recognize himself” (204). Afterwards, he falls into a swoon and spends an unspecified number of days in a feverish delirium. Contrary to his fears, though, his new knowledge is transformative rather than destructive. It is temporarily disorienting, but when he wakes up and verifies the story, he
resolves to love his godmother. He calls to the snake, this time by the name of Oriana, and when he kisses it he falls into another swoon, but he wakes up calm and happy in the arms of his transformed godmother. Once again, the rising line of suspense promises to end in terrifying knowledge, but turns out to be benign. Alberic and Oriana’s now apparently untroubled acceptance of their relationship raises the possibility that the past can be repeated, but with a difference, and thereby become the source of alternative futures that compete with those already laid out. On the other hand, the previous failures suggest that this third attempt might be nothing more than a repetition of those failures by characters who are doomed by their close relationship to the past.

The question of competing forms of futurity—one born out of the present, the other out of the past—comes to a head when Alberic’s idyll with Oriana is interrupted by his grandfather, who recalls him to the Red Palace. The conflict is no longer internal, between Alberic’s hesitation between fear and desire, but external, between the now united pair of lovers and the Duke and his court. In the Duke’s version of the narrative, Alberic’s adolescent exile at the Castle of the Sparkling Waters is unimportant, empty time. Now that his heir is of age, he resolves somewhat belatedly to set about preparing him for rule and family life. Although Alberic easily demonstrates his skill in statecraft, he resolutely refuses any interest in marriage, and when he is not fulfilling his duties as prince he stays in his chambers with what everyone else takes to be a tame grass snake. When Alberic again refuses to marry, his mobility is gradually restricted, until finally he is imprisoned in the ducal prison with only his snake and a book of hours. The fairy tale once again turns gothic, as Alberic is increasingly isolated and
immobilized.\textsuperscript{53} In anger at his obstinacy, the three advisors kill and mutilate the snake in front of Alberic, after which he refuses all food and dies two weeks later.

Ironically, what makes Oriana so desirable initially is also what makes her vulnerable. When Alberic first discovers that her representation in the tapestry has a tail, he reasons that the tail was the source of her appeal rather than a disfigurement: “Very strange it was, but he loved the beautiful lady with the thread of gold hair only the more because she ended off in the long twisting body of a snake. And that, no doubt, was why the knight was so very good to her” (188). As with the castrato in “A Wicked Voice,” her hybridity and the inability to reduce her to any one category make her more attractive. Like Medea and the “samples” that haunt Lee’s Italian landscape, the fact that she is ultimately unattainable makes her all the more valuable. She is both woman and snake, teacher and diminutive plaything, beautiful and grotesque, mother and lover, sepulcher and phallus. She is possessed of magical powers, since she provides Alberic with his gifts, but she is also cursed for mysterious reasons and constrained in the body of a snake for twenty-three hours of the day. As long as she stays within the walls of the Castle of the Sparkling Waters, of which she is the genius loci, she seems to pervade the entire place and enjoy certain indefinite powers, but when she leaves it and goes with Alberic to the Red Palace, she seems to lose something of her special position. Thus, while Alberic travels and practices diplomacy, she remains in his room and practices needlework. It would be difficult to imagine anything befalling her as a woman, but as a sleeping garden snake she is vulnerable and dies. Likewise, it is the abandonment and ruination of the Castle of the Sparkling Waters that makes it both sufficiently marginal to be a safe place for Alberic and Oriana and ultimately fragile and temporary. It exists only as a trace, a collection of ruins and outbuildings that testify to a

\textsuperscript{53} Eve Sedgwick claims that “The various articulations of immobilization and burial alive are the ‘family traits’ of the Gothic conventions, and these articulations delineate a whole geography of isolation” (Sedgwick, Coherence 11).
previous existence, but the bulk of its stones have already been repurposed, having gone into the construction of the new and hostile social space of the Red Palace.

Coincidentally, not long after the publication of “Prince Alberic” in 1896, Lee’s affair with Kit Anstruther-Thomson began to wind down. In the summer of 1897, Anstruther-Thomson had a nervous breakdown, apparently exhausted from her collaboration with Lee on a series of essays on psychological aesthetics. Vineta Colby writes that, instead of a “dramatic rupture as there had been with Mary Robinson” in 1887, “there was a gradual erosion of their mutual attachment. Temporary separations grew longer, until by 1904 these became permanent” (167).54 Significantly, the beginning of the end for their relationship would’ve occurred just short of the magical ten years of devotion required in the fairy tale. Whether or not Lee could predict in 1896 the gradual estrangement to come, the rupture highlights the relatively fragility of same-sex relationships, even when they were well supported by family and friends. In depicting Oriana as marvelous and real rather than as uncanny and frightening, Lee offers her most affirmative fictional representation of queer love, but it can only survive in a ruin that is vulnerable to outside intrusion. The object of fantasy is neither threatening nor unreal, but is instead threatened by society and opposed to the Duke’s pragmatic “realism.” Whereas in the gothic stories it would be possible to find fault with the protagonists’ desires—understood as misplaced, unreal, or wrong—here the romantic pair are plainly tragic victims, and the story indicted the social context in which their love exists. In this case, that context is an Italy that has been dominated and degraded by foreigners. To imagine happiness for Alberic and Oriana is therefore also to imagine some sort of magical unification of Italy, in which the object of desire, so long condemned to be hybrid, might become wholly itself.

54 For a description of the separation and its causes, see Colby 158-172.
Neither Lee’s characters nor Lee herself were strangers to misunderstanding and disappointment, and much of her work is a response to this experience. Her essays and stories dramatize both the pleasure and despair that come out of the attempt to savor the unattainable and the indeterminate for their own sakes. The stories depict the struggle to make contact with something outside of oneself, while also recognizing that those desired and feared others may also be nothing more than illusions. They represent Italy as a land haunted by its own past, unable to move forward, and replete with beauty and danger, while also admitting the possibility that these representations might tell us more about those who come to Italy from abroad, including perhaps Lee herself, than they do about Italy. A large part of the fear that the ghost inspires derives from its threat to collapse the distinctions between self and other, real and unreal, that structure our experience of the world. The actual loss of these distinctions would be terrifying, but to watch the two opposed categories inch closer without touching is extraordinarily compelling. As a result of desire, the world becomes something more than itself, shadowed by its various ghosts. Lee writes about this experience when she responds to her sudden regret at not being with her friends in Greece, and defends the necessity of desire despite its disappointments.

And so, if I did not want... the South, Sicily, Greece, Arcadia, it is probable I should not have felt that little stab of envy and sadness when the smell of burning olive-wood met me on my hillside. But it is certain also that I should not have made those places for myself, extracted and built them up out of this Tuscany lying at my hand. There would have been only one South, one Sicily, Greece, or Arcadia. Now there are two... (EW 318)
In this vision of things, to want is also to create, and this creation imparts value to the world at the same that it begins to overshadow it. If this process of duplication threatens to run amok, creating a virtual hall of mirrors in which identity breaks down and objects perpetually recede, then it is also one that Lee urges us to enjoy getting lost in.
CHAPTER 4
REORIENTING VIEWS IN E. M. FORSTER’S ITALIAN NOVELS

“So, Miss Honeychurch, are you travelling? As a student of art?”
“Oh, dear me, no—oh, no!”
“Perhaps as a student of human nature,” interposed Miss Lavish, “like myself?”
“Oh, no, I am here as a tourist.”
—*A Room with a View*

“I felt we are only a couple of tourists.”
“We shall be that everywhere, and for ever.”
“But affectionate tourists—”
—*Howards End*

Like many British writers before him who discussed Italy with an eye towards criticizing
Britain, in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908) E. M. Forster
represents modern Britain as in need of enlivening contact with a charmingly anachronistic Italy.
Like John Addington Symonds, Forster’s concerns are ethical and social, and his novels ask how
British engagement with Italy and Italianness might be conducive to the good life. Like Henry
James and Vernon Lee, however, Forster also ironized the fantasies of British visitors who, like
Symonds, imagined that the pleasures of tourism in Italy could be profitably extended by taking
up residence there. Forster’s Italian novels prize the enlivening force of contact and discovery,
but they are quite skeptical of the possibility of genuine cross-cultural understanding or long-
term friendship. They depict Italy as a space of romance in which characters experience
powerful moments of vision that render the landscape psychologically and symbolically
significant, especially when it features a sexually desirable male body. These moments of
romantic vision reorient characters’ desires in unexpected and often queer ways, and therefore

55 For a useful overview of (primarily male) homoerotic writing about Italy, see Aldrich.
promise regeneration and erotic fulfillment, but they often lead to disorientation insofar as they create ruptures between a character’s desires and his or her cultural attachments. In this chapter, I argue that an examination of space and genre in Forster’s Italian novels reveals their ambivalence about the ability of this romantic vision to make contact with Italy.

