

EPISTEMOLOGY  
OF THE CLOSET

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## 4

## The Beast in the Closet

*James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic**Historicizing Male Homosexual Panic*

At the age of twenty-five, D. H. Lawrence was excited about the work of James M. Barrie. He felt it helped him understand himself and explain himself. "Do read Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy* and *Tommy and Grizel*," he wrote Jessie Chambers. "They'll help you understand how it is with me. I'm in exactly the same predicament."<sup>1</sup>

Fourteen years later, though, Lawrence placed Barrie among a group of writers whom he considered appropriate objects of authorial violence. "What's the good of being hopeless, so long as one has a hob-nailed boot to kick [them] with? *Down with the Poor in Spirit! A war! But the Subtlest, most intimate warfare. Smashing the face of what one knows is rotten.*"<sup>2</sup>

It was not only in the intimate warfares of one writer that the years 1910 to 1924 marked changes. But Lawrence's lurch toward a brutal, virilizing disavowal of his early identification with Barrie's sexually irresolute characters reflects two rather different trajectories: first, of course, changes in the historical and intellectual context within which British literature could be read; but second, a hatefully crystallized literalization, as *between* men, of what had been in Barrie's influential novels portrayed as exactly "the Subtlest, most intimate warfare" *within* a man. Barrie's novel sequence was also interested, as Lawrence was not, in the mutilating effects of this masculine civil war on women.

The previous two chapters have attempted to suggest, in as great a variety of ways as possible, how pervasively the issues of male homo/heterosexual definition could—or, properly, *must*—be read through the ramified interstitial relations that have constituted modern Euro-

American culture. In this chapter (which represents genetically, as it happens, the inaugurating investigation of the present study), I argue that the Barrie to whom Lawrence reacted with such volatility and finally with such virulence was writing out of a post-Romantic tradition of fictional meditations on the subject quite specifically of male homosexual panic. The writers whose work I will adduce here include—besides Barrie—Thackeray, George Du Maurier, and James: an odd mix of big and little names. The cheapnesses and compromises of this tradition will, however, turn out to be as important as its freshest angularities, since one of the functions of a tradition *is* to create a path of least resistance (or at the last resort, a pathology of least resistance) for the expression of previously inchoate material.

An additional problem: this tradition was an infusing rather than a generically distinct one in British letters, and it is thus difficult to discriminate it with confidence or to circumscribe it within the larger stream of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fictional writing. But the tradition is worth tracing partly on that very account, as well: the difficult questions of generic and thematic embodiment resonate so piercingly with another set of difficult questions, those precisely of sexual definition and embodiment. The supposed oppositions that characteristically structure this writing—the respectable "versus" the bohemian, the cynical "versus" the sentimental, the provincial "versus" the cosmopolitan, the anesthetized "versus" the sexual—seem to be, among other things, recastings and explorations of another pseudo-opposition that had come by the middle of the nineteenth century to be cripplingly knotted into the guts of British men and, through them, into the lives of women. The name of this pseudo-opposition, when it came to have a name, was, as we have seen, homosexual "versus" heterosexual.

Recent sexual historiography by, for instance, Alan Bray in his *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* suggests that until about the time of the Restoration, homophobia in England, while intense, was for the most part highly theologized, was anathematic in tone and structure, and had little cognitive bite as a way for people to perceive and experience their own and their neighbors' actual activities.<sup>3</sup> Homosexuality "was not conceived as part of the created order at all," Bray writes, but as "part of its dissolution. And as such it was not a sexuality in its own right, but

1. Lawrence to Jessie Chambers, August 1910, *The Collected Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Harry T. Moore (London: W. H. Heinemann, 1962), 1: 63.

2. Lawrence to Rolf Gardiner, August 9, 1924, in *The Collected Letters*, 2: 801.

3. Bray, *Homosexuality*, chapters 1–3. Note the especially striking example on pp. 68–69, 76–77.

existed as a potential for confusion and disorder in one undivided sexuality.”<sup>4</sup> If sodomy was the most characteristic expression of antinature or the Anti-Christ itself, it was nevertheless, or perhaps for that very reason, not an explanation that sprang easily to mind for those sounds from the bed next to one’s own—or even for the pleasures of one’s own bed. Before the end of the eighteenth century, however, Bray shows, with the beginnings of a crystallized male homosexual role and male homosexual culture, a much sharper-eyed and acutely psychologized secular homophobia was current.

I argued in *Between Men* that this development was important not only for the persecutory regulation of a nascent minority population of distinctly homosexual men but also for the regulation of the male homosocial bonds that structure *all* culture—at any rate, all public or heterosexual culture.<sup>5</sup> This argument follows Lévi-Strauss in defining culture itself, like marriage, in terms of a “total relationship of exchange . . . not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, [in which] the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners”;<sup>6</sup> or follows Heidi Hartmann in defining patriarchy itself as “*relations between men*, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.”<sup>7</sup> To this extent, it makes sense that a newly active concept, a secular, psychologized homophobia, that seemed to offer a new proscriptive or descriptive purchase on the whole continuum of male homosocial bonds would be a pivotal and embattled concept indeed.

Bray describes the earliest legal persecutions of the post-Restoration gay male subculture, centered in gathering places called “molly houses,” as being random and, in his word, “pogrom”-like in structure.<sup>8</sup> I would emphasize the specifically terroristic or exemplary workings of this structure: because a given homosexual man could not know whether or not to

4. Bray, *Homosexuality*, p. 25.

5. *Between Men*, pp. 83–96.

6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 115; also quoted and well discussed in Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” pp. 157–210.

7. Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” in Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), p. 14; emphasis added.

8. Bray, *Homosexuality*, chapter 4.

expect to be an object of legal violence, the legal enforcement had a disproportionately wide effect. At the same time, however, an opening was made for a subtler strategy in response, a kind of ideological pincers-movement that would extend manyfold the impact of this theatrical enforcement. As *Between Men* argues, under this strategy (or, perhaps better put, in this space of strategic potential),

not only must homosexual men be unable to ascertain whether they are to be the objects of “random” homophobic violence, but no man must be able to ascertain that he is not (that his bonds are not) homosexual. In this way, a relatively small exertion of physical or legal compulsion potentially rules great reaches of behavior and filiation. . . .

So-called “homosexual panic” is the most private, psychologized form in which many . . . western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, at least since the eighteenth century in England and America, the continuum of male homosocial bonds has been brutally structured by a secularized and psychologized homophobia, which has excluded certain shiftingly and more or less arbitrarily defined segments of the continuum from participating in the overarching male entitlement—in the complex web of male power over the production, reproduction, and exchange of goods, persons, and meanings. I argue that the historically shifting, and precisely the arbitrary and self-contradictory, nature of the way *homosexuality* (along with its predecessor terms) has been defined in relation to the rest of the male homosocial spectrum has been an exceedingly potent and embattled locus of power over the entire range of male bonds, and perhaps especially over those that define themselves, not *as* homosexual, but *as against* the homosexual. Because the paths of male entitlement, especially in the nineteenth century, required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of what I am calling male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement.

Some consequences of this approach to male relationships should perhaps be made more explicit. To begin with, as I have suggested earlier, the approach is not founded on an essential differentiation between “basically homosexual” and “basically heterosexual” men, aside from the

9. *Between Men*, pp. 88–89.

historically small group of consciously and self-acceptingly homosexual men, who are no longer susceptible to homosexual panic as I define it here. If such compulsory relationships as male friendship, mentorship, admiring identification, bureaucratic subordination, and heterosexual rivalry all involve forms of investment that force men into the arbitrarily mapped, self-contradictory, and anathema-riddled quicksands of the middle distance of male homosocial desire, then it appears that men enter into adult masculine entitlement only through acceding to the permanent threat that the small space they have cleared for themselves on this terrain may always, just as arbitrarily and with just as much justification, be foreclosed.

The result of men's accession to this double bind is, first, the acute *manipulability*, through the fear of one's own "homosexuality," of acculturated men; and second, a reservoir of potential for *violence* caused by the self-ignorance that this regime constitutively enforces. The historical emphasis on enforcement of homophobic rules in the armed services in, for instance, England and the United States supports this analysis. In these institutions, where both men's manipulability and their potential for violence are at the highest possible premium, the *prescription* of the most intimate male bonding and the *proscription* of (the remarkably cognate) "homosexuality" are both stronger than in civilian society—are, in fact, close to absolute.

