A few pages into Julia Ward Howe’s *The Hermaphrodite*, the novel’s ambiguously sexed narrator, Laurence, reflects on what he terms the “negative happiness of early youth.” In retrospect, he observes, childhood appears to us “happy and golden,” but we experience it otherwise as we live it: “[A]t the time, I was conscious of little more than a vague bien être, sometimes interrupted by deepest melancholy, and a hope of something far brighter and better, which methought time must soon bring me, but for which I am waiting still” (Howe, *H* 6). Laurence’s reflection indexes the two conventional attitudes toward the time of modernity that dominated the nineteenth century: the optimistic looking-forward of a sturdily Victorian faith in progress and the rueful backward glance of a Romantic nostalgia, the sense that the best of times is always already behind us. Contradictory as they might seem, the two attitudes actually complement one another, establishing time as irrevocably linear and the future as its irrefutable guiding principle; even the nostalgic perspective concedes the victory of time’s arrow, the necessity of its incessant movement away from the cherished recollection. Regardless of how one feels about it, time marches on as it surely must. Yet at the same time, Laurence’s consistent expectation of “something far brighter and better” hints at the queer time that suffuses *The Hermaphrodite.*
The future expected, in this vision, may not be a stable repetition (albeit with steady improvements) of the lives one’s parents have already lived, but a radically different one, one not yet imagined, scarcely imaginable; and it is one that Laurence, now grown and, presumably, beyond the wildness of childish dreams, continues to await.

I would like, in this essay, to think through the time that Laurence’s selves—both recollected and present—cannot imagine, a time in which one’s relation to the historical is not predicated on membership in a regularly reproduced family. Jacques Derrida has described the unanticipated future as “necessarily monstrous” insofar as its “surprising” arrival, for which we “are not prepared . . . is heralded by a species of monsters” (Derrida, “Passages” 386–87). Laurence is described as a “monster” both by himself and by his would-be lover Emma on account of his ambiguous sex, which he sees as rendering him ineligible for marriage, unable to “become the half of another” (Howe, H 3) and hence outside the normative family. He is not, however, alone in this position of temporal ex-centricity, as his friend Berto suggests: “It has always been a mania of yours, caro ti, to imagine that everything befalling you is quite peculiar and individual to yourself—you will not perhaps believe that there are a hundred families in Rome, each of which has some one member at least in the same relative position as yourself” (Howe, H 130). Though he is as yet unaware of the precise cause of Laurence’s alienation from his family, Berto nevertheless identifies the way his friend’s putatively exceptional situation comes to appear, in this novel, almost typical, as Laurence’s exile from the family leads him instead toward a series of alliances that collectively falsify the fantasized coherence of gender and desire in the emergent sexual order, and with it, the strategies of temporal transcendence centered around succession and reproduction. Throughout the strange, untimely world of The Hermaphrodite, a persistent denaturalization of both traditional and “modern” modes of temporal self-perpetuation suggests that another way of being in time may lurk beyond the horizon, called into play by the ruination of the family. Yet that other way of being is never, finally, actualized: rather, it is left, in ghostly form, to haunt the corners of Laurence’s story.

The early-twenty-first-century publication of Howe’s novel coincided with a noteworthy increase of inquiry into the question of time in and around the literary text. In American studies, for instance, a new attention to time has accompanied and fueled a revised understanding of space, a resistance to the distorting sense of historical and geological autonomy that congeals around the habit of studying “national” literary traditions, in favor of a recognition that, as Wai Chee Dimock phrases it, “what we nominate as ‘American literature’ is simply an effect of that nomination” (Dimock, “Planet” 4). A “plan-
etary,” rather than national/period-bound, approach to literary analysis helps us to account for the otherwise surprising production, by a woman living in mid-nineteenth-century Boston, of a narrative that resembled, at once, classical mythology and contemporary French fiction (Williams, *HH* 95). The planetary perspective, that is, enables us to see this type of literary wandering across historical and national borders as something other than Howe’s imaginative escape from a stifling life; rather, we may view it as a cognitive challenge to the (stifling) habit of “fram[ing] vast syntagmatic signifying networks within boxes of time” (Charnes). The corporeal and erotic dimension of this intellectual journey demands, as well, that we devote sustained attention to the role of the sexual in reproducing our conceptions of time, and vice versa. Recent scholarship in queer studies, drawing on and extending the postcolonial critical decentering of Western historical narratives, emphasizes the ways the sexual and the temporal are bound up together—the extent to which being in sync with one’s culture consists of fidelity to its sexual norms. As contemporary queer theorists have shown, the ability to “count” as a contributing member of one’s social world, to signify as part of history, is dependent, in the modern West, upon one’s ability to situate oneself according to developmental, sexual, and affective timelines structured around desire for, participation in, and perpetuation of a nuclear family conceived as both emotionally nurturing and heterosexually reproductive. This new attention to the sexual politics of time helps us to trace the way that peregrinations like Laurence’s force the histories of the family to reveal themselves as such, dismantling the mutually reinforcing and supposedly natural links between identity positions and familial relations. They suggest, moreover, how an aimless exile may function as something other than a waste of time, how the untimely existences of Laurence and his queer kin might help us to bend temporality itself, including the time frame in which we can understand *The Hermaphrodite*.

I will open this discussion by using the uncertainty of time in *The Hermaphrodite* and the temporal complexity of its eponymous mythical figure to inquire into the temporality of literary analysis and its capacity for unsettling our understanding of the relations between past and present. I will then move into a consideration of how Laurence’s exile from the line of succession in his father’s estate illuminates a crucial transitional period in the history of sexuality between aristocratic and democratic family forms, the epochal shift that Michel Foucault tracks under the rubrics of *alliance* and sexuality, respectively. In a significant departure from the mid-century domestic-sentimental ideal, however, *The Hermaphrodite* fails to embrace the middle-class family of nurture, declining to pin its understanding of the future on the reproductive
imperative. The novel instead foregrounds a Romantic ideal of hetero-sexual 
intimate transcendence at the same time as it insistently exposes the fissures 
in that time scheme, particularly the displeasure created by a continuing dif-
fERENCE in the social power possessed by each sex, which leaves women per-
petually falling behind. The transcendent teleology of the romance is thus, 
to use Laurence’s term, unrealized both in and by the novel. In the space 
left open by this unrealization, The Hermaphrodite explores other, queerer, 
forms of relation and self-arrangement, forms that also remain unrealized, 
but whose suggestive resonance may propose to us other possibilities for 
charting the futures of sex.

1. History of a Strange Being: 
The Time(s) of The Hermaphrodite

A few problems arise when one tries, as “responsible” literary scholars gener-
ally do, to historicize Howe’s novel. Some of these are common to any unpub-
lished work and many a published one as well. It’s not clear when, exactly, 
Howe composed the pieces of the manuscript that have been published as 
The Hermaphrodite, though the novel’s editor and Howe’s biographer Gary 
Williams dates them with reasonable confidence around 1847. Further-
more, it isn’t known whether Howe ever completed the novel (nor whether 
she would have called it such; Williams cites an 1843 letter that refers to a 
“stranded wreck of a novel, or rather story” that concerned “the history of a 
strange being” [quoted in Williams, HH 81]), or even whether she intended 
the fragments to comprise one story or two (Williams, “Speaking” x). Even 
when we identify this work as a novel composed in the mid-nineteenth cen-
tury, the work of historicizing is complicated by the difficulty of determin-
ing precisely how time in the novel relates to the time of the novel. Though 
The Hermaphrodite maps Laurence’s spatial locations with some degree of 
clarity, it is vague and contradictory on the matter of time. It flirts with the 
category of the historical romance, as it seems to take place in an Old World, 
a patriarchal Europe not overly disturbed by the glimmerings of modernity, 
its nonspecific anteriority at once a comforting invocation of tradition and a 
stiflingly archaic atmosphere reminiscent of Poe’s stories. Despite this uncer-
tain atmosphere of “beforenness,” however, the story ultimately seems to be 
set after Howe’s birth: the 1820s. A somewhat dislocating moment of location 
orcerus by made by Berto identify them obliquely as the Prince Giovanni Torlonia 
(1755–1829) and Charles Lucien Bonaparte (1803–1857). Berto’s observation
that the latter has “some reputation as an author and a naturalist” suggests that this scene takes place sometime in the late 1820s, after Bonaparte has begun to publish his work on American ornithology (1825–33) but before the death of Torlonia (Howe, H 123).