In Forster’s early novels, suburban Britain is represented as a place of hollow convention, hypocrisy, and repression in need of outside stimulus. Without that encounter, it remains stuck in a pattern of changeless repetition as it goes on reproducing itself with ever-decreasing vigor. Like earlier Victorian writers, Forster diagnoses British society as the victim of its own modernity. In his novels, Britain has become what James Buzard calls an “anticulture,” characterized “either as a state of arid commodification and moral apartness existing among a people whose physical adjacency mocked real community... or as a state of disastrous and inescapable interconnection” (*Disorienting* 21). As opposed to the supposedly organic, harmonious, and knowable communities of “traditional” society, modern society is condemned for the lack of authentic relationality, so that social connections that do exist are felt to be either woefully inadequate or oppressive. The inadequacy of British culture is represented, for instance, in *The Longest Journey*, when we are told that the protagonist Rickie Elliott grows up seeing “civilization as a row of semi-detached villas, and society as a state in which men do not know the men who live next door. He had himself become part of the gray monotony that surrounds all cities” (22). Its oppressiveness is voiced by Philip Herriton, who implicitly indict British culture when he characterizes his mother’s domestic regime as a “well-ordered, active, useless machine” that brings no one any pleasure (86). In both of these instances, the efficient activity of modernity seems to go on reproducing itself in valueless profusion.
In *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *A Room with a View*, Italy initially appears as an anachronistic, pre-modern, or “medieval” land of romance that promises to call forth and then fulfill characters’ desires. In opposition to Britain’s northern modernity, it is represented as pleasingly southern and backward, a place where long-held cultural traditions merge with a primitive state of nature. In an early draft of *A Room with a View*, an unattributed fragment of dialogue describes Italy as “The beautiful country where people say yes,” “Where people respond,” and therefore also “Where things happen” (*Lucy* 91). By implication, England is the place where people say no or where they do not respond at all, and therefore a place where things do not happen. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the English Mrs. Herriton says no to Lilia’s pleasures, whether they take the form of cycling in England or marriage in Italy, but Lilia’s talent for disobedience sets events in motion. In *A Room with a View*, Mr. Beebe remarks that the Italians “know what we want before we know it ourselves... They read our thoughts, they foretell our desires ... [and] they turn us inside out” (38). England is associated with repression, control, and ignorance, whereas Italy is associated with expression, freedom, and intuitive understanding. Italy elicits desires and draws out emotions, even when they are unacknowledged or unrecognized, and therefore has the power to thaw out all but the very coolest of northern visitors. This English desire for Italian freedom and sensuality enacts the narrative of the “tame in pursuit of the savage” that June Perry Levine identifies in Forster’s homoerotic posthumous fiction. However, the novels also works to question this binary between tame and savage, and the processes of turning people inside out that Mr. Beebe talks about can be profoundly disorienting. Italy may awaken dreams of erotic autonomy and fulfillment, but it is just as likely to call into question the values and beliefs on which such dreams are founded.
This association between Italy and eroticism has a long history in Forster criticism. Early reviews of the two novels associate Italy with “the revolt of incongruous, queer, and passionate desires” (Masterman 94) and “the primitive earnestness of flesh and blood and feeling” (Scott-James 122). Such comments are consistent with representations of Italy dating back to the Enlightenment that see it as a primitive space within Europe. More recently, Lauren M. E. Goodlad notes that “it has become commonplace to think of E. M. Forster as a writer who depicted national difference, the pull of foreign parts, as a metaphor for queer sexual desire” (307). Margaret Goscilo, for example, argues that Forster represents Italy as a “midwife of selfhood” for its British visitors (203), thereby “cod[ing] foreignness, and particularly Italianness, to include the tabooed ‘Otherness’ of homosexuality... that he tackles directly in Maurice” (193). The best of this criticism theorizes the disruptively queering effects of contact between Britain and Italy, but occasionally critics lose sight of Forster’s preoccupation with failure and envision a less problematic international encounter. For instance, Barbara Rosecrance sums up A Room with a View’s Italian plot as a “straightforward plea for sexuality and self-knowledge” (85), and in an essay on “Hellenism and the Lure of Italy” Ann Ardis links Forster’s valorization of the body to his “characterisation of travel to southern Europe as a means of learning how ‘to live,’ and the value he places on ‘getting lost’” (72). In these and similar readings, characters must escape from the narrowness and sterility of suburban England in order to embrace the natural embodiedness of Italy and they must leave behind the superficiality of the tourist in favor of the true understanding of the traveler.  

\[\text{56}\text{ For arguments about the relationship between representations of Italy and Orientalism, see Dainotto 52-86, Moe 13-36, and Reynolds 75-84.}\]
\[\text{57}\text{ The touchstone for interpretations of Forster and tourism is James Buzard’s The Beaten Track, which adopts a Bourdieuan frame and argues that the traveler and the tourist are two sides of the same coin. In order to maintain the fiction of unique, and therefore authentic, intercultural experience, the traveler has}\]
In such optimistically flattened readings of Forsterian Anglo-Italian contact, critics inadvertently echo the advice of Philip Herriton and Miss Lavish, two of Forster’s most relentlessly satirized characters. Philip’s advice to Lilia in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* that “it is only by going off the track that you get to know the country” leads her into a disastrous marriage with the son of an Italian dentist and her death in childbirth (3). And the declarations of the self-styled free spirit Miss Lavish in *A Room with a View* that she will “emancipate [Lucy] from Baedeker” so that she may experience the “true Italy” (18) are soon revealed as the posturing of a fool. In contrast to these naive pronouncements, Forster’s novels express a more ambivalent attitude towards the risks and pleasures of going off the beaten track in Italy. Whatever success characters experience depends upon their ability to occupy some middle ground between the opposed figures of the homebody and the exile, between Charlotte Bartlett and Lilia Herriton. Because of the unpredictability of the international encounter, the characters that Forster most valorizes are those who are most aware of their status as outsiders, and who therefore maintain a certain respectful distance. Although the figure of the tourist has certain well-rehearsed limitations, Forster will often use the figure of the guest to mediate between the extremes of tourist and resident.

In this chapter I argue that, far from representing a full embrace of nature, the body, and Italian cultural alterity, Forster’s Italian novels demonstrate a marked ambivalence toward the possibility that contact with Italy can spark successful personal and social transformations. In doing so, I follow critics from Lionel Trilling to Lauren Goodlad who have been attentive to the complex dynamics of international encounters that often fail to produce the outcomes that characters desire. Trilling observes of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* that “The invigoration of the

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to invent his abject double, the tourist, whose ignorance and lack of originality supposedly disqualified him (or, especially, her) from authentic cultural experience. See Buzard, *Beaten* 80-97.
book comes from two ideas meeting and one of them being modified. Nothing important has been changed, but in the struggle things have assumed their right names and true meanings” (75). Likewise, Goodlad argues that “the emotive and sexual charge of difference ignites the experience of crossing borders, producing international encounters that are as volatile and unpredictable as they are ethically enlivening” (311). Forster may be famous for celebrating the ability of people from different backgrounds to connect with one another, especially in Where Angels Fear to Tread, but he also expressed considerable skepticism about the ethical or political usefulness of these encounters. These moments of intimacy between people of different nations may be illuminating, but characters seldom agree on their meanings, whether what is at stake is as simple as an instance of unexpected hospitality or as charged as reciprocated sexual desire.

This ambivalence towards Italy becomes especially clear in the series of views that structure the novels, in which characters come face to face with some representation of Italy and attempt to make sense of it and their desires for it. During moments in which vision is arrested on significant objects and landscapes, realism turns to romance. As opposed to realism’s objective descriptions, in romance the line between psychological interiority and objective exteriority break down. Space becomes expressive of emotion and desire, and the objects that are looked upon become suffused with powerful meanings that reorient characters’ desires and values. As Jameson observes in The Political Unconscious, in romance characters become “registering apparatus[es] for transformed states of being, sudden alterations of temperature, mysterious heightenings, local intensities, sudden drops in quality, and alarming effluvia” (112).

My emphasis on the motif of the “view” is inspired both by Forster’s title and by Goodlad’s essay on Where Angels Fear to Tread, which argues that Forster’s emphasis on an ethics of embodied care is balanced by his emphasis on what she calls “view,” “a broad-minded
but particularizing attention to otherness... sparking ethical revision” (321). However, I’m also interested in those scenes in which views express desire rather than mutual respect. For every instance like the one in which Caroline Abbot gazes on Gino’s baby and comprehends its glorious independence, there are many others like the one in which Lilia gazes on Gino and determines to make him hers. In other words, the view that recognizes and acknowledges is often difficult to distinguish from the gaze that objectifies. Views are often as much about desire and fantasy as they are about recognition, and views that recognize the independent reality of the other are often awakenings to the unintelligibility or opacity of such alterity. Even in Caroline’s exemplary recognition of the baby, she is moved by the bond between father and son, but, as Forster tells us, she “could not comprehend it” (134). Especially when the view is marked by desire, characters’ experiences of space become romantic—that is, it becomes expressive of psychological states and manifests desires. My aim is to make explicit the distinction between the ethical view that Goodlad identifies (the view that recognizes the alterity of the other) and the aesthetic or erotic view (the view that desires the alterity of the other) that play off one another in these novels. The view that desires sets events in motion, but the view that recognizes calls into question the often naive or self-serving assumptions on which such desires are based. The frequency with which Forster frustrates his characters’ assumptions about Italy and the plans that they give rise to suggests both a greater degree of self-consciousness about his constructions of Italy and a greater degree of ambivalence about its ability—as representative of all things natural, embodied, and passionate—to deliver characters from the limitations of Englishness.

The rock on which Forster’s fantasies of reconciling desire and recognition continually founder is the attempt to overcome the national and class differences on which desire depends. Like Symonds, Forster often attempts to combine the fiction of Whitmanesque democratic
equality with the eroticization of difference, but this self-serving contradiction makes for
unresolvable psychological conflicts. As Christopher Lane argues, Forster’s fantasy of
“homophilia,” in which “one man claims to find his other unthreatening because he represents
the other’s difference as the basis of their attachment,” is incompatible with his fantasy of
“homosexuality,” in which “the other’s difference” is represented “as violently at odds with the
friendship that homophilia dictates” (*Ruling* 165). The proximity and equality that sustained
relationships seem to require also, as Goodlad makes clear, “threaten to eradicate the compelling
strangeness on which Forsterian encounters depend” (326). Although the claim that Forster’s
desire for the *frisson* of difference and inequality was at odds with his valorization of the
equalitarian “social passion” that Lane identifies (“Forsterian” 105), I’m especially interested in
how the relationship between the desire and recognition of (perhaps unbridgeable) difference
changes and develops over the course of the novel. Whereas desire in Forster pushes closer to
the other while insisting that the other remain strange, recognition steps back from the
appropriation of the other in order to establish some fragile measure of mutuality.

**The Dialectic of Romance and Realism**

The tension in these novels, especially in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, between view as
desire and view as the recognition of difference is also for Forster a tension between the genres
of romance and realism, or—to be more precise—between the outright “fantasy” of his early
short fiction (Forster, *Machine* xv) and what David Medalie calls the “romantic realism” of his
novels. According to David Medalie, in Forster’s fiction “the realistic elements are interwoven
with romantic components, constituting an example of a familiar Edwardian fictional hybrid—
‘romantic realism’” (64). The early stories conform to the hallmarks of romance, which
Northrop Frye describes as “the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream” (Frye 186, 193). They take the wishes and projections of their characters seriously and give them the status of a higher order that can transcend the fallen world in which characters find themselves. In the hybrid genre of the novels, however, the optimism of the romance is challenged and reconfigured by the mundane. Characters realize that their first impressions were false and try to come to a new understanding that will do justice to what the novel considers to be a genuine romance.