My specification of widespread, endemic male homosexual panic as a post-Romantic phenomenon, rather than as coeval with the beginnings, under homophobic pressure, of a distinctive male homosexual culture a century or so earlier, has to do with (what I read as) the centrality of the paranoid Gothic<sup>10</sup> as the literary genre in which homophobia found its most apt and ramified embodiment. Homophobia found in the paranoid Gothic a genre of its own, not because the genre provided a platform for expounding an already formed homophobic ideology—of course, it did no such thing—but through a more active, polylogic engagement of "private" with "public" discourses, as in the wildly dichotomous play around solipsism and intersubjectivity of a male paranoid plot like that of

10. By "paranoid Gothic" I mean Romantic novels in which a male hero is in a close, usually murderous relation to another male figure, in some respects his "double," to whom he seems to be mentally transparent. Examples of the paranoid Gothic include, besides *Frankenstein*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. This tradition is discussed more fully in my *Between Men*, chapters 5 and 6.

*Frankenstein*. The transmutability of the intrapsychic with the intersubjective in these plots where one man's mind could be read by that of the feared and desired other; the urgency and violence with which these plots reformed large, straggly, economically miscellaneous families such as the Frankensteins in the ideologically hypostatized image of the tight oedipal family; and then the extra efflorescence of violence with which the remaining female term in these triangular families was elided, leaving, as in *Frankenstein*, a residue of two potent male figures locked in an epistemologically indissoluble clench of will and desire—through these means, the paranoid Gothic powerfully signified, at the very moment of crystallization of the modern, capitalism-marked oedipal family, the inextricability from that formation of a strangling double bind in male homosocial constitution. Put another way, the usefulness of Freud's formulation, in the case of Dr. Schreber, that paranoia in men results from the repression of their homosexual desire,<sup>11</sup> has nothing to do with a classification of the paranoid Gothic in terms of "latent" or "overt" "homosexual" "types," but everything to do with the foregrounding, under the specific, foundational historic conditions of the early Gothic, of intense male homosocial desire as at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds.

To inscribe that vulgar classification supposedly derived from Freud on what was arguably the founding moment of the worldview and social constitution that he codified would hardly be enlightening. Still, the newly formulated and stressed "universal" imperative/prohibition attached to male homosocial desire, even given that its claim for universality already excluded (the female) half of the population, nevertheless required, of course, further embodiment and specification in new taxonomies of personality and character. These taxonomies would mediate between the supposedly classless, "personal" entities of the ideological fictions and the particular, class-specified, economically inscribed lives that they influenced; and at the same time, the plethoric and apparently comprehensive pluralism of the taxonomies occluded, through the illusion of choice, the overarching existence of the double bind that structured them all.

Recent gay male historiography, influenced by Foucault, has been especially good at unpacking and interpreting those parts of the nineteenth-century systems of classification that clustered most closely around

11. Freud, "Psycho-Analytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia."

what current taxonomies construe as “the homosexual.” The “sodomite,” the “invert,” the “homosexual,” the “heterosexual” himself, all are objects of historically and institutionally explicable construction. In the discussion of male homosexual *panic*, however—the treacherous middle stretch of the modern homosocial continuum, and the terrain from whose wasting rigors *only* the homosexual-identified man is at all exempt—a different and less distinctly sexualized range of categories needs to be opened up. Again, however, it bears repeating that the object of doing that is not to arrive at a more accurate or up-to-date assignment of “diagnostic” categories, but to understand better the broad field of forces within which masculinity—and thus, *at least* for men, humanity itself—could (can) at a particular moment construct itself.

I want to suggest here that with Thackeray and other early and mid-Victorians a character classification of “the bachelor” came into currency, a type that for some men both narrowed the venue, and at the same time startlingly desexualized the question, of male sexual choice.<sup>12</sup> Later in the century, when a medical and social-science model of “the homosexual man” had institutionalized this classification for a few men, the broader issue of endemic male homosexual panic was again up for grabs in a way that was newly redetached from character taxonomy and was more apt to be described narratively, as a decisive moment of choice in the developmental labyrinth of the generic individual (male). As the unmarried Gothic hero had once been, the bachelor became once again the representative man: James wrote in his 1881 *Notebook*, “I take [London] as an artist and as a bachelor; as one who has the passion of observation and whose business is the study of human life.”<sup>13</sup> In the work of such writers as Du Maurier, Barrie, and James, among others, male homosexual panic was acted out as a sometimes agonized sexual anesthesia that was damaging to both its male subjects and its female non-objects. The paranoid Gothic itself, a generic structure that seemed to have been domesticated in the development of the bachelor taxonomy, returned in some of these works as a formally intrusive and incongruous, but notably persistent, literary element.<sup>14</sup>

12. For more on bachelors see Fredric Jameson, *Wyndham Lewis: Fables of Aggression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), chapter 2; also, cited in Jameson, Jean Borie, *Le Célibataire français* (Paris: Le Sagittaire, 1976); and Edward Said, *Beginnings* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), pp. 137–52.

13. Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 28.

14. Bachelor literature in which the paranoid Gothic—or, more broadly, the supernatural—makes a reappearance includes, besides Du Maurier’s *Trilby* and numerous

### Meet Mr. Batchelor

“Batchelor, my elderly Tiresias, are you turned into a lovely young lady *par hasard*?”

“Get along, you absurd Trumperian professor!” say I.

Thackeray, *Lovel the Widower*

In Victorian fiction it is perhaps the figure of the urban bachelor, especially as popularized by Thackeray, who personifies the most deflationary tonal contrast to the eschatological harrowings and epistemological doublings of the paranoid Gothic. Where the Gothic hero had been solipsistic, the bachelor hero is selfish. Where the Gothic hero had raged, the bachelor hero bitches. Where the Gothic hero had been suicidally inclined, the bachelor hero is a hypochondriac. The Gothic hero ranges from euphoria to despondency; the bachelor hero, from the eupeptic to the dyspeptic.

Structurally, moreover, whereas the Gothic hero had personified the concerns and tones of an entire genre, the bachelor is a distinctly circumscribed and often a marginalized figure in the books he inhabits. Sometimes, like Archie Clavering, Major Pendennis, and Jos Sedley, he is simply a minor character; but even when he is putatively the main character, like Surtees’s hero “Soapey” Sponge, he more often functions as a clotheshorse or comic place-marker in a discursive plot.<sup>15</sup> The bachelor hero can only be mock-heroic; not merely diminished and parodic himself, he symbolizes the diminution and undermining of certain heroic and totalizing possibilities of generic embodiment. The novel of which the absurd Jos Sedley is not the hero is a novel *without* a hero.

It makes sense, I think, to see the development of this odd character the bachelor, and his dissolutive relation to romantic genre, as, among other things, a move toward the recuperation as character taxonomy of the endemic double bind of male homosexual panic that had been acted out in the paranoid Gothic as plot and structure. This recuperation is perhaps best described as, in several senses, a domestication. Most obviously, in the increasingly stressed nineteenth-century bourgeois dichotomy between domestic female space and extrafamilial, political and economic male space, the bachelor is at least partly feminized by his attention to and

James stories such as “The Jolly Corner,” George Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Kipling stories such as “In the Same Boat.”

15. In, respectively, Trollope’s *The Claverings* and Thackeray’s *Pendennis* and *Vanity Fair*; “Soapey” Sponge is in R. S. Surtees’s *Mr. Sponge’s Sporting Tour*.

interest in domestic concerns. (At the same time, though, his intimacy with clubland and bohemia gives him a special passport to the world of men, as well.) Then, too, the disruptive and self-ignorant potential for violence in the Gothic hero is replaced in the bachelor hero by physical timidity and, often, by a high value on introspection and by (at least partial) self-knowledge. Finally, the bachelor is housebroken by the severing of his connections with a discourse of genital sexuality.