Yet in the very space where the story establishes its time as historically adjacent to that of its author, the novel’s temporal register also vastly expands, taking on a historical depth suggestive of the ruins of empire. A crucial, traumatic scene, in which Laurence encounters and is renounced by his former companion and would-be lover, Ronald, is situated within the Coliseum; the bereft Laurence, who subsequently falls into a deathlike coma, ends the scene as a “beautiful monster [sitting] as before upon the heap of stones, in the ancient forum, himself as cold and dead as anything there” (Howe, H 193). This enfolding of a present-tense singularity within the vast historical scale of the “ancient forum” demonstrates the novel’s ability to serve as a kind of temporal sponge that, as Dimock asserts, surpasses the modern spatiotemporal frame of the nation. Dimock reads a similar situation of novelistic suffering, also located in Rome, within Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady as contradicting Benedict Anderson’s assessment of the nineteenth-century novel, alongside the nation and the newspaper, as an instrument of the modern regulation of time. Anderson, Dimock observes,

cannot be more wrong about the novel; there is no standardized timetable here, no “clock and calendar” to dictate a flat, synchronized surface. On the contrary, it is because novelistic time is not synchronized, not flat, because it is spongelike, with dimensions sunken and curled up, that it has a geometry different from Euclid’s, and different from the plane geometry of the nation. (Dimock, Continents 88)⁶

The experience of reading a novel is nothing like the serial simultaneity of the newspaper; it is, rather, like walking in a city whose history spans millennia (and indeed, it is no accident that the novel brings Laurence from a small Swiss canton, site of his father’s vehement appeal to a putatively stable tradition, to Rome, the eternal city, where the fantasy of “tradition” in the singular becomes laughable). One is constantly brushing up against pasts that were memorialized, repressed, or simply abandoned—against futures we now know as “history,” and others that simply never came to be.

For Dimock, part of the novel’s fractal capacity is its ability to absorb and transform epic poetry, so that the “archaic” genre, in modern literature, is retained as an uneven survival, manifested “in percentages, as grains and lumps” (Dimock, Continents 86, 87). These pieces of pastness swirling around
Howe’s novel include the classical myths that carry forward the figure of the hermaphrodite, which, like the Coliseum setting, bring to the novel a deep historical dimension. The myth of the hermaphrodite provides the novel with temporal as well as historical grain, furnishing not only the idea of Laurence’s ambiguous sex but also the narrative structures that enable it to use the figure of the hermaphrodite to denaturalize sexual sequencing. The story of Hermaphroditus, as adapted from Ovid, is precisely that, a story: not simply an account of a being who possesses two sexes, it is rather a narrative of transformation, of a being who is first one thing, then another. Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, is pursued by the nymph Salmacis, to whom he is unresponsive; as she watches him bathe in a pool, she prays to the gods that they never be separated, to which they respond by fusing the two bodies. The mournful Hermaphroditus, “weakened” by the addition of femininity, then asks that any man bathing in the pool be similarly transformed. Sharply distinguished from fantasies of the androgyne as originary figure and/or heterosexual Romantic telos, the untimely figure of the hermaphrodite, a creature whose vexed history of desire and shame is marked in the flesh, calls a culture’s sexual arrangements into question.

The classical period, however, is not the only anterior era referenced by Howe’s citation of the hermaphrodite, as the way in which Laurence’s ambiguous sex is first identified in the novel makes clear. At a college reception where Laurence, having won a prize, is the center of attention, he overhears an Italian stranger searching for a classical analogue to his “antique” beauty. Rejecting comparisons to Antinoüs, Mercury, and Apollo, the Italian detects “a striking resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Howe, H 16). Upon hearing these words, Laurence, left uninformed by his parents about the particulars of his ambiguous sex, experiences a shock of recognition and flees to his room, where he is terrorized by “mocking spectres” as he imagines that “the very walls had eyes to spy out my secret, and tongues to betray it” (Howe, H 17). It is crucial here that Laurence is not identified directly as a hermaphrodite (he is later described by a physician as a “very extraordinary case . . . [of] anomalous humanity” [Howe, H 194]) but by means of a hermaphrodite, and a very specifically located one. The reference to the Villa Borghese, where the statue to which the Italian refers is preserved in a room that also contains a series of paintings depicting scenes from Ovid’s Hermaphroditus, points us in the direction of Rome, where the narrative is eventually headed; it also enfolds the time of the Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1576–1633) with that of the hermaphrodite, thus adding to the frame of gender anomalousness both a general notion of early modern aesthetic innovation (Borghese was a collector of Caravaggio and Bernini) and a
particular history of sexual deviance: that of Borghese, whose attachment to a male lover was so well known as to merit papal intervention and so strong as to cause him to fall into a deep depression after their separation.  

The grains and lumps of other times, other narratives, thus complicate the gender and sexual arrangements of the fictional world in which Laurence moves as well as the historical world his story moves against. But we must pause, at this point, to ask precisely which historical world, which culture’s arrangements, we are talking about here: Howe’s or our own? For if, as I above observed, time in the novel is difficult to pin down, the time of the novel is a no less complex matter. Thus far I have been discussing the ways that the novel opens itself outward and backward, as it were, to incorporate traces of cultures other than and prior to Howe’s own. Yet this particular text also constitutes a compelling example of the way literary texts open themselves forward, generating what we might understand, in Linda Charnes’s terms, as “worm-holes to the future.” The question of the time of The Hermaphrodite differs, in this sense, from the questions about how to date and classify the manuscript to which I referred above. Though a “common-sense” historicism would tell us that what we have here is a mid-nineteenth-century novel that just happens to have been published for the first time in 2004, I maintain that the latter fact is more than incidental to our reading. For one thing, as Williams explains, the fragmentary manuscript itself required significant deciphering and arranging before it could be understood as telling anything like a coherent story; his arrangement of the existent fragments in what seems like a solid approximation of chronological order is based, as he observes, not on a historically purist claim of Howe’s original intent but a pragmatic sense of what constitutes a “readable text,” a judgment necessarily made from our present tense (Williams, “Speaking” xlv). The way that readable story is framed by the University of Nebraska Press also says much about our own contemporary generation of a sense of sexual pastness, from the sepia-toned image of an androgynous nude, adapted from a turn-of-the-century photograph, that appears on the dust cover, to the selection of The Hermaphrodite (a word that, when applied to human beings, now registers as archaic) as the title.  

These eroticized signs are recognizable enough to the contemporary reader to generate a sense of connection and different enough to refuse full identification—a seductive mixture of intimacy and distance that resembles the alternating stances of presentism and alterism that, as Carolyn Dinshaw shows in her groundbreaking queer historiography Getting Medieval (1999), characterize contemporary accounts of the sexual past. Viewed from this perspective, The Hermaphrodite is not a mid-nineteenth-century novel that happened to be published in the twenty-first century; it is, rather, a contem-
porary projection of a moment in the nineteenth-century literary history of sexuality.