In order to understand the way that romantic views function to disorient characters and disrupt the flow of narrative, it is useful to examine Forster’s own discussion of the elements of romance in *The Aspects of the Novel* (1927) under the headings of “Fantasy” and “Prophecy.” Whereas fantasy “implies the supernatural, but need not express it” (112), prophecy invokes “whatever transcends our abilities” (110), whether that includes the world’s great religions “or the mere raising of human love and hatred to such a power that their normal receptacles no longer contain them” (126). As Lane remarks in his essay on Forster’s homoerotic posthumous fiction, “What comes out of Forster’s account of fantasy are the qualities that realism resists, cannot explore, and consigns to the responsibility of ‘another world’” (*Ruling* 155). This sense of psychological intensity that cannot be contained within the minds of characters, but which spills out to color the landscape, is common in Forster’s fiction, and in spilling out it often takes the reader by surprise, as if it were somehow in excess of what the circumstances would seem to justify.

Forster himself acknowledged that prophecy in a novel is likely to disrupt “the furniture of common sense” (125), and part of the reason that such moments of romance often seem at
odds with the realistic surface that they interrupt is their implicit homoeroticism. A. A. Markley argues that Forster’s romantic tableaux interrupt a putatively heterosexual narrative by reconfiguring the heterosexual male gaze (as theorized by Jacques Lacan and Laura Mulvey) into a homosexual male gaze “in which the male body is the central focal point” (268). In reconfiguring this gaze, “Forster invented a kind of narration that powerfully expresses male homoerotic desire while shrewdly maintaining the veneer of heterosexual conventionality” (268).

Because Forster could not directly express this homoerotic desire in his published fiction, these tableaux often seem to take on a significance beyond what the immediate circumstances in the narrative justify. As they gesture beyond the representable, they take on the intensity of romance, and characters experience powerful if often ambiguous epiphanies. The suppressed homoerotic content may explain the reactions of Forster’s contemporaries, such as Woolf, who noticed Forster’s penchant for “imprison[ing]” beauty “in brick and mortar,” and R. A. Scott-James, who complained that Forster “insists on assuming... that Early Victorian rules of propriety are the rules of today, and he flagellates these extinct, or, at least, dying, moral mannerisms with caustic, but belated, satire” (121). It could be that Forster is not mistakenly imagining that out-dated conventions are still in effect, but registering the force of social restrictions that he cannot fully represent. These views or tableaux are thus central to the narratives in which they appear, but they also gesture towards something beyond the texts’ realist

58 In a retrospective of Forster’s fiction from the same year as Aspects of the Novel, Virginia Woolf also addressed the conflict between Forster’s realistic surface and his impulses toward lyric poetry. She complains that he continually represents beauty as “imprisoned in a fortress of brick and mortar whence he must extricate her. Hence he is always constrained to build the cage—society in all its intricacy and triviality—before he can free the prisoner” (26). Thus, “if his books are to succeed in their mission his reality must at certain points become irradiated; his brick must be lit up; we must see the whole building saturated with light” (27). However, Woolf writes that “it is in these great scenes... that we are most aware of failure... He fails, one is tempted to think, chiefly because that admirable gift of his for observation has served him too well... What does this mean? we ask ourselves. And the hesitation is fatal. For we doubt both things—the real and the symbolical” (28).
surface, and their implicit homoerotic content may partially explain why Forster so often retreats from these epiphanies.

The clearest example of Forster’s early style of romance, in which Italy fulfills the desires that it evokes, is his first published story, “The Story of a Panic” (1904), and it is also the purest expression of the idea that an escape to Italian nature is the antidote to an oppressive English culture. The crucial encounter between north and south occurs during an outing of English tourists to the hills outside Ravello when Eustace, a sullen English boy traveling with his aunts, has a mysterious and homoerotic encounter with Pan and afterwards develops what some of his fellow tourists see as an improper friendship with a young Italian waiter.59 Pale and narrow-chested before, he becomes spirited and poetic after communing with Italian nature, and the only way for him to overcome the influence of the almost universally unsympathetic English characters is to run away into the woods. This story posits two ‘truths’ about Italy that are rarely presented so unambivalently in Forster’s later fiction: first, it is a pre-modern haven for nature and the body that satisfies all desires; second, it is a place to which at least some English can successfully escape and take up residence.

Forster’s novels, however, vacillate between the temptations of romance and a more realistic style, and the results of erotic awakenings in Italian spaces are often mixed rather than purely exuberant. The novels represent Forster’s attempts to question the early stories’ escapism and their untroubled assumptions about what Italy represents, while also endeavoring to do justice to the psychological intensity that a too-flat realism might neglect. The rather more compromised conditions in which romance exists in the novels is suggested when, during a

59 Although Forster claims to have been oblivious to the story’s homoerotic content when he wrote it, it was not lost on his Cambridge friends John Maynard Keynes and Charles Sayle, whose summary of the story was that “Eustace commits bestiality with a goat... In the subsequent chapters, he tells the waiter how nice it has been and they try to bugger each other” (Moffat 62).
similar outing to the hills around Florence in *A Room with a View*, Forster writes that “Pan had been amongst them—not the great god Pan, who has been buried these two thousand years, but the little god Pan, who presides over social contretemps and unsuccessful picnics” (79). In these “romantic realist” texts, the idealistic desires of romance are frustrated and ironized by realism, but in turn, realism is also disrupted by romance’s claims to the mysterious, the inexpressible, and the queer. The relationship between these two modes is typified by the scene in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in which Philip learns that Lilia has fallen in love with the son of an Italian dentist:

A dentist in fairy land! False teeth and laughing gas and the tilting chair at a place which knew the Etruscan League, and the Pax Romana, and Alaric himself, and the Countess Matilda, and the Middle Ages, all fighting and holiness, and the Renaissance, all fighting and beauty! He thought of Lilia no longer. He was anxious for himself: he feared that Romance might die. (26)

In this passage, the appeal of “Romance” is acknowledged but treated ironically. For Philip, the quotidian details of the dentist’s accoutrements are at odds with the idealized notion of Italy that he has built up, in which the march of history is pleasingly collapsed into a panorama stretching from ancient times to the Renaissance. Although these two periods are separated by over 2,000 years, for Philip they are equally “past” in comparison to the intolerable modernity of the dentist’s chair. For Philip, the distinguishing feature of “Romance” is a fragile purity that is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness.

Happily, at this point the narrator intervenes to set the reader straight. Despite Philip’s fears, Forster insists that “Romance only dies with life. No pair of pincers will ever pull it out of us. But there is a spurious sentiment which cannot resist the unexpected and the incongruous and
the grotesque. A touch will loosen it, and the sooner it goes from us the better” (26). For Forster, there is a “real” romance that persists in spite of frustration and disappointment. In contrast to Philip’s fairy-tale sentiment, which seeks only the harmonious and the expected, this modern, revised romance instead prizes novelty and the unexpected. It is this romance that Philip rediscovers when he makes his second return to Italy. Beaten down by the journey and annoyed by the interference of his mother and sister, he has a new visual experience of Italy in which romance persists: “there was enchantment... solid enchantment, which lay behind the porters and the screaming and the dust. He could see it in the terrific blue sky beneath which they travelled, in the whitened plain that gripped life tighter than a frost, in the exhausted reaches of the Arno, [and] in the ruins of brown castles which stood quivering upon the hills” because “nothing—not even the discomfort—was commonplace” (95). Now a more sophisticated consumer of the romantic and the picturesque, Philip recognizes beauty because of its limitedness and failure. Enchantment is all the more important because it is partially obscured by “the screaming and the dust,” and the features that are singled out in this passage are representative of exhaustion and death, the manifestations of drought and the destructive passage of time. Despite recognizing both travel and the landscape as fallen, he is sustained by the romance of alterity. This attempt to balance Philip’s first naive view of Italy as “fairy land” with a later view that recognizes dirt and decay is typical of Forster’s balancing of romance and realism. The first view seems to be negated by the second, but Forster also seeks to harmonize the two, finding an “enchantment” in disappointment and limitation. In this sense, enchantment is the wheat that survives in diminished form when the spurious chaff of false romance has been eliminated.

This enchanting view of the “ruin[ed]” and “exhausted” landscape takes Philip out of himself, surprising him with what he had not expected to see. This more “realistic” romantic
view that is associated with the imagery of mortality and decay is echoed by a later view, which
interrupts a conversation between Philip and Caroline. The two are in the hotel at Monteriano,
formulating plans for the next day, when they will attempt to adopt Gino’s baby so that it can be
raised in England. In the middle of this discussion, Caroline calls Philip to the window to admire
the view of one of the cities many towers (111). This remarkable passage initially appears to be
nothing more than a very strange interruption, but it theorizes how the act of looking is subject to
violent disruptions that disorient the viewer and draw him into anachronistic and homoerotic
imaginings. After beginning with a description, the passage shifts abruptly, and quite
inexplicably, to the second person, and rattles off a string of names and events that seem to refer
to a fourteenth-century battle. It transports the reader back in time, and marks the violent
intrusion of romance into an otherwise realist scene. The interruption ends as suddenly as it
begins and no reference is made to it afterwards. Although the passage is rarely if ever discussed
by critics, I’d like to argue for its importance, both for its odd singularity and for what it says
about the importance of the motif of the view in the novel. Philip asks suggestively if the tower
is “to be a symbol of the town,” and since Monteriano was the working title of the novel there is
reason to think that the passage may be trying to tell us something about the novel itself.60 I
quote the paragraph in full:

She removed a pile of plates from the Gothic window, and they leant out of it.
Close opposite, wedged between mean houses, there rose up one of the great
towers. It is your tower: you stretch a barricade between it and the hotel, and the
traffic is blocked in a moment. Farther up, where the street empties out by the
church, your connections, the Merli and the Capocchi, do likewise. They
command the Piazza, you the Siena gate. No one can move in either but he shall