The first-person narrators of much of Thackeray's later fiction are good examples of the urban bachelor in his major key. Even though the Pendennis who narrates *The Newcomes* and *Philip* is supposedly married, his voice, personality, and tastes are strikingly similar to those of the archetypal Thackeray bachelor, the narrator of his novella *Lovel the Widower* (1859)—a man called, by no coincidence at all, Mr. Batchelor. (Of course, Thackeray's own ambiguous marital status—married, but to a permanently sanitarium-bound, psychotically depressed woman—facilitated this slippage in the narrators whom Thackeray seemed to model on himself.) Mr. Batchelor is, as James says of Olive Chancellor, unmarried by every implication of his being. He is compulsively garrulous about marital prospects, his own (past and present) among others, but always in a tone that points, in one way or another, to the absurdity of the thought. For instance, his hyperbolic treatment of an early romantic disappointment is used both to mock and undermine the importance to him of that incident and, at the same time, by invidious comparison, to discredit in advance the seriousness of any later involvement:

Some people have the small-pox twice; *I do not*. In my case, if a heart is broke, it's broke: if a flower is withered, it's withered. If I choose to put my grief in a ridiculous light, why not? why do you suppose I am going to make a tragedy of such an old, used-up, battered, stale, vulgar, trivial every-day subject as a jilt who plays with a man's passion, and laughs at him, and leaves him? Tragedy indeed! Oh, yes! poison—black-edged note-paper—Waterloo Bridge—one more unfortunate, and so forth! No: if she goes, let her go! —*si celeres quatit pennas*, I puff the what-d'ye-call-it away!<sup>16</sup>

The plot of *Lovel*—slight enough—is an odd local station on the subway from *Liber Amoris* to Proust. Mr. Batchelor, when he lived in lodgings,

16. *Lovel the Widower*, in *Works of Thackeray*, vol. 1 (New York: National Library, n.d.), chapter 2. Subsequent references to this novel are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by chapter number.

had had a slightly tender friendship with his landlady's daughter Bessy, who at that time helped support her family by dancing in a music hall. A few years later, he gets her installed as governess in the home of his friend Lovel, the widower. Several men in the vicinity are rivals for Bessy's affections: the local doctor, the shrewd autodidact butler, and, halfheartedly, Batchelor himself. When a visiting bounder attacks Bessy's reputation and her person, Batchelor, who is eavesdropping on the scene, fatally hesitates in coming to her defense, suddenly full of doubts about her sexual purity ("Fiends and anguish! he had known her before" [chapter 5]) and his own eagerness for marriage. Finally it is the autodidact butler who rescues her, and Lovel himself who marries her.

If the treatment of the romantic possibilities that are supposedly at the heart of *Lovel* has a tendency to dematerialize them almost before they present themselves, the treatment of certain other physical pleasures is given an immediacy that seems correspondingly heightened. In fact, the substantiality of physical pleasure is explicitly linked to the state of bachelorhood.

To lie on that comfortable, cool bachelor's bed. . . . Once at Shrublands I heard steps pacing overhead at night, and the feeble but continued wail of an infant. I wakened from my sleep, was sulky, but turned and slept again. Biddlecombe the barrister I knew was the occupant of the upper chamber. He came down the next morning looking wretchedly yellow about the cheeks, and livid round the eyes. His teething infant had kept him on the march all night. . . . He munched a shred of toast, and was off by the omnibus to chambers. I chipped a second egg; I may have tried one or two other nice little things on the table (Strasbourg pâté I know I never can resist, and am convinced it is perfectly wholesome). I could see my own sweet face in the mirror opposite, and my gills were as rosy as any broiled salmon. (chapter 3)

Unlike its sacramental, community-building function in Dickens, food in Thackeray, even good food, is most apt to signify the bitterness of dependency or inequality.<sup>17</sup> The exchange value of food and drink, its expensiveness or cheapness relative to the status and expectations of those who partake, the ostentation or stinginess with which it is doled out, or the meanness with which it is cadged, mark out for it a shifty and invidious path through each of Thackeray's books, including this one.

17. On this, see Barbara Hardy, *The Exposure of Luxury: Radical Themes in Thackeray* (London: Owen, 1972), pp. 118–60.

The rounded Pickwickian self-complacency of the rosy-gilled bachelor at breakfast is, then, all the more striking by contrast. In Thackeray's bitchy art where, as in James's, the volatility of the perspective regularly corrodes both the object and the subject of perception, there are moments when the bachelor hero, exactly through his celibacy and selfishness, can seem the only human particle atomized enough to plump through unscathed.

Sometimes unscathed; never unscathing. Of course one of the main pleasures of reading this part of Thackeray's oeuvre is precisely its feline gratuitousness of aggression. At odd moments one is apt to find kitty's unsheathed claws a millimeter from one's own eyes. "Nothing, dear friend, escapes your penetration: if a joke is made in your company, you are down upon it instant, and your smile rewards the wag who amuses you: so you knew at once. . ." (chapter 1). When one bachelor consults another bachelor about a third bachelor, nothing is left but ears and whiskers:

During my visit to London, I had chanced to meet my friend Captain Fitzb—dle, who belongs to a dozen clubs, and knows something of every man in London. "Know anything of Clarence Baker?" "Of course I do," says Fitz; "and if you want any *renseignement*, my dear fellow, I have the honor to inform you that a blacker little sheep does not trot the London *pavé*. . . know anything of Clarence Baker! My dear fellow, enough to make your hair turn white, unless (as I sometimes fondly imagine) nature has already performed that process, when of course I can't pretend to act upon mere hair-dye." (The whiskers of the individual who addressed me, innocent, stared me in the face as he spoke, and were dyed of the most unblushing purple.) . . ." From the garrison towns where he has been quartered, he has carried away not only the hearts of the milliners, but their gloves, haberdashery, and perfumery." (chapter 4)

If, as I am suggesting, Thackeray's bachelors created or reinscribed as a personality type one possible path of response to the strangulation of homosexual panic, their basic strategy is easy enough to trace: a preference of atomized male individualism to the nuclear family (and a corresponding demonization of women, especially mothers); a garrulous and visible refusal of anything that could be interpreted as genital sexuality, toward objects male or female; a corresponding emphasis on the pleasures of the other senses; and a well-defended social facility that freights with a good deal of magnetism its proneness to parody and to unpredictable sadism.

I must say that this does not strike me as a portrait of an exclusively

Victorian human type. To refuse sexual choice, in a society where sexual choice for men is both compulsory and always self-contradictory, seems, at least for educated men, still often to involve invoking the precedent of this nineteenth-century persona—not Mr. Batchelor himself perhaps, but, generically, the self-centered and at the same time self-marginalizing bachelor he represents. Nevertheless, this persona *is* highly specified as a figure of the nineteenth-century metropolis. He has close ties with the *flâneurs* of Poe, Baudelaire, Wilde, Benjamin. What is most importantly specified is his pivotal class position between the respectable bourgeoisie and bohemia—a bohemia that, again, Thackeray in the Pendennis novels half invented for English literature and half merely housetrained.

Literally, it was Thackeray who introduced both the word and the concept of bohemia to England from Paris.<sup>18</sup> As a sort of reserve labor force and a semiporous, liminal space for vocational sorting and social rising and falling, bohemia could seemingly be entered from any social level; but, at least in these literary versions, it served best the cultural needs, the fantasy needs, and the needs for positive and negative self-definition of an anxious and conflicted bourgeoisie. Except to homosexual men, the idea of "bohemia" seems before the 1890s not to have had a distinctively gay coloration. In these bachelor novels the simple absence of an enforcing family structure was allowed to perform its enchantment in a more generalized way; and the most passionate male comradeship subsisted in an apparently loose relation to the erotic uses of a common pool of women. It might be more accurate, however, to see the flux of bohemia as the *temporal* space where the young, male bourgeois literary subject was required to navigate his way through his "homosexual panic"—seen here as a *developmental* stage—toward the more repressive, self-ignorant, and apparently consolidated status of the mature bourgeois paterfamilias.<sup>19</sup>

Among Thackeray's progeny in the exploration of bourgeois bachelors in bohemia, the most self-conscious and important are Du Maurier, Barrie, and—in, for example, *The Ambassadors*—James. The filiations of this tradition are multiple and heterogeneous. For instance, Du Maurier offered James the plot of *Trilby* years before he wrote the novel himself.<sup>20</sup>

18. Richard Miller, *Bohemia: The Protoculture Then and Now* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), p. 58.

19. For some speculations on how and when this came to be represented as a specifically developmental narrative, see *Between Men*, pp. 176–79.

20. James, *Notebooks*, pp. 97–98.



For another, Little Bilham in *The Ambassadors* seems closely related to Little Billee, the hero of *Trilby*, a small, girlish-looking Left Bank art student. Little Billee shares a studio with two older, bigger, more virile English artists, whom he loves deeply—a bond that seems to give erotic point to Du Maurier's use of the Thackeray naval ballad from which Du Maurier, in turn, had taken Little Billee's name:

There was gorging Jack and guzzling Jimmy,  
And the youngest he was little Billee.  
Now when they got as far as the Equator  
They's nothing left but one split pea.  
Says gorging Jack to guzzling Jimmy,  
"I am extremely hungaree."  
To gorging Jack says guzzling Jimmy,  
"We've nothing left, us must eat we."  
Says gorging Jack to guzzling Jimmy,  
"With one another we shouldn't agree!  
There's little Bill, he's young and tender,  
We're old and tough, so let's eat he.  
"Oh! Billy, we're going to kill and eat you,  
So undo the button of your chemie."<sup>21</sup>

As one moves past Thackeray toward the turn of the century, toward the ever greater visibility across class lines of a medicalized discourse of—and newly punitive assaults on—male homosexuality, however, the comfortably frigid campiness of Thackeray's bachelors gives way to something that sounds more inescapably like panic. Mr. Batchelor had played at falling in love with women, but felt no urgency about proving that he actually could. For the bachelor heroes of *Trilby* and *Tommy and Grizel*, though, even that renunciatory high ground of male sexlessness has been strewn with psychic land mines.