My intent here is not to condemn either the press or the novel's editor for the crime of sullying a “pure” past with the grubby fingerprints of our own present. On the contrary, the retroprojection that is *The Hermaphrodite* affords us an important occasion for rethinking the way we think about time in both literary history and the history of sexuality, for remembering, as Charnes observes, “to keep pressing the question [of what another historiography might look like]—to acknowledge the inherent limitations of the cognitive framework that continues to organize our ideological relationship to time” (Charnes). If the fragmented state of Howe's manuscript generates, for the published novel, more than the usual number of what Charnes calls “crash sites,” places where we can see the future make contact with the historical text, this serves but to remind us that all histories are projections. The jumbled and fractal temporalities of *The Hermaphrodite*, alongside the suggestive transtemporal dialogue created by our collision with Howe's text, disable the fantasy of a singular, linear history and, consequently, posit the possibility of other ways of being in, and thinking about, time. And this reminds us, in turn, to try to unlearn habits of mapping the history of sexuality as if we ourselves, our contemporary forms of sexual identity and relation, were its endpoint. As Foucault reminds us, our sexual present tense is no less a projection than the past, and its future is not yet given. Rather than using the past as a unifying mirror to reflect back a coherent self-image, then, a queer historiography would seek to multiply the possible points of contact between them and the kinds of futures that that contact might enliven. The intensities of Laurence's erotically charged relation with Ronald, for instance, may prompt a reading of hermaphrodisim as figuring homosexuality *avant la lettre*—but that understanding need not exhaust the forms of being and modes of attachment this coupling can be made to figure, just as the hetero/homosexual binary ought not to exhaust thinking about sexuality in our own time. To read Howe's novel as breaking apart its present, employing various modes of pastness, and, importantly, scrabbling around for other possible futures, is also to remind ourselves of the necessity of doing the same.

2. The Time of Relations

As I noted above, the novel identifies its diegetic present only within a seemingly unimportant, passing comment about passersby, a move that suggests its less-than-primary status in relation to the multiplicity of times in the nar-
rative. Yet it is noteworthy that that passing historical present also coincides with a key moment within a history of passage, or transition, between family forms. If we accept Berto’s insistence, earlier cited, on Laurence’s typical rather than exceptional status, then the most crucial moment in his history is not the discovery of his ambiguous sex, but his radical break with the family as a result. Intriguingly, the novel structures this break according to a historical transition that, according to Michel Foucault, characterizes modernity itself: the move from a sociality ordered by blood to one ordered by sex. In the first volume of _The History of Sexuality_, Foucault pinpoints the nineteenth century as the crucial period for this transformation in the dominant rubrics of power. The rubric of blood—in which power was channeled through “systems of alliance, the political form of the sovereign, the differentiation into orders and castes, and the value of descent lines”—characterizes the old world, whereas in the new world, the “themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body” identify sexuality as the target of a power concerned with the management of life (Foucault, _History_ 147). Though Foucault’s account does not center on the importance of temporality to modernity’s rearrangement of power, these themes, suggesting the centrality of normative rhythms of life and above all of reproduction in the new world, indicate the extent to which the proliferation of power under the apparatus of sexuality depends upon the timing of life around the reproductive imperative, structuring all life narratives in relation to the “future of the species.”

It is crucial here that sexuality, for Foucault, signifies not simply those behaviors that we usually regard as “sexual,” but more generally, an intensification of the body’s social meanings, which may include affective as well as physical dimensions. Hence the emotional arrangements of the reproductive family were also important to the timing of life.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in _Democracy in America_, takes up the question of the temporal implications of modernizing the family form much more directly. Tocqueville notes that families mark both space and time differently in aristocracy and in modernity. Aristocratic families “remain for centuries in the same condition, often on the same spot,” producing a kind of “contemporaneous[ness]” across generations that bonds members. But in democratic nations, Tocqueville argues, that stability is lacking, as “new families are constantly springing up, others are constantly falling away, and all that remain change their condition” (Tocqueville, vol. 2, 98–99).

The language of isolation and anxiety that Tocqueville employs to describe the spatiotemporal situation of humans in modernity, contrasted with the language of stability in which he narrates the time of the aristocratic bloodline, suggests the extent to which, as Foucault observes, this historical shift “did not come
about . . . without overlappings, interactions, and echoes.” Insofar as modernity continues to be “haunted” by a “preoccupation with blood and the law,” Foucault argues, some compensation for the loss of temporal stability, what Tocqueville referred to as a repeated rupturing of the “woof of time,” was sought (Foucault, History 149; Tocqueville, vol. 2, 99). The intense affections of the emergent model of middle-class domesticity, which remade the family in the sentimental mode, served in part, as Tocqueville suggests, to compensate for the spatiotemporal drift that results from democracy’s flux. Though the “contemporaneity” with the distant past experienced by the aristocratic family eroded in modernity, the new form of the affectionate family, with its increasing emphasis on the home as a place for the care of children, offered an optimistic link to a progressive future in the form of the child. The love that binds the domestic/sentimental family thus plays an important role in the modern deployment of sexuality.

The question of love comes to the fore in the argument that causes Laurence’s break with his father’s family. Laurence’s titled father commands his family as absolutely as he rules over the two “princely estates” combined in his marriage (Howe, H 23). When Laurence returns from college, he remarks his father’s power to synchronize the movements of the entire household around his will, intimating a corresponding absence, in these clockwork figures, of the “natural” warmth of the family:

Paternus seemed to be the Evil Genius, the master magician of the feast, and one could have dreamed that the other figures around the table had been so many automata, animated only by his will. When he ate, the company ate, their very knives and forks keeping time with his. When he spoke, they listened and replied—when his voice ceased, they subsided into sympathetic silence. The dessert having been got through with, my health having been formally proposed and mechanically drunk, I wondered whether he would leave them rooted in their places until the next day, at the same hour; but he gave the signal of command, and they rose in concert, and marched like well-drilled soldiers back to the drawing room. (Howe, H 24)

For Laurence’s father (whom he mockingly dubs Paternus, the Latinization evoking the Roman structure of patria potestas, which seems to have survived in his household) the transmission of bloodlines is so important that it has literally constructed Laurence’s sex. A show of independence from Laurence provokes Paternus to threaten that he can “‘hold up [Laurence’s] assumed manhood to the scorn of society’” (Howe, H 28). The father explains that Laurence’s birth coincided with an illness that left him anxious to secure a
male heir; having only daughters, he “‘deemed it most expedient’” to pronounce Laurence male at birth so that he could secure the estate’s succession across time (Howe, H 29). This explanation conflicts significantly with the one Laurence has previously given: that his parents hoped, in designating him male, to give him the protection of masculinity, “which would at least permit me to choose my own terms in associating with the world, and secure to me an independence of position most desirable for one who could never hope to become the half of another” (Howe, H 3). While both of these accounts align social power with maleness, Paternus’s version designates his household as one in which the patriarch’s law and the continuity of bloodlines remain the overarching concerns, rather than such affectively centered notions as the “welfare of the child,” implicit in Laurence’s account. Laurence discovers, moreover, that his father is willing to offer this information only because he now wishes to insure a more integral succession through Laurence’s younger brother Philip, born while Laurence was away at school.