60 See Rosenbaum for a “literary history” of Where Angels Fear to Tread.
be instantly slain, either by bows or by crossbows, or by Greek fire. Beware, however, of the back bedroom windows. For they are menaced by the tower of the Aldobrandeschi, and before now arrows have struck quivering on the washstand. Guard these windows well, lest there be a repetition of the events of February 1338, when the hotel was surprised from the rear, and your dearest friend—you could just make out that it was he—was thrown at you over the stairs. (111)

Besides disorienting the reader, what purpose does this passage serve, and who is the “you” to whom it addresses itself? One answer might be that it is the reader herself, who is momentarily drawn into the scene in an unexpected way. On the other hand, given that Philip is the only character likely to have such knowledge of Italian history, it might be that he is the one imagining this sequence of events. From the fact that the “you” takes part in the battle, we can at least assume that it is male. Whatever the case, the passage seems to sum up in miniature the odd effects that views so often produce in Forster’s fiction: one moment one is carefully observing a scene, and the next one is taken out of oneself, perhaps disoriented or facing a different direction. The break between the expected description of Philip and Caroline’s view and the description of the battle is signaled by an assertion of ownership: “It is your tower,” we are told, and the very next moment “you” has managed to cut off all traffic between himself and the viewed object, so that he can claim not only the hotel and the tower, but also all the space in between. This ownership of the view recalls Mary Louise Pratt’s memorable description of the imperial gaze that so many Victorian explorers adopted as “the monarch of all I survey” (201), and casts the Herritons’ confident plans of “rescuing” the baby in a quasi-imperial light. However, in this scene the sense of dominion is undermined by the possibility of being “surprised from the rear.” The passage suddenly transports “you” to the middle ages, as if Italian
spaces created disorienting slippages in time. Within this already temporally-awkward stray memory, “you” is asked to remember the death of “your dearest friend,” whose dead body is violently “thrown at you over the stairs.” Not only is the suddenly vulnerable observer being attacked, the attack entails the loss of a male friend, whose body is now a weapon. The passage describes the transition from an imperial gaze that believes that it owns whatever it looks upon—and therefore has the power to change it as if by magic—to a much more embattled standpoint that is conscious of surprise threats and unexpected perspectives. In making the transition from realism to romance and security to vulnerability, the passage terminates in the evocation of a homoerotic bond that can only be acknowledged in the instant in which it is both unexpectedly lost and unexpectedly threatening.

The Dialectic of Desire and Recognition

Whereas *A Room with a View*’s comedic structure presupposes a happy ending for its characters, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* insists on frustration and doubt. Italy’s supposedly primitive society, which integrates nature and the body, initially appears as a solution to the problems of a modern British anti-culture that is hostile to individuality and pleasure, but characters find that Italy, in its difference, resists the attempt to appropriate it in the service of British self-development. Paradoxically, Forster’s Britain is represented as both pathologically modern and pathologically static, making it a negative mirror image of the supposed backwardness of Italy. Since Britain is seemingly unable to reflect on itself, and therefore cannot change or grow, it remains stuck in what Caroline Abbot would call the “groove” of its own oppressive culture (76). The principal enforcer and guardian of this groove is the calculating matriarch Mrs. Herriton, who enforces the status quo in order to maintain her own
power. As opposed to the young people around her, who want to remake the world, “Mrs. Herriton did not believe in romance nor in transfiguration, nor in parallels from history, nor in anything else that may disturb domestic life” (8). Neither desire nor art nor anything else can be allowed to upset the self-enclosed and self-perpetuating system over which she presides. The outcome of her domestic rule is her rigidly Protestant daughter, Harriet Herriton, whose near-identical first and last names suggest a person who is too much all of a piece, even for the taste of Mrs. Herriton, who wonders if “Harriet’s education had been almost too successful” (13). This somewhat misogynistic blaming of Edwardian Britain’s ills on the excessive power of its women is opposed to the novel’s representation of Italy’s patriarchy, where male freedom in male-dominated public spaces—“the democracy of the caffè”—comes at “the expense of the sisterhood of women” (46). This is not a trivial cost for Forster, but in Italy at least one half of the population is allowed to be happy and free.

From Philip’s first tour of Italy to the Herritons’ second rescue mission, Italy continually appears as a force that promises to enliven, supplement, or remake a deficient Britishness. As Britain’s southern other, Italy seems to be a land of contingency and freedom where desire can have its way. Philip’s first tour may ultimately do nothing more than augment his snobbery, but the experience of beauty in Italy gives him the hope that his rather unhappy life could be different, and “he came back with the air of a prophet who would either remodel Sawston or reject it” (69). Lilia hopes that by going to Italy she will be able to escape, at least for a time, from the oppressive supervision of her in-laws, and when she meets Gino posed against a wall, she dreams of escaping it altogether. Even Caroline hopes that her visit to Italy—“once, and once only”—as Lilia’s chaperone will make an interesting counterpoint to her otherwise
uneventful life, and Lilia’s marriage seems to her like a way of transcending society’s limitations, if only vicariously (21).

As we learn, however, these hopes are destined for brutal disappointment. By the time the novel opens, Philip has already settled back into his characteristically self-satisfied cynicism, and Lilia’s trip ends in a disastrous marriage and her death in childbirth. The marriage is also an ironic comeuppance for Mrs. Herriton who, treating Italy as a convenient place to send inconvenient people, hopes that getting Lilia out of the country will head off what she considers an improper second marriage with a “chinless curate” (7), and for Philip, who hopes that Italy will improve Lilia’s taste and manners. Even more importantly, however, Philip comes to the conclusion that “Italy, the land of beauty, was ruined for him” since it “had no power to change men and things who dwelt in her” (69). Caroline comes to a similarly fatalistic view of society. She explains to Philip later that “I didn’t see that all these things are invincible, and if we go against them they will break us to pieces” (77), and she comes to blame herself for leading Lilia into such an ill-planned rebellion.

The novel, then, is structured by a trajectory from hope to disappointment, and these two extremes are often signaled by moments of looking. In the moment of hope, characters see the object of their desires in a romantic landscape, and they are led to believe that they can transform their lives and their relationship to society. In the moment of disappointment, they have an epiphany in which they recognize that the difference that they once desired is more intractable than they thought and that the possibility of desiring differently is impossible to live out successfully. When Lilia arrives in Italy, she adopts the touristic vocabulary that Philip and her guidebooks have trained her to use. From Monteriano, she writes that “one really does feel in the heart of things, and off the beaten track. Looking out of a Gothic window every morning, it
seems impossible that the middle ages have passed away” (10). This description, which highlights the faculty of sight as a guarantor of Italy’s authenticity, echoes the advice that Philip gives her at the beginning of the novel that “it is only by going off the track that you get to know the country... And don’t, let me beg you, go with that awful tourist idea that Italy’s only a museum of antiquities and art. Love and understand the Italians, for the people are more marvellous than the land” (3-4). In its reference to the middle ages, it also prefigures in a safely touristic form the anachronistic view from the tower that Philip and Caroline will experience later in the novel. According to Lilia’s letter, she has already achieved the first goal of getting off the beaten track in order to experience a real Italy supposedly outside the regimes of tourism, but it is the second goal, to “Love and understand the Italians,” and therefore to give up the distanced role of the touristic observer by becoming a participant, that will get her in trouble.

Just as the plot of *A Room with a View* turns on Lucy’s desiring view of George amid the violets, the plot of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* turns on Lilia’s view of Gino on the wall. According to Caroline, “The first evening we got to Monteriano... Lilia went out for a walk alone, saw that Italian in a picturesque position on a wall, and fell in love” (74). Caroline’s description confirms the power of sight in Lilia’s decision to abandon her marginal status in the Herriton household in favor of marriage in Italy. Gino is not merely handsome, but also “picturesque,” an adjective that implies a certain harmony between the man viewed and the landscape that is his background. According to Buzard, the picturesque is typified by “the epiphanic moment in which the unified aesthetic essence of the place shines forth,” or the *genius loci* is embodied in “a scene, balanced and complete” (*Beaten* 188); and, as Nelson Moe explains, “the valorization of nature and classical ruins that characterizes the picturesque in the late eighteenth century” expanded by the middle of the nineteenth century to include “the
valorization of natural man,” or the people who live in such places (66). As in romance, the landscape is more than mere spatial extension and becomes psychologically and symbolically powerful. Lilia’s memory confirms this unity of body and place in her view of Gino: “She remembered how the evening sun had struck his hair, and how he had smiled down at her, and being both sentimental and unrefined, was determined to have the man and the place together” (40). Lilia recalls the experience as a framed and aesthetically coherent view that affirms her pre-existing notions of the place. Having discovered what she set out to find, she is the perfect tourist. But Lilia exceeds the role of the tourist, who is content to look and pass on, by determining to possess the object of desire. Unpracticed in this new role, she fails to respect the implied boundaries between looking, loving, and acting that are obvious to someone like Philip. To be sentimental is expected for the tourist, but to be so unrefined as to give up one’s protective distance makes one a resident, and this new role produces unexpected difficulties.

Lilia’s desiring view of Gino set against the Italian landscape is countered by a later view of the same landscape that sums up her disappointment. Instead of escaping from all of the Herritons’ restrictions—in a word, from “culture”—by taking up residence in a place of nature and beauty that has been constituted for the pleasure of the foreign visitor, she finds herself in another culture with its own set of rules. Her inability to either overcome or accept these rules as her own is indicated by the position of the house that she shares with Gino. Although it is outside the city walls and “faced away from” the town (61), thus signaling her lack of connection with Italian culture, she is not free of its restrictions. She attempts to negotiate the limitations that she faces in distinctly spatial terms by getting out of the house and taking walks. During

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61 In his nuanced and illuminating reading, Jonah Siegel explains the marriage’s failure in similar terms of “the banality of living with one’s object of desire” and writes that “the concrete passions” of Lilia and Caroline shock Philip because “they refuse to recognize longing as itself a pleasure of the imagination” (197-8). However, Siegel’s psychoanalytic reading largely ignores how the doubly problematic nature of the (homo-)eroticized Italian male as object of desire makes that desire’s satisfaction so difficult.
these walks, she begins to see Italy in a new way that reflects her estrangement. If she leaves the “strange house” in which she is forced to spend most of her time, there is only the “strange little town” and the surrounding countryside, which is “stranger still.” Most strange of all is that “there was scarcely a touch of wildness in it—some of those slopes had been under cultivation for two thousand years” (56). That is, what she finds isn’t “nature,” or pure potentiality waiting to be molded to her desires, but an entrenched culture with no intention of changing for her. In this moment of disenchantment, she realizes that her desires produced unsustainable fantasies about Italy and recognizes its apparently unbridgeable difference. This newly realistic view that she takes of the Italian landscape and of her relation to it produces a recognition of alterity that has its own kind of romance. Though unexpected and disappointing, the landscape “was terrible and mysterious all the same” (56). It is no longer what she set out to find, but is instead incomprehensibly foreign, both a disappointment and a revelation.