In fact, the most consistent keynote of this late literature is exactly the explicitly thematized sexual anesthesia of its heroes. In each of these fictions, moreover, the hero's agonistic and denied sexual anesthesia is treated as being *at the same time* an aspect of a particular, idiosyncratic personality type *and also* an expression of a great Universal. These (anti-)heroes offer, indeed, prototypes of the newly emerging incoherences between minoritizing and universalizing understandings of male sexual definition. Little Billee, for instance, the hero of *Trilby*, attributes his sudden inability to desire a woman to "a pimple" inside his "bump of"

21. "Ballads," in *Works of Thackeray*, 6: 337.

"fondness"—"for that's what's the matter with me—a pimple—just a little clot of blood at the root of a nerve, and no bigger than a pin's point!"<sup>22</sup> In the same long monologue, however, he attributes his lack of desire, not to the pimple, but on a far different scale to his status as Post-Darwinian Modern Man, unable any longer to believe in God. "Sentimental" Tommy, similarly, the hero of Barrie's eponymous novel and also of *Tommy and Grizel*, is treated throughout each of these astonishingly acute and self-hating novels both as a man with a specific, crippling moral and psychological defect and as the very type of the great creative artist.

#### Reading James Straight

James's "The Beast in the Jungle" (1902) is one of the bachelor fictions of this period that seems to make a strong implicit claim of "universal" applicability through heterosexual symmetries, but that is most movingly subject to a change of gestalt and of visible salencies as soon as an assumed heterosexual male norm is at all interrogated. Like *Tommy and Grizel*, the story is of a man and a woman who have a decades-long intimacy. In both stories, the woman desires the man but the man fails to desire the woman. In fact, in each story the man simply fails to desire at all. Sentimental Tommy desperately desires to feel desire; confusingly counterfeits a desire for Grizel; and, with all the best intentions, finally drives her mad. John Marcher, in James's story, does not even know that desire is absent from his life, nor that May Bartram desires him, until after she has died from his obtuseness.

To judge from the biographies of Barrie and James, each author seems to have made erotic choices that were complicated enough, shifting enough in the gender of their objects, and, at least for long periods, kept distant enough from *éclaircissement* or physical expression, to make each an emboldening figure for a literary discussion of male homosexual panic.<sup>23</sup> Barrie had an almost unconsummated marriage, an unconsum-

22. George Du Maurier, *Trilby* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1922), p. 271.

23. The effect of emboldenment should be to some extent mistrusted—not, I think, because the attribution to these particular figures of an experience of male homosexual panic is likely to be wrong, but because it is so much easier to be so emboldened about men who are arguably homosexual in (if such a thing exists) "basic" sexual orientation; while what I am arguing is that panic is proportioned not to the homosexual but to the nonhomosexual-identified elements of these men's characters. Thus, if Barrie and James are obvious authors with whom to *begin* an analysis of male homosexual panic, the analysis I am offering here must be inadequate to the degree that it does not eventually work just as well—even better—for Joyce, Faulkner, Lawrence, Yeats, etc.

mated passion for a married woman (George Du Maurier's daughter!), and a lifelong, uncategorizable passion for her family of sons. James had—well, exactly that which we now all know that we know not. Oddly, however, it is simpler to read the psychological plot of *Tommy and Grizel*—the horribly thorough and conscientious ravages on a woman of the man's compulsion to pretend he desires her—into the cryptic and tragic story of James's involvement with Constance Fenimore Woolson than to read it directly into any incident of Barrie's life. It is hard to read Leon Edel's account of James's sustained (or repeated) and intense, but peculiarly furtive,<sup>24</sup> intimacies with this deaf, intelligent American woman author, who clearly loved him, without coming to a grinding sense that James felt he had with her above all something, sexually, to prove. And it is hard to read about what seems to have been her suicide without wondering whether the expense of James's heterosexual self-probation—an expense, one envisions if one has Barrie in mind, of sudden “generous,” “yielding” impulses in him and equally sudden revulsions—was not charged most intimately to this secreted-away companion of so many of his travels and residencies. If this is true, the working-out of his denied homosexual panic must have been only the more grueling for the woman in proportion to James's outrageous gift and his moral magnetism.

If something like the doubly destructive interaction I am sketching here did in fact occur between James and Constance Fenimore Woolson, then its structure has been resolutely reproduced by virtually all the critical discussion of James's writing. James's mistake here, in life, seems to have been in moving blindly from a sense of the good, the desirability, of love and sexuality to the automatic imposition on himself of a specifically *heterosexual* compulsion. (I say “imposition on himself,” but of course he did not invent the heterosexual specificity of this compulsion; he merely failed, at this point in his life, to resist it actively.) The easy assumption (by James, the society, and the critics) that sexuality and heterosexuality are

24. Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Middle Years: 1882–1895*, vol. 3 of *The Life of Henry James* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1962; rpt. ed., New York: Avon Books, 1978), makes clear that these contacts—coinciding visits to some cities and shared trips to others (e.g., 3: 94), “a special rendezvous” in Geneva (3: 217), a period of actually living in the same house (3: 215–17)—were conducted with a consistent and most uncharacteristic extreme of secrecy. James also seems to have taken extraordinary pains to destroy every vestige of his correspondence with Woolson. Edel cannot, nevertheless, imagine the relationship except as “a continuing ‘virtuous’ attachment”: “That this pleasant and *méticuleuse* old maid may have nourished fantasies of a closer tie does not seem to have occurred to him at this time. If it had, we might assume he would have speedily put distance between himself and her” (3: 217). Edel's hypothesis does nothing, of course, to explain the secrecy of these and other meetings.

always exactly translatable into one another is, obviously, homophobic. Importantly, too, it is deeply heterophobic: it denies the very possibility of *difference* in desires, in objects. One is no longer surprised, of course, at the repressive blankness most literary criticism shows on these issues; but for James, in whose life the pattern of homosexual desire was brave enough and resilient enough to be at last biographically inobliterable, one might have hoped that in criticism of his work the possible differences of different erotic paths would not be so ravenously subsumed under a compulsorily—and hence, never a truly “hetero”—heterosexual model. With strikingly few exceptions, however, the criticism has actively repelled any inquiry into the asymmetries of gendered desire.

It is possible that critics have been motivated in this active incuriosity by a desire to protect James from homophobic misreadings in a perennially repressive sexual climate. It is possible that they fear that, because of the asymmetrically marked structure of heterosexist discourse, *any* discussion of homosexual desires or literary content will marginalize him (or them?) as, simply, *homosexual*. It is possible that they desire to protect him from what they imagine as anachronistically gay readings, based on a late twentieth-century vision of men's desire for men that is more stabilized and culturally compact than James's own. It is possible that they read James himself as, in his work, positively refusing or evaporating this element of his eros, translating lived homosexual desires, where he had them, into written heterosexual ones so thoroughly and so successfully that the difference *makes* no difference, the transmutation leaves no residue. Or it is possible that, believing—as I do—that James often, though not always, attempted such a disguise or transmutation, but reliably left a residue both of material that he did not attempt to transmute and of material that could be transmuted only rather violently and messily, some critics are reluctant to undertake the “attack” on James's candor or artistic unity that could be a next step of that argument. Any of these critical motives would be understandable, but their net effect is the usual repressive one of elision and subsumption of supposedly embarrassing material. In dealing with the multiple valences of sexuality, critics' choices should not be limited to crudities of disruption or silences of orthodox enforcement.

Even Leon Edel, who traces out *both* James's history with Constance Fenimore Woolson *and* some of the narrative of his erotic desire for men, connects “The Beast in the Jungle” to the history of Woolson,<sup>25</sup> but

25. Edel, *Life of James*, vol. 4, *The Master: 1910–1916* (1972), pp. 132–40.

connects neither of these to the specificity of James's—or of any—sexuality. The result of this hammeringly tendentious blur in virtually all the James criticism is, for the interpretation of “The Beast in the Jungle,” seemingly in the interests of showing it as universally applicable (e.g., about “the artist”), to assume without any space for doubt that the moral point of the story is not only that May Bartram desired John Marcher but that John Marcher *should have desired* May Bartram.