As his version of the decision behind the designation of his sex indicates, Laurence holds a very different understanding of both power and the family form. He maintains that his father’s power is not limitless, promising that he will consult both legal and medical authorities to counter any attempt to disinherit him by disproving his manhood, revealing a thoroughly modern understanding of the power of science to speak the truth of the body. Nevertheless, Laurence is willing to place himself out of the line of succession, though this willingness comes from an understanding of his father’s manhood, rather than his own, as lacking. Paternus is, in Laurence’s view, a “domestic iceberg,” and he marvels that two such affectionate beings as himself and Philip could descend from such a father (Howe, H 26). During their argument, in response to Paternus’s insistence on the “‘respect due to a father,’” Laurence insists on “‘the kindness—the humanity due to a son’” (Howe, H 28). His father’s inhumanity “degrade[s]” the succession in Laurence’s eyes, as he affirms: “I had not ambition to represent him” (Howe, H 29–30). When his father offers to settle a smaller fortune on Laurence if he will agree to renounce the patrimony to Philip, Laurence readily agrees, recasting the decision as motivated not by his father’s potential legal power over him but by his failure to love him as a father should: “He did not injure me, he had not power to do so, but the evil intention in a father’s heart—ah! It made an orphan of me once and forever” (Howe, H 27). In fact, Laurence will only agree to contract the matter with Philip directly, preferring the affectionate child to the titled “iceberg.”

We can see in this father-son conflict an impress of the historical transformation of family forms outlined above: Laurence’s father’s ancient vision of
family as controlled by father-right above all, versus his own modern image of the family as an affectionate assemblage ruled by the “heart” and hedged round by professional authority. Ironically, Laurence manages, by conceding to his father the right to order the patrilinear succession as he sees fit, to bring his own model of family into being in the very act of renunciation; his insistence on accepting his renegotiated inheritance from Philip rather than Paternus forces law to follow love. Philip, for his part, shows signs of being the very type of relation for which Laurence longs; Laurence observes that “the child’s heart already pined for sympathy and affection,” and he cries out for Laurence to take him along as he prepares to depart (Howe, H 31). Years later, Philip will prove his fidelity to Laurence’s model of the family, as he chooses for his lover not a titled woman but a peasant’s daughter, the dancer Rösli. He follows Rösli to Rome and proposes marriage, insisting that he will locate Laurence and restore to his “dearly loved” brother the right of succession, instead taking up residence in a small rural cottage on the estate, confident that the affectionate Laurence will shelter them (Howe, H 118). In contrast, Laurence’s father views the succession agreement as a mere matter of expediency, just as he understood Laurence’s sex. When Philip dies shortly after fleeing to Rome, the father confronts Laurence at his graveside, hailing him publicly as Viscount and demanding that he return home to resume his place as heir. When Laurence refuses, he bribes officials to have his son declared insane and committed to an institution, a fate Laurence manages to escape only by going into hiding as an Englishwoman named Cecilia. The institutional power of the father thus continues to threaten the affectionate model Laurence embraces. Though Laurence insists on narrating his own story according to a desire to will into being a world ordered by voluntary, affinitive bonds rather than hereditary obligation, when voluntary contracts and promises (to say nothing of medical authority) can be simply voided by power, he is forced to realize that his father’s world still refuses to cede the historical stage.

3. Hetero-sexual Sequences

Laurence’s father’s concern for the succession reflects not only a historically distinct conception of the purpose of family but, consequently, a different apprehension of time. The aristocratic family, as Tocqueville depicts it, is balanced in the middle of distant ancestors and descendants, contemporaneous with all generations. In the middle-class sentimental-domestic vision of the family that emerged in the nineteenth century—one in which the presence
of affectionate bonds, rather than noble bloodlines, conveys the value of a household—transtemporal connection is, rather, sustained through the figure of the child. In this shift, reproduction is necessitated by a future whose demands pressure the present, rather than a line of descent that demands maintenance. As a result, the time of the family becomes “progressive,” forward-moving, and more or less linear. The very possibility of that progress, however, mandates that the family be ideologically structured to place limitations on temporal flux; the brighter future toward which the affectionate family, in time with the democratic nation, optimistically launches its children should differ only in degree, not in kind, from the life-stories of the parents. The promise of futurity compensates for the loss or lack of ancestral lineage; not everyone can possess that type of past, but people willing to dedicate themselves to the proper family form can master this way of living on indefinitely. Yet while the shape of the past differs in the modern family, it is not wholly absent; the extensive bloodline of the aristocratic family is replaced by the timelessness of familial, and specifically maternal, affection, a nurture authorized by nature, and centered around the child, who requires this affectionate “heritage” in order to thrive. As a result, the conception of the child and the notion of futurity have become so intertwined that, as some queer theorists have recently argued, the future itself is unimaginable outside the structures of generational reproduction. As Michael Warner observes: “Whether we bear children or not, our lives converge on a future that continues to be imagined not as the activity of other adults like ourselves, but as the inheritance of children—our donatees, our surrogates, our redeemers, our alibi” (Warner 777).¹⁵

Given the centrality of what Warner dubs “repronarrative” to the modern conception of time, an identity that has been ideologically central since the mid-nineteenth century, its absence from the fragments that comprise The Hermaphrodite is noteworthy (Warner 786). Alongside Laurence’s faith in the nurturant family, a nostalgic relation to childhood is clearly manifested throughout the work: within Laurence’s recollection of his own childhood (before his “fall” into an awareness of the complexity created by his ambiguous sex), in the depiction of the affectionate Philip, and in Laurence’s reflections on Ronald’s youth, though these last are complicated by his own obvious attraction to Ronald. Yet this marked affection for childhood is accompanied by no evident desire to reproduce these charming figures. Occasionally, one of the male characters appeals to the sacred duty of childbearing, yet even they depict it only as that which women, by nature, crave. In Berto’s account of his relationship with Eleonora, a young Swiss girl, he seeks—unsuccessfully—to check her desire to enter a Roman convent by insisting: “[Women]
love, they are loved, they will marry, and rear up blooming families, while you are withering in your lonely cloister. They are following their true vocation, derived from Nature and from God, while yours dates only from your own imagination and the wrongly exerted influence of others” (Howe, H 104–5). Similarly, when Berto’s mad sister Nina, rhapsodizing about her adventures in America with Gaetano, the banished former lover to whom she imagines herself married, pauses to hold up her arms and lament, “‘somehow, they are always empty,’” Berto and Laurence ascribe this interruption to the speech of a woman’s nature through the flesh of the female body, occasionally intruding into Nina’s dream-life to remind her to lament the children she will never bear (Howe, H 142).

Despite these laments, however, the absence of the reproductive family from the plot of the novel does not function to underscore its importance, as the death or absence of the mother worked, in mid-century sentimental novels, to enshrine the cultural centrality of that figure. Rather, both of the examples I have cited here operate to underscore the ideological, rather than biological, origin of the marital-reproductive imperative. Childbearing appears to be what men want women to want, whereas neither Eleonora nor Nina seems especially bothered by the absence of progeny in their lives. Despite Berto’s insistence that Eleonora emulate, rather than adore, the mother of Christ, her passion for the conventual life is so strong that at her induction she swoons in the arms of the Abbess and “die[s] a momentary death, under the too keen sword of the spirit” (Howe, H 107). Nina, for her part, neglects to incorporate children into her fantasy union with Gaetano; despite Laurence’s insistence that she “weep[s] for the children that are not, and have never been,” the arms whose emptiness she laments appear to be extended only toward her absent lover (Howe, H 142). The maternal instinct is appealed to, in the novel, whenever women’s desire for passionate union with an immaterial beloved becomes too palpably erotic, threatening to reveal itself as desire, without the reproductive imperative as its alibi.