In another moment of desperation, she compares her present solitude with her life in Sawston, where “People would be running in and out of each other’s houses all along the road,” and she decides to go for yet another walk (61). Since Lilia is afraid to be seen leaving the house by their Italian servant, she climbs “the stairs up to the attic—the stairs no one ever used” where she “might slip out on to the square terrace above the house, and thus for ten minutes walk in freedom and peace” (61). Tellingly, the key to this door is kept “in the pocket of Gino’s best suit—the English check—which he never wore” (62). At this point, England rather than Italy is the sign of freedom. She spots a diligence leaving the city by “the Siena gate, from which the road to England started” (62), and attempts to escape in that geographically significant direction, but the land itself, cultivated by centuries of agriculture, prevents her. She “stumbl[ed] over the great clods of earth, large and hard as rocks, which lay between the eternal olives” (63). Lilia is
thus doubly exiled, cut off from the English relatives she has purposely alienated and unable to join the local Italian society whose language she does not speak. As far as the novel is concerned, Lilia’s brand of cultural synthesis is impossible, and there is nothing left for her to do but die in childbirth. Her attempt to escape from the Herritons and become an active participant in her own life has failed; instead of an intensification of the pleasure and mobility of tourism, she becomes a prisoner. This attempted return to England foreshadows the moves that Forster will make in his later Edwardian novels like *A Room with a View* and *Maurice*, in which erotic fulfillment with men is only possible when it is transposed to England. Given the failure of Lilia’s naive attempt to escape to Italy, the rest of the novel will seek out a more nuanced and ambivalent approach. Philip and Caroline will continue to experience desire and recognition in terms of views that disorient and reorient them, but, having learned from Lilia’s mistakes, they will refuse to take the step from viewing and desiring to acting and taking possession.

**Interrupting Views, Interrupted Dialectics**

The previous section of this chapter interpreted Lilia’s experience of hope and disappointment in terms of space and vision. In the following section, I examine what happens in the novel when disillusionment has already set in. One response is to cut one’s losses, to give up on whatever hopes had previously gone under the name of “Italy” and to reconcile oneself to life in England. Philip and Caroline both seem to resign themselves to this option, and Mrs. Herriton shows a similar willingness to wash her hands of Italy. Even when the baby’s existence becomes publicly known, she affects a nonchalance at odds with her controlling temperament. As she says to Caroline, “We never even mention it. It belongs to another world” (83). Only when Caroline threatens to make the child her own concern does Mrs. Herriton reassert her
authority and send Philip and Harriet to retrieve it, thus bringing the two countries brought back into a dynamic relationship. Caroline, Philip, and Harriet all return to Italy in order to bring the baby back to England, where they will presumably scrub it of its Italianness. Although Philip does as his mother says without believing in the mission, Caroline and Harriet are sincere in their moral purpose.

Romantic views will continue to be important in this section, but here they will tend to shock a character into the clarity of observation rather than the fantasy of desire. As such they are more likely to interrupt an intended course of action than to precipitate one. Having gotten past the first stage of hope, Philip and Caroline have for the most part slid back into negative fantasies. Philip feels that Italy “had no power to change men and things who dwelt in her” (69), and after Caroline blames herself for Lilia’s death, Italy transforms in her imagination from a place of sincerity and desire to “a magic city of vice beneath whose towers no person could grow up happy or pure” (86). Their next step in the narrative will be to balance desire with recognition and to recover some sense of the romance of “real” alterity that is not merely a reflection of their desires (although it may turn out to be a reflection of Forster’s desires). However, as we have seen in Philip’s intuition of enchantment in the “screaming and the dust” and in the anachronistic tower scene, such moments reveal the susceptibility of the observer to disorientation and the impossibility of drawing a bright line between observing and acting.

Caroline, Philip, and Harriet return to Italy in order to retrieve the baby, but they often find that their touristic impulses to look are at odds with their quasi-imperial mission. Since Caroline has decided to play the role of “spy” on Philip and Harriet rather than becoming an actor in her own right (106), she has nothing to do but wait when she discovers that she has arrived in Monteriano a day ahead of the other two. Without anyone to spy on, she decides to
take in a view of the city from the Rocca—a significant location because its mention in Baedeker is made to stand in for Philip’s own early, and rather escapist, love of Italy. As we are told early on, Philip understands the “hidden charms of Baedeker,” and “could never read ‘The view from the Rocca (small gratuity) is finest at sunset’ without a catching at the heart” (16-17). Caroline’s outing represents a pleasurable break before the hard business of negotiating with Gino about the child, or perhaps even an attempt to recover some earlier and less troubled relationship to Italy, when she could look on it as a beautiful spectacle. However, in this case Caroline’s touristic view leads her into unexpected contact with the locals when she is surprised to discover that Gino is already on the Rocca, relaxing in a friend’s garden. The next day, she explains to Philip that “It was very awkward for me. But I had to talk: he seemed to make me. You see he thought I was here as a tourist; he thinks so still. He intended to be civil, and I judged it better to be civil also” (108). Gino takes appearances for reality, and since Caroline is behaving as a tourist he welcomes her as one. In being welcomed, she must recognize Gino’s priority as the one who welcomes her. She is productively de-centered, changed at least momentarily from an invading district visitor to a guest.

A second pleasure outing produces a similar disruption of plans when the role of the spectator turns out to be more volatile than previously thought. When the three go to see a performance of Lucia di Lammermoor, they are discomfited by the permeability of spectacle and audience in an Italian opera house and become involved in the local matters that they had planned to put off until the next day. By coming to the opera in the first place, they admit a compromise in their mission and allow art to interrupt duty; both Caroline and Harriet are “a little shamefaced” that “this strenuous day of resolutions, plans, alarms, battles, victories,

62 Discuss Goodlad and her use of “the view from the Rocca” to stand in for an ethical attentiveness to otherness. Instead it seems to be a kind of touristic
defeats, [and] truces, ended at the opera” (114-115). More to the point, the opera creates a space in which the audience becomes part of the spectacle. The interior of the theater is done up in garish style, and the audience seems to have come just as much to look at one another as to watch the opera. Moreover, they continually break the fourth wall, as when they greet Lucia’s entrance on stage by welcoming her to Monteriano. Harriet is predictably scandalized, but Caroline and Philip manage to “convince each other that Romance was here” (116). The atmosphere invites them to give up their outsider status and to take the social rules of the provincial Italian opera for their own, at least temporarily, and to find beauty in it. Their unexpected meeting with Gino reiterates that the observer is not separate from the scene that he or she observes, but may at any moment be drawn into it. When Philip hands up a stray bouquet to Gino’s box, he is surprised to find that “his own hands were seized affectionately” (119) and “Amiable youths bent out of the box and invited him to enter it” (120). Once he is pulled into the box, he is torn between feeling “horror at the muddle he had made” and feeling “enchanted” by “the light caress of the arm across his back” (120). Like Symonds climbing the bell tower, Philip here is simultaneously invited to feel “at home” and also to feel like a privileged outsider. Gino welcomes him as “A relative! A brother!” and also receives him as an honored guest. Nevertheless, this act of welcoming disorients Philip, just as it did previously to Caroline, and makes it more difficult for him to carry out his mother’s wishes with any degree of sincerity. As he explains when he returns to the hotel, “I got taken by surprise” (121), and this susceptibility means that he has begun to form ties of desire and friendship without intending to.

If this first day’s events begin to pull the group’s mission off course, then the next day’s finish the job. Caroline’s visit to Gino sets off a series of views in which Caroline, Gino, and Philip all experience a change of heart when looking at the others. Caroline sees Gino and the
baby separately and then together, then Gino sees Caroline with the baby, and finally Philip sees Gino and Caroline with the baby. For Caroline, watching Gino with the baby marks the point at which she gives up any intention of separating father and son, but according to her it is also the moment when she begins to fall in love with him. When she confesses her love for Gino at the end of the novel, she explains to Philip that she and Gino have nothing in common “except the times we have seen each other,” and the visit to Gino’s home is what “began it, as far as I know the beginning. Or it may have begun when you took us to the theatre, and I saw him mixed up with music and light” (179).

For Caroline, the view that desires and the view that recognizes merge. She sets out “to do battle with the powers of evil” (125), but she is caught off guard in the famous scene in which she is confronted with the sight of the baby’s body: “The real thing, lying asleep on a dirty rug, disconcerted her. It did not stand for a principle any longer. It was so much flesh and blood, so many inches and ounces of life.” Despite all the plans that have been made for it, “now that she saw this baby, lying asleep on a dirty rug, she had a great disposition not to dictate one of them, and to exert no more influence than there may be in a kiss or in the vaguest of the heartfelt prayers” (127-128). After this recognition of the baby, she again turns an admiring glance toward Gino: “His face was in profile, and its beautiful contours drove artfully against the misty green of the opposing hills” (129). Finally, when she sees him kiss his son, she is overwhelmed: “The man was majestic; he was a part of Nature; in no ordinary love scene could he ever be so great” (136). Like Lilia, Caroline sees Italian culture primarily through the lens of nature. She sees it as primitive and limited, but also as “majestic” in its harmony with supposedly immortal natural rhythms. Also like Lilia, she comes to see Italy as not merely a blank slate on which to project desires or plans, but as an autonomous and self-contained culture. When she looks at the
baby, she imagines it as having a personal future: “in time it would not answer you unless it chose, but would secrete, within the compass of its body, thoughts and wonderful passions of its own” (128). Of course, an independent other can also be frightening, recalling the “mysterious and terrible” landscape that Lilia looks upon before she dies. Indeed, Caroline feels premonitions of this fearful alterity while she watches Gino, and for her it is symbolized by the remarkably durable ring of smoke that Gino blows in her direction: “the ring mesmerized her. It had become vast and elliptical, and floated in at the reception-room door... She lost self-control. It enveloped her. As if it was a breath from the pit, she screamed” (126). Her bizarre reaction to the smoke ring expresses the fear of, and the desire for, the autonomous other, and its evocation of hell both recalls Philip’s description of the tower as reaching “down to the other place” (111) and suggests Caroline’s shame over the desire for Gino that is beginning to overtake her.