*Tommy and Grizel* is clearer-sighted on what is essentially the same point. “*Should have desired*,” that novel graphically shows, not only is nonsensical as a moral judgment but is the very mechanism that enforces and perpetuates the mutilating charade of heterosexual exploitation (James's compulsive use of Woolson, for instance). Grizel's tragedy is not that the man she desires fails to desire her—which would be sad, but, the book makes clear, endurable—but that he pretends to desire her, and intermittently even convinces himself that he desires her, when he does not.

Impressively, too, the clarity with which *Tommy and Grizel* conveys this process and its ravages seems not to be dependent on a given, naive or monolithic idea of what it would mean for a man “really” to desire someone. On that issue the novel seems to remain agnostic, leaving open the possibility that there is some rather different quality that is “real” male desire or, alternatively, that it is only more and less intermittent infestations of the same murderous syndrome that fuel any male eros at all. That the worst violence of heterosexuality comes with the male *compulsion to desire* women and its attendant deceptions of self and other, however, Barrie says quite decisively.

*Tommy and Grizel* is an extraordinary, and an unjustly forgotten, novel. What has dated it and keeps it from being a great novel, in spite of the acuteness with which it treats male desire, is the—one can hardly help saying Victorian—mawkish opportunism with which it figures the desire of women. Permissibly, the novel's real imaginative and psychological energies focus entirely on the hero. Impermissibly—and here the structure of the novel itself exactly reproduces the depredations of its hero—there is a moralized pretense at an equal focus on a rounded, autonomous, imaginatively and psychologically invested female protagonist, who, however, far from being novelistically “desired” in herself, is really, transparently, created in the precise negative image of the hero—created to be the single creature in the world who is most perfectly fashioned to be caused the most exquisite pain and intimate destruction by him and him only. The fit is excruciatingly seamless. Grizel is the daughter of a mad

prostitute, whose legacies to her—aside from vitality, intelligence, imagination—have been a strong sensuality and a terror (which the novel highly valorizes) of having that sensuality stirred. It was acute of Barrie to see that this is the exact woman—were such a woman possible—who, appearing strong and autonomous, would be most unresistingly annihilable precisely by Tommy's two-phase rhythm of sexual come-on followed by repressive frigidity, and his emotional geology of pliant sweetness fundamented by unyielding compulsion. But the prurient exactitude of the female fit, as of a creature bred for sexual sacrifice without resistance or leftovers, drains the authority of the novel to make an uncomplacent judgment on Tommy's representative value.

Read in this context, “The Beast in the Jungle” looks, from the point of view of female desire, potentially revolutionary. Whoever May Bartram is and whatever she wants, clearly at least the story has the Jamesian negative virtue of not pretending to present her rounded and whole. She is an imposing character, but—and—a bracketed one. James's bravura in manipulating point of view lets him dissociate himself critically from John Marcher's selfishness—from the sense that there is no *possibility* of a subjectivity other than Marcher's own—but lets him leave in place of that selfishness finally an *askesis*, a particular humility of point of view as being *limited* to Marcher's. Of May Bartram's history, of her emotional determinants, of her erotic structures the reader learns very little; we are permitted, if we pay attention at all, to *know* that we have learned very little. Just as in Proust it is always open to any minor or grotesque character to turn out at any time to have a major artistic talent with which, however, the novel does not happen to busy itself, so “The Beast in the Jungle” seems to give the reader permission to imagine some female needs and desires and gratifications that are not structured exactly in the image of Marcher's or of the story's own laws.

It is only the last scene of the story—Marcher's last visit to May Bartram's grave—that conceals or denies the humility, the incompleteness of the story's presentation of her subjectivity. This is the scene in which Marcher's sudden realization that *she* has felt and expressed desire for *him* is, as it seems, answered in an intensely symmetrical, “conclusive” rhetorical clinch by the narrative/authorial prescription: “The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived.”<sup>26</sup> The paragraph

26. “The Beast in the Jungle,” in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), 11: 401. All subsequent references to this work are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

that follows, the last in the story, has the same climactic, authoritative (even authoritarian) rhythm of supplying Answers in the form of symmetrical complementarities. For this single, this conclusive, this formally privileged moment in the story—this resolution over the dead body of May Bartram—James and Marcher are presented as coming together, Marcher's revelation underwritten by James's rhetorical authority, and James's epistemological *askesis* gorged, for once, beyond recognition, by Marcher's compulsive, ego-projective certainties. In the absence of May Bartram, the two men, author/narrator and hero, are reunited at last in the confident, shared, masculine knowledge of what she Really Wanted and what she Really Needed. And what she Really Wanted and Really Needed show, of course, an uncanny closeness to what Marcher Really (should have) Wanted and Needed, himself.

Imagine "The Beast in the Jungle" without this enforcing symmetry. Imagine (remember) the story with May Bartram alive.<sup>27</sup> Imagine a possible alterity. And the name of alterity is not *always* "woman." What if Marcher himself had other desires?

#### *The Law of the Jungle*

Names . . . Assingham — Padwick — Lutch — Marfle — Bross —  
Crapp — Didcock — Wichells — *Putchin* — Brind — Coxeter —  
Coxster . . . Dickwinter . . . Jakes . . . Marcher —

James, *Notebook*, 1901

There has so far seemed no reason, or little reason, why what I have been calling "male homosexual panic" could not just as descriptively have been called "male heterosexual panic"—or, simply, "male sexual panic." Although I began with a structural and historicizing narrative that emphasized the pre- and proscriptively defining importance of men's bonds with men, potentially including genital bonds, the books I have discussed have not, for the most part, seemed to center emotionally or thematically on such bonds. In fact, it is, explicitly, a male panic in the face of *heterosexuality* that many of these books most describe. And no assumption could

27. Interestingly, in the 1895 germ of (what seems substantially to be) "The Beast in the Jungle," in James's *Notebooks*, p. 184, the woman outlives the man. "It's the woman's sense of what might [have been] in him that arrives at the intensity. . . . She is his Dead Self: he is alive in her and dead in himself—that is something like the little formula I seem to *entrevoir*. He himself, the man, must, in the tale, also materially die—die in the flesh as he has died long ago in the spirit, the *right* one. Then it is that his lost treasure revives most—no longer *contrarié* by his material existence, existence in his false self, his wrong one."

be more homophobic than the automatic association of same-sex object choice with a fear of heterosexuality or of the other sex. It is all very well to insist, as I have done, that homosexual panic is necessarily a problem only, but endemically, of nonhomosexual-identified men; nevertheless the lack in these books of an embodied male-homosexual thematics, however inevitable, has had a dissolutive effect on the structure and texture of such an argument. Part, although only part, of the reason for that lack was historical: it was only close to the end of the nineteenth century that a cross-class homosexual role and a consistent, ideologically full thematic discourse of male homosexuality became entirely visible, in developments that were publicly dramatized in—though far from confined to—the Wilde trials.

In "The Beast in the Jungle," written at the threshold of the new century, the possibility of an embodied male-homosexual thematics has, I would like to argue, a precisely liminal presence. It is present as a—as a very particular, historicized—thematics of absence, and specifically of the absence of speech. The first (in some ways the only) thing we learn about John Marcher is that he has a "secret" (358), a destiny, a something unknown in his future. "'You said,'" May Bartram reminds him, "'you had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen'" (359). I would argue that to the extent that Marcher's secret has a content, that content is homosexual.

Of course the extent to which Marcher's secret has anything that could be called a content is, not only dubious, but in the climactic last scene actively denied. "He had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened" (401). The denial that the secret has a content—the assertion that its content is precisely a lack—is a stylish and "satisfyingly" Jamesian formal gesture. The apparent gap of meaning that it points to is, however, far from being a genuinely empty one; it is no sooner asserted as a gap than filled to a plenitude with the most orthodox of ethical enforcements. To point rhetorically to the emptiness of the secret, "the nothing that is," is, in fact, oddly, *the same gesture* as the attribution to it of a compulsory content about heterosexuality—of the content specifically, "He should have desired her":

*She* was what he had missed. . . . The fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance—he had emptied the cup to the lees; he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened. That was the rare stroke—that was his visitation. . . . This the

companion of his vigil had at a given moment made out, and she had then offered him the chance to baffle his doom. One's doom, however, was never baffled, and on the day she told him his own had come down she had seen him but stupidly stare at the escape she offered him.