In place of the aforementioned forms of familial transtemporal connection—maintaining a succession for its own sake and in embracing the future through the figure of the child—*The Hermaphrodite*, instead, puts forth a vision of temporal transcendence in the form of the intimate opposite-sex couple. The (hetero) couple, imagined as perfectly complementary, becomes a self-sufficient unit—indeed, a new form of self—that moves directly from time into eternity on the basis of its mutual devotion, rather than its production of progeny. The intimate transcendence of the couple recalls accounts of the androgyne as figuring the unity of the two sexes in marriage, an image that marked early Christian, Gnostic, and Neoplatonic thought (Long 7–12;
Gilbert 11–19). This image surfaced periodically in early modern and post-Enlightenment accounts of love, as, for example, in the 1590 ending to Book Three of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, when the lovers Amoret and Scudamour, embracing after a long separation, seem to have morphed into a single bisexed being.¹⁷ It also marks the ending Howe provides for the only fully “realized” opposite-sex romance to take place in the pages of the novel—the story of Eva and Rafael, which is contained in an old manuscript given Berto by his uncle, the mysterious Count______. The manuscript, the work of an unknown German mystic, is given to Laurence by Berto before the latter leaves him, as Cecilia, to stay with his sisters, because Berto believes it contains some connection to his sister Nina’s madness; as Cecilia, Laurence reads it aloud to the eldest sister, Briseida, and her would-be lover Pepino. The narrative begins as Eva, refusing all consolation after the death of her lover Rafael, resolves to preserve her love until she can be reunited with his spirit in the afterlife, a devotion from which neither the advice of angels nor the attentions of a prince can deter her. In a quasi-Gnostic twist, Eva’s constant and prolonged mourning—which the angels initially present, in accordance with the dictates of nineteenth-century Christian consolation culture, as outright defiance of God’s will—is eventually revealed to be a sacred trust. Having proved her worthiness by refusing all earthly consolation, she is rewarded by the planting of a vine on Rafael’s grave, which, when it blooms, carries her to heaven where she rejoins her beloved. The “instincts of [Eva’s] heart,” the tale’s narrator avers, set into motion a chain of behaviors that facilitate her transcendence: “from [her heart] she had learned love, love had taught her constancy, constancy had taught her undying hope, and hope for the future had taught her renunciation in the present” (Howe, *H* 180). What appears here as a natural impulse toward affection provides the launching point for a narrative of feminine constancy culminating in a vision of eternal union, as in heaven the pair finally “seem[s] to be no longer two, but one” (Howe, *H* 181), at which point the narrative breaks off. Eva’s entire dedication to Love furnishes the proper telos for the romance: true lovers transcend both time and the flesh to remain united, literally, happily ever after.

This vision of romantic hetero-sexual complementarity negotiates the problem of time by generating something other than the future-borne child: it produces, rather, a new being which rises, literally, above time. In this sense, the Eva/Rafael romance parallels certain retellings of the myth of the androgyne, the originary symbol of two sexes fused. (Though Aristophanes’s account of this figure in Plato’s *Symposium* does not idealize the figure of the androgyne—it is both too bawdy and too cynical to operate as a True Romance—that did not prevent Neoplatonic thinkers from embracing the
figure as such.) In this account, in which the separation of the sexes becomes a traumatic fall into time, the (re)union of the two halves in marriage serves to repair the trauma and return the lovers to eternity. For some of Howe’s readers, the transcendent telos of the Eva/Rafael manuscript challenges the gendered norms that shaped the reproductive family as well. For instance, Valerie Ziegler reads the vision of eternal union at the close of the manuscript as a kind of feminist statement, an “ecstatic transfiguration that disrupted the carefully defined gender spheres of the Victorian age.” In Ziegler’s reading, true (hetero-sexual) romance becomes a “transformative spirituality” that challenges earthly gender hierarchies (Ziegler 70). Yet the “transformative” telos of this romance is predicated on a particular sequence that incorporates a noteworthy temporal gap between the two sexes: the story begins after Rafael has entered eternity, and Eva is left to suffer for an extended period of time before she can, in effect, catch up with him. Rafael possesses the ability to see all events from the perspective of eternity and hence to foresee Eva’s future, as indicated when he instructs her to wait for the angel of consolation. Eva believes this is merely conventional insistence on the spiritual necessity for the bereaved to return to everyday life and insists that she will not receive the angel when he comes; in the end, however, it is this angel who facilitates her apotheosis. The distance between the two lovers here is not merely a matter of accident, the fact that Rafael happened to die first. Rather, it is linked to a specifically gendered time-lag that informed nineteenth-century sentimental culture at every level. Rafael embodies Knowledge, as his ability to predict the future and his pedagogical treatment of Eva in heaven alike suggest, whereas Eva embodies Love, whose lessons come from within. Understood as fundamental to human nature, the notion of love is enshrined at, and in effect as, the origin of the human in sentimental thought, but in this romance it lags behind, and must catch up to, a masculinized knowledge greater than itself.

Another incident on the way to the final, harmonious union further extends the manuscript’s implicit commentary on the temporal dissonance associated with the two lovers’ gendered positions in time. Shortly after Eva’s ascent to heaven, she notices that Rafael now bears a scar upon his forehead, which he tells her is the mark of “‘a deadly sin which I did once commit’”; the scar, however, has earned him divine compassion and consolation, and he asserts that over time it will “‘become an ornament upon my brow’” (Howe, H 179). Rafael insists that no shame attaches to him from this scar, as many of the angels are similarly scarred or deformed, “even mutilated to the extent of a limb or an eye,” and this corporeal marking reminds the divine of “‘the sufferings of man upon earth, for that he had borne them in
his own body” (Howe, H 179). In this sentimental theology, to be human is to remain ever vulnerable to being wounded, and thus woundedness itself manifests humanity; it is in this sense that wounds, viewed from a certain perspective, carry within them their own redemptive power, as Rafael suggests.\(^\text{18}\) Though Rafael is the only one to bear a physical scar, Eva and Rafael both function[ed] in life as wounded subjects: Rafael as imperfect and Eva as incomplete, awaiting the posthumous reunion that will complete her. Whereas this mutual woundedness seemingly marks the symmetry that orders the heterosexual couple’s complementarity, the many tales of frustrated opposite-sex romance in the novel insinuate a causality that throws this mirroring off-balance. It is not simply that men are flawed and women are wounded; women are wounded chiefly because men are flawed.

The time-lag between the sexes that surfaces in the Eva and Rafael story and throughout The Hermaphrodite points toward what we might understand as sentimental disphasure, a precursor of the disphasure that Freud would later describe as constitutive of heterosexual coupling. For Freud, men’s and women’s desire remains “a phase apart psychologically”: men desire women as maternal substitutes, whereas women desire (male) children as compensation for their own castration (Freud, Lectures 166).\(^\text{19}\) Howe’s novel, while sidestepping the repronormativity that orders Freud’s thinking here, nevertheless maintains a similar sense that the sexes are out of sync, that the gendered difference between the rational and the emotional becomes reified as temporal distance. Another mid-nineteenth-century account of sentimental disphasure as a lack of full synchronicity in the marital couple appears in Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s discussions of the unevenly gendered nature of power in the affectionate home. Although the middle-class domestic household understood itself to be ruled by “the law of love,” to which all were equally subject, it nevertheless remained structured by men’s legal and civic privilege, disrupting fantasies of mutuality and complementarity. Beecher and Stowe, in The American Women’s Home, represented this state of affairs as at once a social fact and an unfortunate survival that would eventually wither away, abolished by the evolution of love as a regulatory principle. They acknowledged that the husband was indeed the legal head of the household and that the wife was required by the laws of church and state to submit to his will. But this only mattered, they observed, in homes where love was absent. Where the domestic affections were present, as by nature they should be, they asserted, love would ensure harmony between husband and wife, rendering any resort to legal privilege unnecessary. Beecher and Stowe identify the growth of love as a regulatory principle with the progress of “Christian”
civilization, though even here, they observe, this progress is notably uneven, as more emphasis has been given to women's submission than to men's need to learn the law of love. However, they predict that the growth of women's education will eventually render women self-sufficient, so that they will no longer marry out of need, but will only enter into the marital state “by that love for which there is no need of law” (Beecher and Stowe 156). In this way, the family of love mapped itself over the family of law in a position of immanence, at once asserting itself as ever-present truth and deferring its full manifestation to the future.