This scene in Gino’s house is clearly meant to sort out Caroline’s tensions between desire, recognition, and action, but it is also an important turning point for Gino and Philip, who here take turns looking at Caroline with the baby. Although both are clearly fond of Caroline before this point, neither is ready to make a proposal of marriage. By the end of novel, however, Philip is on the brink of proposing to Caroline when she confesses her love for Gino. Ironically, it is Gino who convinces Philip that he should propose and who, we are led to believe, might have done so himself had he not already been engaged. Caroline’s power over the two men begins with the bathing scene and the quasi-religious tableau that follows. Given Philip’s erotic interest in male bodies, his desire for Caroline is not very credible (137). But the novel is clearly trying to use the tableau to say something that it cannot quite put into words. When Gino and Caroline are finished washing the baby, he poses them together:

63 For Sedgwickian readings of this triangle of desire, see Goscilo and Bristow.
He put a chair for her on the loggia, which faced westward, and was still pleasant and cool. There she sat, with twenty miles of view behind her, and he placed the dripping baby on her knee. It shone now with health and beauty: it seemed to reflect light, like a copper vessel. Just such a baby Bellini sets languid on his mother’s lap, or Signorelli flings wriggling on pavements of marble, or Lorenzo di Credi, more reverent but less divine, lays carefully among flowers, with his head upon a wisp of golden straw. For a time Gino contemplated them standing. Then, to get a better view, he knelt by the side of the chair, with his hands clasped before him.

So they were when Philip entered, and saw, to all intents and purposes, the Virgin and Child, with Donor. (137-138)

In this scene, we have a series of views and tableaus that result in varying degrees of desire and recognition for each of the characters. For Caroline, the tableau of Gino and the baby represent a marvelous synthesis of nature and culture, and her recognition of this “authentic” alterity makes all her earlier plans impossible, but she cannot make the leap from desire to action the way Lilia did. For Gino, the tableau of Caroline with the baby represents something simpler: an understanding wife for him and a mother for his child. For Philip, the tableau takes on overtones from religion and art history, and he recognizes the composition that Gino has created unconsciously. Caroline falls in love with Gino, Gino falls in love with Caroline, and Philip falls in love with both.

And what of the baby’s role in this love triangle? He is, as always, wordless, but here he takes on a special significance. Even before the allusions to Italian painting, it is clear that Forster is reaching for another moment of romance, since one would not normally expect a baby
to “reflect light like a copper vessel,” even when freshly washed (137). This irradiation of the baby, who appears to shine but really reflects, points to its role in the novel as an empty signifier onto which various people project whatever they want. As the product of a marriage between an Italian man and an English woman, the baby could represent some kind of Anglo-Italian cultural synthesis à la *Aurora Leigh*, but this hope is dashed by Lilia’s death, to say nothing of its own. Mrs. Herriton would like to reclaim the baby as English, securely within her domestic reign, but Gino’s question, “Who would have believed his mother was blonde? For he is brown all over” (136), suggests that the baby takes after his father. Caroline’s recognition of the baby depends upon her insistence on the particularity of the baby’s living body, which for her negates and renders absurd all the various ways that people “exercise their ideals” on it (128). Just because the baby has been recognized as an independent material body, though, does not mean that it can no longer be a “principle” (128). Although Caroline reportedly “could not comprehend” the hope of continuity that the baby represents for Gino (134), Forster certainly has no difficulty romanticizing the notion of male fecundity through which “physical and spiritual life may stream out of him for ever”—especially when the man in question is a handsome Italian youth. With Forster’s blessing, Philip imposes another layer of psychological significance and sees the baby as a Christ figure in a Renaissance painting, a parallel that bolsters Caroline’s maternal importance and which will later be developed when the baby dies for the sins and disappointments of the adult characters.

The baby’s death also helps to explain why, in Forster’s fictional universe, contact between north and south cannot be allowed. The novel imagines England and Italy as two closed cultural systems that can only make direct contact at the risk of interrupting the principle of continuity that both hold dear. As the narrator comments regarding Lilia and Gino’s marriage,
“No one realized that more than personalities were engaged; that the struggle was national; that
generations of ancestors, good, bad, or indifferent, forbade the Latin man to be chivalrous to the
northern woman, the northern woman to forgive the Latin man” (64). The novel thus frames
their marriage, and the child that comes of it, as occasions for the battle between two opposed
cultures, the “northern” and the “Latin,” both of which have long histories that go on asserting
themselves into the present. The primary representatives of these two cultural systems are Gino
and Mrs. Herriton (rather than Lilia, “so similar to her husband in so many ways” [65]), whose
social rituals Lilia attempts to imitate and whose principal motivation is control over the
domestic sphere and all the control over mating and reproduction that it implies.

It would be difficult to think of two more different characters than Gino and Mrs.
Herriton, but both are particularly concerned with the theme of continuity, either in its corporeal
and instinctive aspects, as Gino is, or in its social and calculated aspects, as Mrs. Herriton is.
Gino’s defining characteristic is the “divine hope of immortality: ‘I continue,’” beside which
even sexual desire—or “falling in love,” as the novel has it—“was a mere physical triviality”
(66). This desire for continuation is described as “the desire that his son should be like him, and
should have sons like him, to people the earth” (134). When Lilia gives birth to a boy, he says of
it that “we shall be brothers” (67). In other words, he envisions continuity as reproduction of the
self-same, to the point that he collapses even the minimal difference of the father-son
relationship into the sameness of brother-brother, where equality is based on identity, and
therefore also on exclusion—most notably of women, but also of anyone that might come
between them. Neither Lilia’s motherly presence nor her tea parties can be allowed to mediate
relationships between men. Indeed, Lilia’s death in childbirth seems to suggest that Gino’s
ability to reproduce himself necessitates the death of his wife, just as Mrs. Herriton’s domestic
sovereignty and Lilia’s Italian adventures depend on the deaths of their husbands. Even after Lilia’s death, Gino refuses to let his family live with him because, as he puts it, “they would separate us” (133).

Mrs. Herriton likewise allows nothing to interfere with her domestic sovereignty, but the breach of national borders seems to destabilize household borders as well. The connection between cross-cultural contact and domestic instability is dramatized in the scene in which Mrs. Herriton and Harriet first hear news of Lilia’s engagement while sowing seeds in the garden. The interruption of this act of horticultural reproduction by a message from another culture also foreshadows the death of the baby at the end of the novel. Mother and daughter do their work dutifully: “They sowed the duller vegetables first, and a pleasant felling of righteous fatigue stole over them as they addressed themselves to the peas. Harriet stretched a string to guide the row straight, and Mrs. Herriton scratched a furrow with a pointed stick” (13). Into these well-made grooves, Mrs. Herriton appears certain of her control over this ritual of managed birth and growth: she “was very careful to let those peas trickle evenly from her hand, and at the end of the row she was conscious that she had never sown better” (13). But before the peas can be covered Lilia’s letter arrives; when Harriet first reads it, she says that “it doesn’t make sense” (14), and soon the family get so involved in strategizing that they forget about these future generations. When Mrs. Herriton returns to the garden that night, the birds have eaten the seeds, she finds “countless fragments of the letter ... disfiguring the tidy ground” instead of peas waiting patiently in their grooves (19). The letter takes the place of the peas, but its status as trash mocks the promise of futurity they represent. As opposed to Mrs. Herriton’s useful, orderly, and managed reproduction, the ripped up letter represents the baffling chaos of language.
The chapter in which the baby dies is the climax of this cross-cultural encounter with Italy, and it is likewise marked by the failure of communication. However, in this case the failure to make sense seems to gain tremendous significance. As with other scenes of romance in the novel, otherwise ordinary objects are suffused with meaning, but here the effect is grotesque rather than sensual. Before the three English leave town, Harriet steals Gino’s baby and hides it in her coat, arranging to be picked up by Philip with the help of a local mute. As the landlady of the hotel explains to Philip, the “poor idiot... cannot speak. He carries messages for us all” (155). The mute is a personification of cross-cultural misunderstanding, since he is charged with conveying messages but unable to do so directly. When Philip asks him a question, the mute’s response is “unintelligible,” and he can only produce “horrible sighings and bubblings.” Philip is oddly disturbed by his encounter with the mute, and afterwards he feels that “the whole of life had become unreal” (156). Strangest of all, though, is Gino’s baby, which Philip believes was obtained legitimately. Throughout the ride the baby is unnaturally quiet despite his plentiful tears, and when Philip lights a match to take a look, he tells Harriet that the baby’s “face... seemed all wrong... All puckered queerly” (158). Growing concerned, he worries that “it is too uncanny—crying and no noise” (158). As Harriet tries in vain to comfort the child, it becomes Christ-like in the burden that it carries and expresses through its tears: “It was as if they were travelling with the whole world’s sorrow, as if all the mystery, and all the persistency of woe were gathered to a single fount” (159). If, as Goodlad claims, this is the moment in which Philip “encounter[s] otherness, recognizing his infinite responsibility for another’s suffering,” it is not only “too late,” but also sparked by the failure to understand. In keeping with the novel’s mixed tone, when a wreck overturns the carriage and kills the baby, the silence is interrupted not by tears but by Harriet’s deranged laughter.
The baby’s death affirms the impossibility of any productive interchange between north and south, but it also highlights the weakness and limitations of the view. After their series of views of one another and the baby, Philip and Caroline see things more clearly than ever, but this understanding is not enough to prevent the likes of Harriet from rushing towards disaster. Such a failure is also foreshadowed by the conversation between Philip and Caroline in Santa Deodata’s before their departure. Reflecting on her decision to defect from the cause, Caroline tells Philip that “You are the only one of us who has a general view of the muddle” (146). But faced with his lack of conviction, she warns that “It’s not enough to see clearly,” since one must at least try to do what’s right (148). It is Caroline’s supposedly unphilosophical feminine view that is ultimately most compelling, and it is presented most forcefully in the tableau that Philip witnesses after she prevents an enraged Gino from strangling him. In this spectacle of the power of sight, Caroline once again stands in for Mary as she unconsciously re-enacts the Pieta and holds the now childlike and weeping Gino in her arms.