The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived.  
(401)

The supposedly “empty” meaning of Marcher’s unspeakable doom is thus necessarily, specifically heterosexual; it refers to the perfectly specific absence of a prescribed heterosexual desire. If critics, eager to help James moralize this ending, persist in claiming to be able to translate freely and without residue from that (absent) heterosexual desire to an abstraction of all possibilities of human love, there are, I think, good reasons for trying to slow them down. The totalizing, insidiously symmetrical view that the “nothing” that is Marcher’s unspeakable fate is necessarily a mirror image of the “everything” he could and should have had is, specifically, in an *oblique* relation to a very different history of meanings for assertions of the erotic negative.

Let us attempt, then, a different strategy for its recovery. A more frankly “full” meaning for that unspeakable fate might come from the centuries-long historical chain of substantive uses of space-clearing negatives to void and at the same time to underline the possibility of male same-sex genitality. The rhetorical name for this figure is preterition. Unspeakable, Unmentionable, *nefandam libidinem*, “that sin which should be neither named nor committed,”<sup>28</sup> the “detestable and abominable sin, amongst Christians not to be named,”

Whose vice in special, if I would declare,  
It were enough for to perturb the air,

“things fearful to name,” “the obscene sound of the unbecoming words,”

A sin so odious that the fame of it  
Will fright the damned in the darksome pit,<sup>29</sup>

28. Quoted in Boswell, *Christianity*, p. 349 (from a legal document dated 533) and p. 380 (from a 1227 letter from Pope Honorius III).

29. Quoted in Bray, *Homosexuality*—the first two from p. 61 (from Edward Coke’s *Institutes* and Sir David Lindsay’s *Works*), the next two from p. 62 (from William Bradford’s *Plimouth Plantation* and Guillaume Du Bartas’s *Divine Weeks*), and the last from p. 22, also from Du Bartas.

“the love that dare not speak its name”<sup>30</sup>—such *were* the speakable nonmedical terms, in Christian tradition, for the homosexual possibility for men. The marginality of these terms’ semantic and ontological status as substantive nouns reflected and shaped the exiguity—but also the potentially enabling secrecy—of that “possibility.” And the newly specifying, reifying medical and penal public discourse of the male homosexual role, in the years around the Wilde trials, far from retiring or obsolescing these preteritive names, seems instead to have packed them more firmly and distinctively with homosexual meaning.<sup>31</sup>

John Marcher’s “secret,” “his singularity” (366), “the thing she knew, which grew to be at last, with the consecration of the years, never mentioned between them save as ‘the real truth’ about him” (366), “the abyss” (375), “his queer consciousness” (378), “the great vagueness” (379), “the secret of the gods” (379), “what ignominy or what monstrosity” (379), “dreadful things . . . I couldn’t name” (381): the ways the story refers to Marcher’s secret fate have the same quasi-nominative, quasi-obliterate structure.

There are, as well, some “fuller,” though still highly equivocal, lexical pointers to a homosexual meaning: “The rest of the world of course thought him *queer*, but she, she only, knew how, and above all why, queer; which was precisely what enabled her to dispose the concealing veil in the right folds. She took his *gaiety* from him—since it had to pass with them for gaiety—as she took everything else. . . . She traced his unhappy *perversion* through reaches of its course into which he could scarce follow it” (367; emphasis added). Still, it is mostly in the reifying grammar of periphrasis and preterition—“such a cataclysm” (360), “the great affair” (360), “the catastrophe” (361), “his predicament” (364), “their real truth” (368), “his inevitable topic” (371), “all that they had thought, first and last” (372), “horrors” (382), something “more monstrous than all the monstrosities we’ve named” (383), “all the loss and all the shame that are thinkable” (384)—that a homosexual meaning becomes, to the degree that it does become, legible. “I don’t focus it. I can’t name it. I only know I’m exposed” (372).

I am convinced, however, that part of the point of the story is that the reifying effect of periphrasis and preterition on this particular meaning is,

30. Douglas, “Two Loves.”

31. For a striking anecdotal example of the mechanism of this, see Beverley Nichols, *Father Figure* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), pp. 92–99.

if anything, *more* damaging than (though not separable from) its obliterative effect. To have succeeded—which was not to be taken for granted—in cracking the centuries-old code by which the-articulated-denial-of-articulability always had the possibility of meaning two things, of meaning either (heterosexual) “nothing” or “homosexual meaning,” would also always have been to assume one’s place in a discourse in which there was a homosexual meaning, in which all homosexual meaning meant a single thing. To crack a code and enjoy the reassuring exhilarations of knowingness is to buy into the specific formula “We Know What That Means.” (I assume it is this mechanism that makes even critics who think about the male-erotic pathways of James’s personal desires appear to be so untroubled about leaving them out of accounts of his writing.<sup>32</sup> As if this form of desire were the most calculable, the simplest to add or subtract or allow for in moving between life and art!) But if, as I suggested in the first section of this chapter, men’s accession to heterosexual entitlement has, for these modern centuries, always been on the ground of a cultivated and compulsory denial of the *unknowability*, of the arbitrariness and self-contradictoriness, of homo/heterosexual definition, then the fearful or triumphant interpretive formula “We Know What That Means” seems to take on an odd centrality. First, it is a lie. But, second, it is the particular lie that animates and perpetuates the mechanism of homophobic male self-ignorance and violence and manipulability.

It is worth, accordingly, trying to discriminate the possible plurality of meanings behind the unspeakables of “The Beast in the Jungle.” To point, as I argue that the narrative itself points and as we have so far pointed, simply to a possibility of “homosexual meaning” is to say worse than nothing: it is to pretend to say one thing. But even on the surface of the story, the secret, “*the thing*,” “the thing she knew,” is discriminated, first of all discriminated temporally. There are at least two secrets: Marcher feels that he knows, but has never told anyone but May Bartram, (secret number one) that he is reserved for some very particular, uniquely rending fate in the future, whose nature is (secret number two) unknown to

32. Exceptions that I know of include Georges-Michel Sarotte’s discussion of James in *Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the American Novel and Theater from Herman Melville to James Baldwin*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1978); Richard Hall, “Henry James: Interpreting an Obsessive Memory,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 8, no. 3/4 (Spring–Summer 1983): 83–97; Robert K. Martin, “The ‘High Felicity’ of Comradeship: A New Reading of Roderick Hudson,” *American Literary Realism* 11 (Spring 1978): 100–108; and Michael Moon, “Sexuality and Visual Terrorism in *The Wings of the Dove*,” *Criticism* 28 (Fall 1986): 427–43.

himself. Over the temporal extent of the story, both the balance, between the two characters, of cognitive mastery over the secrets’ meanings, and the temporal placement, between future and past, of the second secret, shift; it is possible, in addition, that the actual content (if any) of the secrets changes with these temporal and cognitive changes, if time and intersubjectivity are of the essence of the secrets.

Let me, then, baldly spell out my hypothesis of what a series of “full”—that is, homosexually tinged—meanings for the Unspeakable might look like for this story, differing both over time and according to character.

For John Marcher, let us hypothesize, the future secret—the secret of his hidden fate—importantly includes, though it is not necessarily limited to, the possibility of something homosexual. For *Marcher*, the presence or possibility of a homosexual meaning attached to the inner, the future, secret has exactly the reifying, totalizing, and blinding effect we described earlier in regard to the phenomenon of the Unspeakable. Whatever (Marcher feels) may be to be discovered along those lines, it is, in the view of his panic, *one* thing, and the worst thing, “the superstition of the Beast” (394). His readiness to organize the whole course of his life around the preparation for it—the defense against it—remakes his life monolithically in the image of *its* monolith of, in his view, the inseparability of homosexual desire, yielding, discovery, scandal, shame, annihilation. Finally, he has “but one desire left”: that *it* be “decently proportional to the posture he had kept, all his life, in the threatened presence of it” (379).