In this domestic-sentimental account, a gap in the history of sexuality, manifested as a time-lag between the sexes, will be healed, over time, as the growth of women's self-sufficiency will bring about the full manifestation of the time of love. Yet Howe's novel maintains a more pessimistic relation to this idealized telos, emphasizing the way that the ideal of sexual complementarity seems always to be thrown out of sync by the emergence of divergence in the sequencing of gendered powers. This is the case in the story of Nina, the most direct effect of the Eva/Rafael manuscript in the time of the novel. Berto reads the manuscript to Nina in an attempt to console her after Gaetano's departure. Nina is fascinated by the “idea of [the] eternal and indivisible union of loving spirits,” which becomes, as Briseida reports, “first a desire, then a conviction, then, a madness” (Howe, H 164). Though the romantically-minded Briseida admires the “sublime” nature of the madness to which her sister's obsession with eternal union has driven her, their more worldly sister Gigia laments that women should throw their lives away for the sake of undeserving men. In her illness, Nina will speak only when spoken to of Gaetano, and otherwise appears inanimate, almost lifeless; she is not so much fused with Gaetano as fantastically absorbed into him. Just as Eva, in the story, trails in the wake of Rafael, Nina, in her hallucinations, trails after Gaetano in his forced exile from Italy, waiting in camp while he hunts bear with the Indians in order to sing him to sleep. The “radical” telos of “true romance” in the time of the novel, then, tends more to reaffirm than to unsettle existing gender hierarchies; in order to achieve love-union, women must dedicate their entire being to following where their male lovers lead. Viewed in this light, the telos of the Eva and Rafael story recalls the myth of Hermaphroditus, a less optimistic account of how bisexed beings came to be than that of the androgyne. In that account, as we saw earlier, hermaphroditism is the outcome not of a timeless ideal but of a distinctly ill-timed relation between the sexes. Howe's novel updates this myth to underscore the impossibility of hetero-sexuality as idealized love-union under existing historical conditions, since men's disproportion-
ate power across both public and private spheres perpetually threw this fusion out of joint.

4. Unrealized Moments

Laurence’s response to the Eva and Rafael story is divided over time. As a character (and as Cecilia), he responds by praising it as a “mystery, but one of those which light, and not darkness, veils from us” (Howe, H 183). His later narratorial assessment, however, is less decisive, as he questions whether “health or sickness” characterizes the mind that crafted the manuscript. This dual response is also conveyed by the way in which he reports the group’s dumbstruck reaction to the story; he observes, “We were all, for the moment, unrealized” (Howe, H 183). The uncertainty of the term “unrealized”—which can mean either “not realized,” left incomplete or unactualized, or else “made unreal,” rendered fictional, deprived of reality—imbues Laurence’s comment with an odd temporality that accurately captures the novel’s relation to the question of sexual synchronicity. On one view, the characters have simply not achieved the marital and reproductive norms that nevertheless remain the shape of a truly realized life. They could be understood as arrested in their developmental trajectories, thwarted by tragedy or personal idiosyncracies; or, more critically, they may appear as blocked by history’s failure to arrive at the necessary conditions for fulfillment, as Beecher and Stowe’s discussion of the delayed arrival of the family of love suggests. This reading is supported by Briseida’s critique of Italian marital practices. Explaining her refusal to marry, Briseida informs Laurence-as-Cecilia: “‘In this country, love and marriage are, so to speak, in a state of divorce’” (Howe, H 154). Marriage is entirely an arrangement of convenience, and women’s limited cultural capital means that they usually get the worst end of the bargain. Accordingly, she declares, she has decided instead on a “‘modest [single] life, embellished only by literature and by friendship’” (Howe, H 155). Briseida’s disdain for marriage ties in with the novel’s other depictions of Italy as behind the times, held back by the corruption of high society and by a (Catholic) Church that is “ignorant and superstitious” (Howe, H 144). She could, accordingly, be read, in a vein sympathetic to the (Protestant) convictions espoused by Beecher and Stowe, as a forward-thinking woman, in advance of a culture that may yet progress toward the kind of familial ideal she merits.

In other ways, however, the novel’s failure to reproduce the idealized familial and sexual forms of the mid-nineteenth century exposes these forms
themselves as unreal, as fictions produced to regulate both desire and time. The dislocated and dislocating effect of the Eva and Rafael manuscript points toward this possibility; though the manuscript is described as old and difficult to read, the story itself is undated, floating free of historical time just as the lovers, in the final union, transcend time itself. Briseida’s romantic embrace of the story as “a dream of heavenly truth” (Howe, H 183) similarly places the story beyond history, just as her admiration of Laurence’s bisexed condition, when she discovers it, as “a heavenly superhuman mystery, one undivided, integral soul, needing not to seek on earth its other moiety” places her friend above the sufferings born of living in time (Howe, H 193–94). In this, however, she is dramatically mistaken, as Laurence has spent most of the novel suffering on behalf of others and is, even as she speaks, lying in the death-like coma brought on by his despair at Ronald’s departure, tormented by dream-visions in which he is visited by two lovers and “utterly torn asunder by the love I bare to both of them, the woman and the man” (Howe, H 196). Briseida’s tendency to embrace visions of heterosexual union as “heavenly” without noticing the signs of trauma, damage, and disphasure they contain might suggest to us that she is not, in fact, the forward-thinking emblem of an eventually-realized future. That the novel displays to us the damage that the characters overlook, or cannot see, conveys its capacity to unrealize the teleological couplings Briseida idealizes in the second sense—to expose their fictionality and their insufficiency and thus to make possible a renegotiation of the field of sexuality altogether. What is needed, in this view, is not to realize the sexual forms that the culture already idealizes, but rather, in the wake of the shattering of these romantic fictions, to generate new forms altogether—forms that might take our conceptions of identity and sexuality into terrain hitherto unimagined.

I want to close, then, by considering the extent to which The Hermaphrodite gestures beyond the exposure of reprosexuality as a fiction to hypothesize alternate ways of being in relation to others across time. A starting point for these might be the explicit renunciation of reproductivity in favor of the moment of pleasure that Laurence’s two would-be lovers, the older widow Emma von. P and the slightly younger viscount Ronald, alike avow. Although both Emma and Ronald address Laurence as the opposite sex in their would-be sexual encounters with him (Emma, whom he meets while he is at college, knows him as a man, whereas Ronald, who also knows Laurence as a man, nevertheless implores him to be a woman), their desire is queer insofar as neither expects a romantic, much less a marital/reproductive, future with him.20 Rather, each embraces sexual pleasure as a thing of the moment—not because of Laurence’s ostensible inability to reproduce but
because the marital/reproductive fantasy is irrelevant to the present tense of their desire. Emma embraces sex as its own fulfillment; bent on seducing Laurence, she visits his rooms in the middle of the night and assures him she is not looking for a marriage proposal: “Give me but this one night, but this one hour—do you ask where I shall be tomorrow? I can die tomorrow—I shall have been happy” (Howe, H 17–18). Ronald, likewise, throws himself at Laurence with an abandon that refuses to see beyond the present. After jealously dueling with another student over the question of Laurence’s sex, Ronald goes to Laurence’s room, wounded and drunk, to insist that the blood he has shed in the duel gives him the right to possess his companion. When Laurence, pretending to comply, pours him a drink, Ronald toasts him with the exclamation, “Here is to love, a past without a reckoning—a present without a future!” (Howe, H 88). The sheer force of desire in each of these attempted seduction scenes cancels the possibility of the conventional romance’s sequential progression, even according to those narrative obstacles (boy meets girl, boy loses girl, etc.) that necessarily delay the happily-ever-after ending; this desire calculates, rather violently, on the moment alone.