Her eyes were open, full of infinite pity and full of majesty, as if they discerned the boundaries of sorrow, and saw unimaginable tracts beyond. Such eyes he had seen in great pictures but never in a mortal. Her hands were folded round the sufferer, stroking him lightly, for even a goddess can do no more than that...

Philip looked away, as he sometimes looked away from the great pictures where visible forms suddenly become inadequate for the things they have shown us.

(169)

In this tableau, she is imagined as nearly omniscient in her ability to see “beyond” the immediate tragedy and her desire for the man in her arms. The power of this gaze depends on its ability to look past both Gino and Philip without losing awareness of them. That she shows tenderness for
Gino in spite of his recent violence towards Philip is especially significant, since it echoes in a sublime register the combination of masochistic pleasure and fear that Philip has just experienced in Gino’s hands. As Gino pins him to the floor and fastens his “moist and strong” hands around his throat, Philip wishes for death and wonders if Gino’s talent for torture is inherited from “his ancestors,” “childlike ruffians who,” in an allusion to a previous conflation of homoeroticism and violence, “flung each other from the towers” (167). However, Philip “look[s] away” from this transfigured spectacle of ambivalent intimacy, as if the power of sight is now as “inadequate” as the means of representation. Later, when Philip has renounced both Gino and Caroline, he can only “be glad that she had once held the beloved in her arms,” even if he did not. Philip repeats a move that the novel has already made many times, foreclosing the possibility of contact with Italy and the representation of equivocal desires while simultaneously gesturing towards them through romance and the fantastic “irradiation” of the ordinary.

**Reruns and Codas**

*Where Angels Fear to Tread* is a profoundly pessimistic novel because it offers one of Forster’s most unforgiving critiques of the stasis and lovelessness of English society while rejecting the possibility that this society can be significantly changed. Italy is a temporary escape, but English characters cannot make a home there, and prolonged contact is likely to result in death. *A Room with a View*, on the other hand, is considerably lighter in tone and even pulls off a happy ending for its hero and heroine. Lucy Honeychurch is a young woman who discovers new depths within herself while traveling in Italy. Italy awakens her sense of beauty, George Emerson awakens her passion, and his father Mr. Emerson impresses upon her the necessity of understanding both: as he tells her, “Pull out from the depths those thoughts that you
do not understand, and spread them out in the sunlight and know the meaning of them” (30). Mr. Emerson’s philosophy depends on the belief that successful living is a matter of having the courage to see clearly, and for the most part the novel will bear him out. As in any good story, there are complications, misunderstandings, and false starts, but in the end Lucy acknowledges the truth of her love and marries George.

*A Room with a View* may be a far cry from the complications and dead ends of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, but it only achieves its happy ending by avoiding a direct confrontation with the questions of cross-cultural contact and homoerotic desire that the first novel seemed to find unresolvable. Whereas desire in the former novel tends toward the anarchic and the unpredictable, with characters continually falling in love with inappropriate objects, in the latter desire is for the most part structured and contained by the marriage plot. Furthermore, none of the main characters is Italian, and Lucy does not ever consider the possibility of giving up tourism in favor of residence. In fact, Lucy’s most important encounters in Italy occur, not when she goes “off the beaten track,” but when she is engaged in typically touristic activities: visiting Santa Croce, buying postcards and walking through the Piazza Signoria, and taking a drive for views of the surrounding countryside. When she and George return to Italy for their honeymoon, they stay at the very same Pension Bertolini that she once considered hopelessly overrun by English tourists. It is as if Lucy has the opportunity to wander just enough within this circumscribed touristic space to make interesting things happen.

Although *A Room with a View* was the third of Forster’s novels to be published, it was the first of Forster’s published novels to be conceived and drafted. That fact might lead us to explain its light tone, happy ending, and less direct treatment of thorny questions of desire, violence, and cross-cultural understanding as the product of a less experienced and possibly more
naive novelist. However, the two early drafts of the novel, which date to 1901-2 and 1903, respectively, are considerably darker than the version that we now know as *A Room with a View*. Not only does Mr. Beebe play a much more sinister—and explicitly homosexual—role, but the hero and heroine are ultimately not strong enough to overcome the social resistance to their union; at the end of the novel George is killed when, after Lucy rejects him, he crashes his bicycle into a fallen tree. Given that Forster’s revisions considerably brighten up the novel, one might read it as a kind of replay of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in which he allows for a happy ending by avoiding the questions of cross-cultural conflict that *Where Angels Fear to Tread* found unresolvable and downplaying the novel’s homoeroticism.

The novel’s first half is about the capacity of travel to bring out new aspects of a personality through new sights and associations, and the second half shows their effect on the lives of its protagonists back at home in England. In an Edwardian variant of the Austenian marriage plot, the heroine must choose an appropriate suitor. But if the novel, as everyone seems to agree, and as it continually reminds us, is a comedy, then it is a comedy of a peculiar sort. Lionel Trilling notes that in “scale and tone it is even smaller and lighter than *Where Angels Fear to Tread,*” but he also points out that “the comedy is also shot through with a sense of melodramatic evil” (97). As we have come to expect, it is realistic, but this realism is also shot through with romance. Whereas in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* these moments of romance, which were frequently experienced as views, were as likely to frustrate a character’s desires as to elicit them, in *A Room with a View* these romantic views either lead characters toward their desires or, in the cases when they seem to suggest something dark, violent, or challenging, they tend to interrupt the marriage-focused narrative without actually changing it. As David Medalie writes, “Lucy’s happiness is guaranteed in any case by the formality of the comic mode in that
novel” (36). In this section I focus on the various points at which the comic realist mode is interrupted by romance and by unexpected views that often express a homoerotic subtext at odds with the novel’s marriage plot.

The controlling spatial metaphor of the novel is, of course, the contrast between the room and the view. If a room is associated with culture, the mind, and limitation, then the view is associated with nature, the body, and imaginative and erotic freedom. It is this distinction that Lucy and Cecil have in mind when they discuss how she imagines him: he tells her that “I had got an idea... that you feel more at home with me in a room... Never in the real country like this,” and she assents that she imagines him in a “drawing-room... with no view” (122-123). Lucy’s view of George could not be more different. When she accidentally comes across him on a hill outside Florence, he is standing on the edge of a promontory.

From her feet the ground sloped sharply into view, and violets ran down in rivulets and streams and cataracts, irrigating the hillside with blue, eddying round the tree stems, collecting into pools in the hollows, covering the grass with spots of azure foam. But never again were they in such profusion; this terrace was the well-head, the primal source whence beauty gushed out to water the earth.

Standing at its brink, like a swimmer who prepares, was the good man. (78) When she arrives, he sees her “as one who had fallen out of heaven. He saw radiant joy in her face, he saw the flowers beat against her dress in blue waves. The bushes above them closed. He stepped quickly forward and kissed her” (78). Although the kiss is between two English people, they are brought together by the Italian driver, and the energy of their attraction seems to come from the Italian landscape. When Lucy and Charlotte discuss the event in private that evening, Lucy blames it on the view: “this time I’m not to blame... I simply slipped into those violets...
The sky, you know, was gold, and the ground all blue, and for a moment he looked like some one in a book” (83). Her picturesque gaze, which sees George as integral to the landscape and evokes previous texts, makes him a figure out of romance that she cannot forget. Even back in England, she returns to this image of him, and it will remain strong enough to eventually eclipse the room-bound Cecil.

Important as this instance is, at the margins of the novel Forster gives us reason to believe that there may be something dangerous about views, great expanses, and romance. For instance, the first description of the drawing room at Windy Corner implies that the curtains that limit one’s view may in fact be necessary or even beautiful. The curtains are described as both a “dome of many-colored glass” and a “sluice-gate,” a beautiful shelter and a guard against the “intolerable” light that might otherwise flood the room. The character most associated with enclosure is Charlotte Bartlett, whom Forster called “the apostle of concealment” in an earlier draft of the novel (Lucy 117). Charlotte sees her task as keeping Lucy safe, particularly from the dangers of sex. Thus, when Mr. Emerson is gauche enough to offer the two women his better-situated rooms, she fends them off, explaining to Lucy that “I am a woman of the world, in my small way, and I know where things lead to” (15). She knows just enough about the world to know that it is dangerous and that she must keep that danger at bay, but not how to engage with it. She responds to Lucy’s objection by “envelop[ing] her in a protective embrace as she wished her good-night. It gave Lucy the sensation of a fog” (15). Although we are clearly meant to laugh at Charlotte’s caution and to understand its crippling limitations, she is, as she says, “a woman of the world,” and there is some truth in her acknowledgement of its danger that Forster insists, in his own small way, that we register. As many critics have noted, the fulfillment of
English desire in his fiction is often accompanied by a (usually Italian) death. In “The Story of a Panic,” Eustace’s liberation from his stuffy English relatives seems to require the otherwise inexplicable death of the Italian waiter, and in Where Angels Fear to Tread the combination of Philip’s inaction and Harriet’s certainty leads to the accidental death of Gino’s baby.