This is how it happens that the outer secret, the secret of having a secret, functions, in Marcher’s life, precisely as *the closet*. It is not a closet in which there is a homosexual man, for Marcher is not a homosexual man. Instead, it is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret—the closet of imagining a homosexual secret. Yet it is unmistakable that Marcher lives as one who is *in the closet*. His angle on daily existence and intercourse is that of the closeted person,

the secret of the difference between the forms he went through—those of his little office under government, those of caring for his modest patriarchy, for his library, for his garden in the country, for the people in London whose invitations he accepted and repaid—and the detachment that reigned beneath them and that made of all behaviour, all that could in the least be called behaviour, a long act of dissimulation. What it had come to was that he wore a mask painted with the social simper, out of the eye-holes of which there looked eyes of an expression not in the least matching the other features. This the stupid world, even after years, had never more than half-discovered. (367–78)

Whatever the content of the inner secret, too, it is one whose protection requires, for him, a playacting of heterosexuality that is conscious of being only window dressing. “You help me,” he tells May Bartram, “to pass for a man like another” (375). And “what saves us, you know,” she explains, “is that we answer so completely to so usual an appearance: that of the man and woman whose friendship has become such a daily habit—or almost—as to be at last indispensable” (368–69). Oddly, they not only appear to be but are such a man and woman. The element of deceiving the world, of window dressing, comes into their relationship *only* because of the compulsion he feels to invest it with the legitimating stamp of visible, institutionalized genitivity: “The real form it should have taken on the basis that stood out large was the form of their marrying. But the devil in this was that the very basis itself put marrying out of the question. His conviction, his apprehension, his obsession, in short, wasn’t a privilege he could invite a woman to share; and that consequence of it was precisely what was the matter with him” (365).

Because of the terrified stultification of his fantasy about the inner or future secret, Marcher has, until the story’s very last scene, an essentially static relation to and sense of both these secrets. Even the discovery that the outer secret is already shared with someone else, and the admission of May Bartram to the community it creates, “the dim day constituted by their discretions and privacies” (363), does nothing to his closet but furnish it: camouflage it to the eyes of outsiders, and soften its inner cushioning for his own comfort. In fact the admission of May Bartram importantly *consolidates and fortifies* the closet for John Marcher.

In my hypothesis, however, May Bartram’s view of Marcher’s secrets is different from his and more fluid. I want to suggest that, while it is true that she feels desire for him, her involvement with him occurs originally on the ground of her understanding that he is imprisoned by homosexual panic; and her own interest in his closet is not at all in helping him fortify it but in helping him dissolve it.

In this reading, May Bartram from the first sees, correctly, that the possibility of Marcher’s achieving a genuine ability to attend to a woman—sexually or in any other way—depends as an absolute precondition on the dispersion of his totalizing, basilisk fascination with and terror of homosexual possibility. It is only through his coming out of the closet—whether as a *homosexual man* or as a man with a less exclusively defined sexuality that nevertheless admits the possibility of desires for other men—that Marcher could even begin to perceive the attention of a

woman as anything other than a terrifying demand or a devaluing complicity. The truth of this is already evident at the beginning of the story, in the surmises with which Marcher first meets May Bartram’s allusion to something (he cannot remember what) he said to her years before: “The great thing was that he saw in this no vulgar reminder of any ‘sweet’ speech. The vanity of women had long memories, but she was making no claim on him of a compliment or a mistake. With another woman, a totally different one, he might have feared the recall possibly even of some imbecile ‘offer’” (356). The alternative to this, however, in his eyes, is a different kind of “sweetness,” that of a willingly shared confinement: “her knowledge . . . began, even if rather strangely, to taste sweet to him” (358). “Somehow the whole question was a new luxury to him—that is from the moment she was in possession. If she didn’t take the sarcastic view she clearly took the sympathetic, and that was what he had had, in all the long time, from no one whomsoever. What he felt was that he couldn’t at present have begun to tell her, and yet could profit perhaps exquisitely by the accident of having done so of old” (358). So begins the imprisonment of May Bartram in John Marcher’s closet—an imprisonment that, the story makes explicit, is founded on his inability to perceive or value her as a person beyond her complicity in his view of his own predicament.

The conventional view of the story, emphasizing May Bartram’s interest in liberating, unmediatedly, Marcher’s heterosexual possibilities, would see her as unsuccessful in doing so until too late—until the true revelation that comes only after her death. If what needs to be liberated is in the first place Marcher’s potential for homosexual desire, however, the trajectory of the story must be seen as far bleaker. I hypothesize that what May Bartram would have liked for Marcher, the narrative she wished to nurture for him, would have been a progress from a vexed and gaping self-ignorance around his homosexual possibilities to a self-knowledge of them that would have freed him to find and enjoy a sexuality of whatever sort emerged. What she sees happen to Marcher, instead, is the “progress” that the culture more insistently enforces: the progress from a vexed and gaping self-ignorance around his homosexual possibilities to a completed and rationalized and wholly concealed and accepted one. The moment of Marcher’s full incorporation of his erotic self-ignorance is the moment at which the imperatives of the culture cease to enforce him, and he becomes instead the enforcer of the culture.

Section 4 of the story marks the moment at which May Bartram

realizes that, far from helping dissolve Marcher's closet, she has instead and irremediably been permitting him to reinforce it. It is in this section and the next, too, that it becomes explicit in the story that Marcher's fate, what was to have happened to him and did happen, involves a change in him from being the suffering object of a Law or judgment (of a doom in the original sense of the word) to being the embodiment of that Law.

If the transition I am describing is, in certain respects, familiarly oedipal, the structuring metaphor behind its description here seems to be peculiarly alimentative. The question that haunts Marcher in these sections is whether what he has thought of as the secret of his future may not be, after all, in the past; and the question of passing, of who is passing through what or what is passing through whom, of what residue remains to *be* passed, is the form in which he compulsively poses his riddle. Is the beast eating him, or is he eating the beast? "It hasn't passed you by," May Bartram tells him. "It has done its office. It has made you its own" (389). "It's past. It's behind," she finally tells him, to which he replies, "*Nothing*, for me, is past; nothing *will* pass till I pass myself, which I pray my stars may be as soon as possible. Say, however, . . . that I've eaten my cake, as you contend, to the last crumb—how can the thing I've never felt at all be the thing I was marked out to feel?" (391). What May Bartram sees and Marcher does not is that the process of incorporating—of embodying—the Law of masculine self-ignorance is the one that has the least in the world to do with feeling.<sup>33</sup> To gape at and, rebelliously, be forced to

33. A fascinating passage in James's *Notebooks*, p. 318, written in 1905 in California, shows how in James a greater self-knowledge and a greater acceptance and *specificity* of homosexual desire transform this half-conscious enforcing rhetoric of anality, numbness, and silence into a much richer, pregnant address to James's male muse, an invocation of *fisting-as-écriture*:

I sit here, after long weeks, at any rate, in front of my arrears, with an inward accumulation of material of which I feel the wealth, and as to which I can only invoke my familiar demon of patience, who always comes, doesn't he?, when I call. He is here with me in front of this cool green Pacific—he sits close and I feel his soft breath, which cools and steadies and inspires, on my cheek. Everything sinks in: nothing is lost; everything abides and fertilizes and renews its golden promise, making me think with closed eyes of deep and grateful longing when, in the full summer days of L[amb] H[ouse], my long dusty adventure over, I shall be able to [plunge] my hand, my arm, *in*, deep and far, and up to the shoulder—into the heavy bag of remembrance—of suggestion—of imagination—of art—and fish out every little figure and felicity, every little fact and fancy that can be to my purpose. These things are all packed away, now, thicker than I can penetrate, deeper than I can fathom, and there let them rest for the present, in their sacred cool darkness, till I shall let in upon them the mild still light of dear old L[amb] H[ouse]—in which they will begin to gleam and glitter and take form like the gold and jewels of a mine.

swallow the Law is to feel; but to have it finally stick to one's ribs, become however incongruously a part of one's own organism, is then to perfect at the same moment a new hard-won insentience of it and an assumption of (or subsumption by) an identification with it. May Bartram answers Marcher's question, "You take your 'feelings' for granted. You were to suffer your fate. That was not necessarily to know it" (391). Marcher's fate is to cease to suffer fate and instead to become it. May Bartram's fate, with the "slow fine shudder" that climaxes her ultimate appeal to Marcher, is herself to swallow this huge, bitter bolus with which *she* can have *no* deep identification, and to die of it—of what is, to her, knowledge, not power. "So on her lips would the law itself have sounded" (389). Or, tasted.