Yet despite their rejection of a reproductive future in favor of the presence of desire, both Emma and Ronald are eventually recuperated into normalized and generative gender positions. Laurence, who is traveling away from his father’s estate, discovers Emma’s death as his carriage crosses paths with her funeral; he manages to spend a night alone with her corpse, during which he fantasizes that her soul ministers to him. The posthumous completion of the night alone that Emma had sought replaces erotic desire with necrotic redemption in Laurence’s imagination, substituting sexual exchange with the purifying act of mutual sacrifice and allowing him to fantasize that he is emancipated from “the burthen of [his] humanity” (Howe, H 34)—although subsequent events prove him wrong. Emma is thus converted by death into the ministering angel whose purity redeems the sins of men, a posthumous extension of maternality and perhaps the most conventional ideological role for a nineteenth-century woman.21 And while Ronald, tortured by memory, wanders the world in a mad frenzy seeking Laurence’s spectralized (and feminized) presence, he is recalled to sanity and tradition by his father’s imminent death, or, as he puts it, “the divine right of nature and of blood” (Howe, H 191). His father persuades him that he must not refuse the succession of his estate, for the sake of his subjects; accordingly, after he inherits the throne, he decides to play it straight, and renounces his pursuit of Laurence. Notwithstanding their abandonment of the familial future, then, both characters end up in quasi-parental positions, serving as the benevolent figures who ensure the growth and continued well-being of others.22
ness of a desire that rejects the familial future for the now of fulfillment is depicted in the novel as itself evanescent, an alluring gesture but ultimately one unable to withstand the discipline of the reproductive imperative.

There remain, however, other ways of being proposed in the novel, ones whose relation to that discipline—and even to what we know as sexuality—is less clear. We may trace these through the transverse, and not a little perverse, rays that emanate from the figure of the eccentric Count______, proprietor of a rural hermitage that Laurence happens upon during his travels, original owner of the Eva and Rafael manuscript, and the uncle and tutor of Berto. Two accounts of the Count’s history are offered Laurence in the novel. At first, he is told that “the village priest . . . [believed] that the noble Count would have enjoyed a longer life, and would have made a more edifying death, if he had married a wife, gone to mass, and settled the affairs of his soul with a jolly confessor over a flask of Rhenish, instead of choosing to settle them alone with the devil as (he opined) had been the case” (Howe, H 37). Countering the picture of the demonic madman who, the villagers insist, still haunts the hermitage, the guide hired by Laurence to show him around the hermitage insists that they simply misunderstand the Count’s approach to living, which was guided by a “scrupulous and exact division of his time and his duties” (Howe, H 38). This account transforms the irregular, unmarried Count of the villagers into a model modern citizen, deft practitioner of the temporal discipline and self-control urged upon the nineteenth-century subject by countless advice books. Yet a third possibility emerges in the repetition and transformation of the Count’s time-consciousness by his nephew and heir, Berto. Similarly unmarried and childless, Berto also devotes his life to a self-devised time scheme, in which he divides the branches of knowledge into twelve, pursuing each for a month at a time; he lauds this scheme as enabling a new consciousness, opposed to “‘onesidedness, fixed idea[s], and all the insanities of the learned’” (Howe, H 95). Berto’s celebration of his time scheme downplays the productivity and good citizenship emphasized in the admiring villager’s account of the Count’s, instead underscoring his own personal pleasure in this alternative approach, which permits him such activities as a month in Naples passing as one of the lazzeroni. Inventing “his own crazy way,” Berto manages to become, as his sister calls him, “‘un originale’” (Howe, H 155), holding himself apart from the pressure to conform to a recognizable life narrative that ends up straightening out Ronald—though this originality stops at the question of sex; he remains entirely capable of exercising his patriarchal authority over his sisters, denying the artist Gigia her request to join him in the South and refusing to allow Nina to go with Gaetano to America. Even as it sketches new possibilities for living, then, the
novel insistently highlights the time-lag that prevents women from taking advantage of them. While Berto’s sisters are to some extent free to arrange their time just as he has, the spatial constraints placed on women continue to limit the ways they may take in life.

While Berto’s continuation of the Count’s legacy defers a generational reproductive schedule in favor of one that is calendrical and intellectual in nature, Laurence’s encounter with that legacy bends time almost to the breaking point. Laurence falls under the spell of the Count as he takes up residence in the hermitage that the Count had reserved for one month out of each twelve, which the admiring villager describes as his “yearly Ramadan” (Howe, H 39). Laurence, however, stays longer, until he himself has generated another legend among the villagers, who believe he is either a sorcerer or a saint, thus confirming their contention that the specter of the Count yet haunts this space. The villagers’ tales are in part justified, as, spurred on by the removed nature of the space and by the collection of theological and philosophical books in the Count’s library, Laurence enters into a period of spiritual masochism, whose content or duration he cannot later recollect: “It is marked in my remembrance by states, rather than by days; and its light and darkness were other than that of the evening and the morning” (Howe, H 44). This ecstatic retreat generates ideas and thoughts far enough beyond the ordinary framework that they cannot be articulated in Laurence’s own language, and which he views as fragments of divine knowledge. And though he later renounces the self-destructive tendency that marks this period and flees the “phantom voices” (Howe, H 50) of the hermitage, he cannot do so without lingering regret for this time of “rapture . . . and inspiration” (Howe, H 65).

The mixed feelings with which Laurence recollects his life in the hermitage reflect the difficulty of thinking outside conventional forms of identity that depend on and demand familial reproduction. Laurence’s ecstatic period resembles what Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit describe as the effect of traumatized perception: the shattering of “realised psychic and social identities” and the becoming-visible of “every body’s limitless extensibility in space and time,” replacing selective transcendence—for those who fit into the “officially sanctioned connections that confirm such identities as husband, or mother”—with universal immanence (Bersani and Dutoit 9, 8). Bersani and Dutoit acknowledge, however, that the prospect of moving on from fixed identities (and the reproductive arrangements that confirm and perpetuate them) to new relational regimes that we can, as yet, scarcely imagine, much less articulate, generates both exhilaration and melancholy, the pain of loss as well as the exciting possibility of being otherwise (Bersani and Dutoit 9).
ambivalence of this prospect, the difficulty of surrendering the “identitarian myths” that have “richly nourished” us, accounts, I propose, for the sense of melancholy that suffuses this novel. Though other critics have read the manuscript as ultimately advocating a reluctant acceptance of conformity to social and relational norms by dramatizing the suffering that lies in wait for those who do not or cannot fit in, I would assess the tone of *The Hermaphrodite* as a gesture toward a realization almost opposite to this. Its melancholy, that is, marks not the mournful necessity of a reluctant return to norms, but the reluctance that accompanies recognition of the necessary impossibility of that return.