In A Room with a View, the connection between British tourist and Italian death is much less direct. In keeping with the previous examples, this death occurs when Lucy chooses to break out of her chaperoned routine by taking a walk by herself in the Piazza Signoria, but the Italian man whom she watches die from a knife wound is a complete stranger to her, and there is no sense in which his death could be considered a result of anything she has done. When she first steps into the piazza, we are told that the sights are “now fairly familiar to her,” but in the twilight they take on the cast of romance as the statues of the Loggia become a collection of genii loci: the statue of Neptune is “unsubstantial in the twilight, half god, half ghost,” and the Loggia “showed as the triple entrance of a cave, wherein dwelt many a deity, shadowy, but immortal” (47). With characteristic irony, Forster calls it “the hour of unreality—the hour, that is, when unfamiliar things are real” (47). In this case, the qualification negates the initial description: it is not the hour that is unreal, but our ordinary experience of the world. Lucy may not know what she wants, but Forster’s imagery is clear enough: “She fixed her eyes wistfully on the tower of the palace, which rose out of the lower darkness like a pillar of roughened gold. It seemed no longer a tower, no longer supported by earth, but some unattainable treasure throbbing in the tranquil sky” (47). The tower is the phallic symbol of the indefinable, unfamiliar real. Two men begin to fight over money, and at the moment of the victim’s death “he bent towards Lucy with a look of interest, as if he had an important message for her. He opened his lips to deliver it, and a stream of red came out between them and trickled down his

See Stone 395 and Buzard, Beaten 296.
unshaven chin” (48). The death seems utterly random, and at first Lucy does not even realize that he has been stabbed, since she only sees that “one of them was hit lightly upon the chest” (47-48). That she initially interprets his frown as related to her implies that his message will define the desires that she cannot, but the mute physicality of blood is the opposite of speech. Here it is the sign of both life and death, not liberatory but a frightening eruption of the body into the familiar but magical rituals of tourism. Buzard interprets the Italian’s death as the displaced sign of the violence that tourism inflicts, even unintentionally, on the places and cultures that it remakes (Beaten 297-300), but if Italy stands for nature, sex, and the body, then this brush with death is a fantastic demonstration of the chaos and danger that Forster sees as accompanying those linked forces. The death is an entirely Italian matter, witnessed by but unrelated to the British tourists who see it or gossip about it.

This is one of the most remarkable scenes in Forster’s fiction, because although it is the catalyst for a closer connection between Lucy and George, its own significance is quite ambiguous. The death seems to be of great importance, both for Lucy and for George, who attends to her when she faints. She feels as though “she, as well as the dying man, had crossed some spiritual boundary” (49), and the experience leads George to declare that “I shall probably want to live” (52), but what either have to do with the Italian’s death is never stated. All of the emotions in this chapter seem terribly displaced. Lucy’s first response is to ask, “Oh, what have I done?” as though her own actions were responsible for the death (48). Equally inexplicably, George tells her that “something tremendous has happened... It isn’t exactly that a man has died” (50). The narrator also echoes this displacement, stating that “the real event—whatever it was—had taken place, not in the Loggia, but by the river” (68). Barbara Rosecrance convincingly reads the incident, with its throbbing tower and the blood that ends up on Lucy’s postcards, as
“Lucy’s symbolic loss of virginity” and “the discovery of her passionate self” (92), but Lucy’s reaction is not explicable solely in terms of fear of inchoate eroticism. Instead of deciding which of the two events—the stabbing at the Loggia or the conversation at the river—is more important, I argue that the novel conflates the two, asking us to draw a parallel between intimacy with a handsome man and watching another man get killed, and thus establishes a parallel between this scene and the anachronistic tower scene in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.

Since the incident is the turning point that brings George and Lucy together, it might seem that its status as linchpin in a heterosexual marriage plot is certain. However, the importance of the two fighting Italian men, so quickly marginalized by the characters and the narrator, does not disappear from the text. Attempting to make light of the incident, Lucy offhandedly comments to George, “And the murderer tried to kiss him, you say—how very odd Italians are!” (50). This line suggests that physical affection could either follow from, or coexist with, violence. Significantly, the incident’s homoeroticism in the novel’s first draft was much more overt. In the earlier version, the stabbing isn’t seen by any of the characters. Instead, Lucy’s love interest, a young artist named Arthur, sees the injured victim’s body as it is being laid in the fountain of Neptune to be washed: the Italian victim “was magnificently made and his splendid chest swelled & contracted with every spurt of the blood, while his brown sun burnt arms played idly upon the fountain rim” (*Lucy* 36). Remarkably, the same description of the throbbing tower that is from Lucy’s perspective in the published version is from the perspective of the dying man in the early draft. This highly eroticized description of the expiring male body produces a change in Arthur as important as the later change produced in George. However, instead of deciding in the affirmative, like George, Arthur decides that he must give something up:
By some subtle connection, the sight of the young Italian’s perfect form lying on the fountain brim had led him to disbelieve in his own capacity for rendering beauty. That indeed was an aesthetic connection, intelligible if unexpected, but there was also a stronger connection of a more subtle and still stronger kind. He longed to be more emotional and more sympathetic: to see more, and more largely, of the splendid people with whom he should live so short a time. Art was not helping him: it was always supposed to help, but it was not helping. (Lucy 37)65

Arthur’s experience of death, though in some ways more direct than Lucy’s, is even more distanced and aestheticized. The Italian seems not at all important in his own right, but as a deeply felt symbol of male beauty. The unattainability of the “Italian’s perfect form” is figured, first, by its incipient death. Indeed, part of this body’s perfection is the way its transience is made all too apparent by the heaving that seems to pump out the blood and the delicate “play” of the limbs as they give up their life. Second, as a male body it is a forbidden object of desire that can only be acknowledged when placed in extremis. Third, because it cannot be possessed or openly desired, the body cannot be properly represented; Arthur doubts his own ability to represent its beauty and therefore to make it his own. In a line that reads like a rejoinder to the aestheticism of Pater’s conclusion to The Renaissance, Forster writes that “Art was not helping him” in his desire “to see more, and more largely” (37). As a result of his encounter, Arthur will give up his career in painting and recommit himself to the Forsterian ideal of personal relations. In the transition from Lucy to A Room with a View, Forster rewrites this scene of a sensitive young man’s confrontation with death and illicit homoerotic desire as the occasion for

65 For the sake of readability I have removed editorial symbols signaling deletions and insertions.
heterosexual intimacy, but its old resonances persist and call the novel’s comic realist surface into question.

Despite the tremendous importance that both characters and narrator attribute to the incident of the stabbing and all of its diffuse erotic energies, it causes very little to happen. It does serve as an occasion for intimacy between Lucy and George, but certainly many writers before and since have come up with less cumbersome ways of bringing hero and heroine together. Significantly, though, this incident leads the two to be wary of one another. Only their chance meeting on the violet-covered hill brings the two together again and makes their love glitteringly apparent, but it also precipitates Charlotte’s decision to depart early to Rome, leaving the Emersons behind until they turn up unexpectedly once again as the Honeychurch’s neighbors in England. Instead of confronting the full implications for cross-cultural contact and its associations with violence, Forster leaves these connections implicit, and soon the novel follows Lucy in her retreat back to England. Luckily, in this case England is not as inhospitable to romance as it was in Where Angels Fear to Tread. Summer Street is just far enough away from the encroaching city to have little corners of wildness like the Sacred Lake, and the Emersons, though educated, are just close enough to the working classes for them to seem vital. Perhaps as a result, the England that Forster represents in this novel does not seem so modern or so removed from the natural rhythms of life. As Charlotte once says apologetically, “I am used to Tunbridge Wells, where we are all hopelessly behind the times” (11). Instead, the entire weight of modern anticulture is placed on the shoulders of Lucy’s fiancé Cecil Vyse, an intellectual young man like Philip Herriton who fails to win as much sympathy. When their engagement is announced, Cecil despises the congratulations of Lucy’s neighbors whom he thinks of as making their engagement “public property—a kind of waste place where every outsider may shoot his vulgar sentiment”
(112), but Forster intervenes, arguing that “the smirking old women, however wrong individually, were racially correct. The spirit of the generations had smiled through them, rejoicing in the engagement of Cecil and Lucy because it promised the continuance of life on earth” (112). In choosing George over Cecil, Lucy finds a balance between Gino’s vital animality and Cecil and Philip’s effete intellect, and the novel affirms the possibility of a happy ending within England.

Like the posthumously published Maurice, written in 1914, the novel’s happy ending seems to depend upon Forster’s good intentions and, as Medalie says, is “guaranteed... by the formality of the comic mode” (36). Both novel, then, are a kind of retreat from the Forsterian impasse of desire for the other that was acknowledge more fully in Where Angels Fear to Tread and which was not explored again until A Passage to India.66 In Maurice, the cross-cultural erotics of difference that animated Where Angels Fear to Tread are transposed onto a cross-class relationship between middle-class Maurice and the working-class gamekeeper Alec Scudder. Since Maurice intuits that he must learn to make a life for himself outside of family, suburbia, and “the niche that England had prepared for him” (55), he seeks out a number of other contexts in which to grow into a more sincere and sexually free person: first at Cambridge with the unsatisfactorily Hellenistic Clive, then in London during a period of celibacy, and finally in a geographically indistinct pastoral England with Alec. Unlike Clive, Maurice does not stake his erotic future on a trip abroad, but ultimately finds fulfillment in England. It must be stressed, though, that the ending of Maurice in which the two lovers live together in the woods is

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66 Although by 1924 Forster had moved on to relationships that were thornier than those involved in tourism, in A Passage to India he makes one, perhaps jocular, reference to Italy that suggests the continuity of his international concerns: “To regard an Indian as if he were an Italian is not, for instance, a common error, nor perhaps a fatal one, and Fielding often attempted analogies between this peninsula and that other, smaller and more exquisitely shaped, that stretches into the classic waters of the Mediterranean” (61).
plainly—and intentionally—utopian. Forster’s answer to a failed romantic fantasy in Italy is therefore a utopian pastoral in England. As Forster writes in his “Terminal Note,” “A happy ending was imperative... I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows, and in this sense Maurice and Alec still roam the greenwood. I dedicated it ‘To a Happier Year’ and not altogether vainly” (250). In this passage, Forster expresses the desire that the encounter between tame and savage should not have to result in misunderstanding and violence even as he recognizes that the ideal space of the “greenwood” does not exist, either because it has been destroyed by industrialization or because the moment of freedom has not yet arrived. With this imagination of a place that does not exist and a time that is either past or not yet arrived, Forster enacts a kind of de-spatialization and de-temporalization of homoeroticism so that, freed of these encumbrances, it can transcend the boundaries and contradictions that elsewhere make it so volatile.

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67 On this paradoxical temporality in the Terminal Note, see Matz.
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