To end a reading of May Bartram with her death, to end with her silenced forever in that ultimate closet, "her" tomb that represents (to Marcher) *his fate*, would be to do to her feminine desire the same thing I have already argued that Barrie, unforgivably, did to Grizel's. That is to say, it leaves us in danger of figuring May Bartram, or more generally the woman in heterosexuality, as only the exact, heroic supplement to the murderous enforcements of male homophobic/homosocial self-ignorance. "The Fox," Emily Dickinson wrote, "fits the Hound."<sup>34</sup> It would be only too easy to describe May Bartram as the fox that most irreducibly fits this particular hound. She seems the woman (don't we all know them?) who has not only the most delicate nose for but the most potent attraction toward men who are at crises of homosexual panic. . . . — Though, for that matter, won't most women admit that an arousing nimbus, an excessively reflowing and dangerous maelstrom of eroticism, somehow attends men in general at such moments, even otherwise boring men?

If one is to avoid the Barrie-ism of describing May Bartram in terms that reduce her perfectly to the residueless sacrifice John Marcher makes to his Beast, it might be by inquiring into the difference of the paths of her own desire. What does she want, not for him, but for herself, from their relationship? What does she actually get? To speak less equivocally from my own eros and experience, there is a particular relation to truth and authority that a mapping of male homosexual panic offers to a woman in the emotional vicinity. The fact that male heterosexual entitlement in (at

34. *Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 406.



least modern Anglo-American) culture depends on a perfected but always friable self-ignorance in men as to the significance of their desire for other men means that it is always open to women to know something that it is much more dangerous for any nonhomosexual-identified man to know. The ground of May Bartram and John Marcher's relationship is from the first that she has the advantage of him, cognitively: she remembers, as he does not, where and when and with whom they have met before, and most of all she remembers his "secret" from a decade ago while he forgets having told it to her. This differential of knowledge affords her a "slight irony," an "advantage" (353)—but one that he can at the same time use to his own profit as "the buried treasure of her knowledge," "this little hoard" (363). As their relationship continues, the sense of power and of a marked, rather free-floating irony about May Bartram becomes stronger and stronger, even in proportion to Marcher's accelerating progress toward self-ignorance and toward a blindly selfish expropriation of her emotional labor. Both the care and the creativity of her investment in him, the imaginative reach of her fostering his homosexual potential as a route back to his truer perception of herself, are forms of gender-political resilience in her as well as of love. They are forms of excitement, too, of real though insufficient power, and of pleasure.

In the last scene of "The Beast in the Jungle" John Marcher becomes, in this reading, not the finally self-knowing man who is capable of heterosexual love, but the irredeemably self-ignorant man who embodies and enforces heterosexual compulsion. In this reading, that is to say, May Bartram's prophecy to Marcher that "You'll never know now" (390) is a true one.

Importantly for the homosexual plot, too, the final scene is also the only one in the entire story that reveals or tests the affective quality of Marcher's perception of another man. "The shock of the face" (399): this is, in the last scene, the beginning of what Marcher ultimately considers "the most extraordinary thing that had happened to him" (400). At the beginning of Marcher's confrontation with this male figure at the cemetery, the erotic possibilities of the connection between the men appear to be all open. The man, whose "mute assault" Marcher feels "so deep down that he winced at the steady thrust," is mourning profoundly over "a grave apparently fresh," but (perhaps only to Marcher's closet-sharpened suspicions?) a slightest potential of Whitmanian cruisiness seems at first to tinge the air, as well:

His pace was slow, so that — and all the more as there was a kind of hunger in his look — the two men were for a minute directly confronted. Marcher knew him at once for one of the deeply stricken . . . nothing lived but the deep ravage of the features he showed. He *showed* them — that was the point; he was moved, as he passed, by some impulse that was either a signal for sympathy or, more possibly, a challenge to an opposed sorrow. He might already have been aware of our friend. . . . What Marcher was at all events conscious of was in the first place that the image of scarred passion presented to him was conscious too — of something that profaned the air; and in the second that, roused, startled, shocked, he was yet the next moment looking after it, as it went, with envy. (400–401)

The path traveled by Marcher's desire in this brief and cryptic nonencounter reenacts a classic trajectory of male entitlement. Marcher begins with the possibility of *desire* for the man, in response to the man's open "hunger" ("which," afterward, "still flared for him like a smoky torch" [401]). Deflecting that desire under a fear of profanation, he then replaces it with envy, with an *identification with* the man in that man's (baffled) desire for some other, presumed female, dead object. "The stranger passed, but the raw glare of his grief remained, making our friend wonder in pity what wrong, what wound it expressed, what injury not to be healed. What had the man *had*, to make him by the loss of it so bleed and yet live?" (401).

What had the man *had*? The loss by which a man *so bleeds and yet lives* is, is it not, supposed to be the castratory one of the phallus figured as mother, the inevitability of whose sacrifice ushers sons into the status of fathers and into the control (read both ways) of the Law. What is strikingly open in the ending of "The Beast in the Jungle" is how central to that process is man's desire for man — and the denial of that desire. The imperative that there *be* a male figure to take this place is the clearer in that, at an earlier climactic moment, in a female "shock of the face," May Bartram has presented to Marcher her own face, in a conscious revelation that was far more clearly of desire:

It had become suddenly, from her movement and attitude, beautiful and vivid to him that she had something more to give him; her wasted face delicately shone with it — it glittered almost as with the white lustre of silver in her expression. She was right, incontestably, for what he saw in her face was the truth, and strangely, without consequence, while their talk of it as dreadful was still in the air, she appeared to present it as inordinately soft. This, prompting bewilderment, made him but gape the

more gratefully for her revelation, so that they continued for some minutes silent, her face shining at him, her contact imponderably pressing, and his stare all kind but all expectant. The end, none the less, was that what he had expected failed to come to him. (386)

To the shock of the female face Marcher is not phobic but simply numb. It is only by turning his desire for the male face into an envious identification with male loss that Marcher finally comes into *any* relation to a woman—and then it is a relation through one dead woman (the other man's) to another dead woman of his own. That is to say, it is the relation of *compulsory* heterosexuality.

When Lytton Strachey's claim to be a conscientious objector was being examined, he was asked what he would do if a German were to try to rape his sister. "I should," he is said to have replied, "try and interpose my own body."<sup>35</sup> Not the joky gay self-knowledge but the heterosexual, self-ignorant acting out of just this fantasy ends "The Beast in the Jungle." To face the gaze of the Beast would have been, for Marcher, to dissolve it.<sup>36</sup> To face the "kind of hunger in the look" of the grieving man—to explore at all into the sharper lambencies of that encounter—would have been to dissolve the closet, to recreate its hypostatized compulsions as desires. Marcher, instead, to the very end, turns his back—recreating a double scenario of homosexual compulsion and heterosexual compulsion. "He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast; then, while he looked, perceived it, as by a stir of the air, rise, huge and hideous, for the leap that was to settle him. His eyes darkened—it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, face down, on the tomb" (402).

35. Lytton Strachey, quoted in Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography* (London: W. H. Heinemann, 1968), 2: 179.

36. Ruth Bernard Yeazell makes clear the oddity of having Marcher turn his back on the Beast that is supposed, at this late moment, to represent his self-recognition (in *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976], pp. 37–38).

## 5

## Proust and the Spectacle of the Closet

"Vous devez vous y entendre mieux que moi, M. de Charlus, à faire marcher des petits marins. . . . Tenez, voici un livre que j'ai reçu, je pense qu'il vous intéressera. . . . Le titre est joli: *Parmi les hommes*."

Proust, *A la recherche*

About the foundational impossibilities of modern homo/heterosexual definition, the questions we have been essaying so far have been, not how this incoherent dispensation can be rationalized away or set straight, not what it means or even how it means, but what it makes happen, and how. *A la recherche du temps perdu* demands to be a signaling text of such an exploration. While the figure of Wilde may have been the most formative individual influence on turn-of-the-century Anglo-European homosexual definition and identity (including Proust's), *A la recherche* has remained into the present the most vital center of the energies of gay literary high culture, as well as of many manifestations of modern literary high culture in general. It offers what seems to have been the definitive performance of the presiding incoherences of modern gay (and hence nongay) sexual specification and gay (and hence nongay) gender: definitive, that is, in setting up positions and sight lines, not in foreclosing future performance, since it seems on the contrary that the closet drama of *A la recherche* is still *in* performance through its sustained and changing mobilizations of clausal and disclosural rage, excitement, resistance, pleasure, need, projection, and exclusion.

Two recent, gay-affirmative critical ways of dealing with the incoherences around homosexuality in Proust, opposite in tone and methodology and in many ways opposite in intent, seem to find it necessary to make similar gestures of compartmentalizing Proust's treatment of sexual specification, disavowing one side of it and identifying with and nourishing the other. J. E. Rivers's 1980 book *Proust and the Art of Love*, a treatment of the centrality of the homosexual "theme" in Proust that is full