The strange temporality of Laurence’s stay in the hermitage is noteworthy for one final thing: its generation by the erotics of the library. The allure of the Count’s library, a promiscuous collection of theological and philosophical tracts, plays a substantial part in Laurence’s attraction to the hermitage; he is intrigued by the historical and theological breadth of the collection, in which radically divergent and even anathemic texts are shelved next to one another in “flagrant contradiction” (Howe, *H* 39). The books rise out of their own times to touch others, pointing various roads to redemption and the allure thereof, suggesting numerous ways of living time as felt, as filled, as anything but “empty [and] homogenous.” Laurence imagines the Count talking himself into creating such a capacious collection, a first step toward his willingness to put himself in the Count’s place. He goes on to fantasize that the Count’s books are now talking to him:

> Methought too that these silent Saints all had a voice, and that each spake to me, and all invited me to come and dwell there, and be acquainted with them, and all promised me that I should find peace and comfort in so doing. The mystic said: “I will teach thee how to believe—” the reformer said: “I will teach thee how to reason—” the sublime heathen and the God-like Nazarene said: “I will teach thee to suffer, to love, and to forgive.” And I replied to each and all of them: “I will come.” (Howe, *H* 40)

The seductive call of the books to Laurence partially resembles the generation of a “touch across time” that Carolyn Dinshaw describes as queer historiographic method. Dinshaw figures such touches, transcending the distance of an alterist historical approach, not as moments of identification between past and present, a collapse into presentism, but of a mutually enlivening partial connection, a means of making contact across “all kinds of differ-
ences” (Dinshaw 21). Laurence, in this scene, is drawn to the promise of “peace and comfort” as a means of consolation for loss, but the contact he makes with the perverse chronology of the Count’s library does not simply fill holes or heal wounds in the subject; instead, it leads him to a sustained period of meditation that generates unexpected, unpredictable forms of thought whose vibrations continue to move him long afterward. And this, I propose, is the kind of connection to which *The Hermaphrodite* ultimately lends itself. The novel extends an invitation across an uncertain span of time (since it is and is not of our own moment) not precisely in order to redress a lack in the history of sexuality, but to take the measure of its forms and multiply its possibilities. We would, I think, be well advised to prolong our contact with it.

**Notes**

1. For discussions of the history of time in the nineteenth century, see Buckley, Gilmour, Chapman, and Bowler.

2. I have chosen, in this essay, to use the term “ambiguously sexed” to describe Laurence, instead of either “hermaphroditic” or the contemporary term “intersexed,” both because of the novel’s own complex deployment of the former in terms of its cultural and mythical histories, which I will later discuss, and because the use of the latter to describe Laurence’s overdetermined but underdescribed condition would undermine what contemporary activists rightly identify as the need to demythologize intersex identity. For more on present-day intersex issues, see Dreger, *Intersex in the Age of Ethics*, and Kessler.

3. For important works in postcolonial studies that take this approach, see especially Chakrabarty and Bhabha. My understanding of sexual “synchronicity” here draws upon Ernst Bloch’s account of the non-synchronicities of contemporary capitalism. For Bloch, non-synchronous populations are those which are held apart, globally and locally, from the norms of modernity by structures that prevent the accumulation of capital—as one can see in the division of the globe into so-called developed and developing regions, or the First, Second, and Third Worlds. The question of sexual synchronicity extends Bloch’s framework to encompass the future-projected familial models of generationality by means of which a capitalist modernity has made itself at home.


5. Judith Halberstam defines queer time as “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety and inheritance” (Halberstam 6). I would, however, resist Halberstam’s specification of queer time as postmodern, if by postmodern we indicate a historical period rather than a relationship to historicity, insofar as that distinction problematically reifies the past as a site of stasis which we (post)moderns have transcended.

7. Writing on the early modern obsession with the hermaphrodite, Kathleen P. Long, in *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe* (2006), observes, "It is the perfect figure for troubled times." Long proposes that the figure captured the early modern imagination insofar as its ability to highlight and gesture beyond the culture's epistemologies made this figure a useful one for a transitional period, "a symbol of the end of an order, an era, and of the beginning of a new era" (Long 27). The idealized version of the androgyne to which I refer here departs, as I will later discuss, from the satirical tone with which this figure is located at the origin of love by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, although, as Long points out, it was embraced by neo-Platonists as an image of sexual harmony (Long 9–10).

8. Gary Williams describes this room and notes that Howe would have visited this site when in Rome (Williams, *HH* 95–96).

9. As Francis Haskell notes in *Patrons and Painters* (1963), Borghese's "villa . . . was the centre of the most hedonistic society that Rome had known since the Renaissance" (Haskell 29; quoted in O'Quinn 117).


11. See Halperin; also Menon.

12. I make this argument at greater length in *Arranging Grief* (2007).

13. See also Michael Warner's discussion of this passage in his essay "Irving's Poster-ity" (2000), to which my thinking here and elsewhere is much indebted.

14. Here and elsewhere in this essay I use “hetero-sexual[ity]” to indicate opposite-sex romantic/sexual couplings; this variant spelling is intended not simply to recall the nonexistence of the word "heterosexuality" itself at the time Howe wrote, but, more important, its distance from what Warner identifies as "modern heterosexuality," which "presents itself as a relation between equals." Though the hetero-sexual romance in this novel points toward the emergent ideal that Warner describes (it is likewise distinguished from reproduction" and "grounded in love and sexualuity"), the novel insistently underscores the material and ideological inequalities between the sexes that cause opposite-sex pairings to lag behind this idealized self-presentation (Warner 776). See also Katz.

15. See also Lee Edelman's discussion of reproductive futurism in *No Future* (2004).

16. See Dever; also Cherniavsky.

17. For an extended discussion of this passage as signifying "a general representation of a particular perfection in love," see Cirillo.

18. On the centrality of wounding to the sentimental understanding of the subject, see Noble.


20. Here I invoke the sense in which “queer” signifies something outside heteronormative, rather than merely hetero-sexual, practice. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner observe that “queer,” in this sense, signals a “radically anticipatory stance” (Berlant and Warner 344).

21. For discussions of the cultural work done by dead women in the nineteenth century, see Bronfen, Dever, and Cherniavsky.

22. It must also be noted here that the violence accompanying the abandonment of the future is directed at that which is figured as *feminine* in each scenario. Emma, who represents herself as entirely in Laurence's power, offers to die for her irregular desire—and, indirectly, she does; already wrought up to a feverish pitch, she goes into hysterics when
she recognizes Laurence’s ambiguous sex and shortly afterward dies of brain-fever. Ronald, conversely, threatens to violate and even to kill Laurence if he does not comply with his demand to “be a man to all the world, if you will, but a woman, a sweet, warm, living woman to me” (Howe, H 86). Ronald’s plea for Laurence to “be a woman to me” might be read as a piece of subversive role-playing that undermines the hierarchical relation of the sexes and obligatory heterosexuality, but his violent attempt to make Laurence a woman reifies them again.

23. For an important overview of the turn to clock-discipline in capitalist culture, see Thompson.

24. For instance, Mary H. Grant argues that “[Howe] saw in store for the ordinary mortal whose sexuality was ambiguous nothing but loneliness, misunderstanding, and pain. The ultimate lesson, reinforced by everything around her, was that gender defined role. Without a clear gender definition, a person had no place in society” (Grant 123). And while Ziegler sees the figure of Laurence as interrogating Victorian sexual norms, she also asserts that the novel views him with “ambivalence” because of his inability to fit in (Ziegler 69).

25. The phrase belongs to Walter Benjamin’s characterization of the way the modern historiographer imagines time. See Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”