Homotopia?: Gay Identity, Sameness & the Politics of Desire

Jonathan Kemp

Published by Punctum Books


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76496

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2668312
Chapter One

Against Custom:
André Gide’s Pedagogic Pederasty

“Before discussing, one ought always to define.”
– André Gide, Journals

The life of André Gide (1869–1951) remains one of the great coming out narratives in the history of sexuality, showing a courage and honesty about his homosexuality at a time when it didn’t pay to be courageous or honest. Yet he was also guilty of prejudice, prudishness, self-interest and self-oppression. This tension represents one of the characteristics of homosexual discourse, a struggle between claims for naturalness and a capitulation to widespread homophobia. Gide’s polemic on male–male love, Corydon, whilst clearly an example of reverse discourse, is at the same time a profoundly anti-gay text, reviling all forms of homosexuality other than the one Gide himself practiced: pederasty.¹ Of the four texts this book analyses, Corydon was the last to be published, and is the starting point of this study because in a sense it constitutes a distillation of the themes of homosexual discourse at the time. Gide began work on it at the turn of the century, and it is possible, therefore, to see in this text the limits of the discourse, the meanings and definitions with which it worked, and the themes with which it dealt.

In this chapter, using Gide’s *Corydon*, his *Journals*, and the autobiographical *If It Die*, I intend to show how Gide’s own paranoia over a particular sexual act fed his theoretical approach to homosexuality and warped his arguments, so that, rather than promote tolerance, he perpetuated stereotypes and fostered greater intolerance, casting aside all forms of same-sex behaviour other than pederasty as deserving social opprobrium, and establishing a model for gay identity based on a refusal of particular sexual acts and expressions and a strict policing of desire which can only be described as homophobic.

*How Shall I Address Thee?*

Although Gide rejected all the major medico-legal writers, he was clearly influenced by their taxonomic definitions of the various types of homosexual. He formulated his own taxonomy in his *Journals* as follows:

I call a pederast the man who, as the word indicates, falls in love with young boys. I call a sodomite [...] the man whose desire is addressed to mature men. I call an invert the man who, in the comedy of love, assumes the role of a woman and desires to be possessed.\(^2\)

For Gide, then, pederasty is the only form of homosexuality that involves love. Sodomites and inverts merely fuck, perform a “comedy of love”. We can conclude from this a separation of love from sex which Gide’s own biography dramatizes, and which stereotypes of gay promiscuity maintain. On the one hand, there is love; on the other, sex. There is a denial of the emotional built into Gide’s definition of the sodomite and the invert, as there is a denial of or refusal of the sexual built into his definition of the pederast.

And yet the Greek model of pederasty which Corydon champions often involved, as David Halperin points out, “the penetration of the body of one person by the body (and, specifically,
the phallus) of another”. Moreover, according to Greek mores, the penetrator should be the social superior to the penetrated. In Greek pederasty, sodomy was performed by free adult men on young boys and slaves, their social inferiors – a fact Gide overlooks. Consider the disgust Corydon displays for sodomy when discussing the appearance of sodomites in Titian’s painting, The Council of Trent: “It seems bravado, vice, an exceptional amusement for the debauched and the blasé.” Sodomy emerges as a behaviour indulged in only by those who have refused standard socialization: the debauched and the blasé, the act itself a vice, a vaunted display of courage.

By not acknowledging that what he terms ‘Greek love’ was commonly expressed through anal intercourse, Gide is not only being inaccurate, he is being disingenuous. Moreover, Corydon claims to dislike inverters because “their defect is too evident” and “poorly informed people confuse normal homosexuals with them” (C, 119), something which would not happen, Gide believed, if they knew that different types of homosexual existed. And for Gide, only certain types deserved equality. Following on from the previous extract from his Journals, he writes:

These three types of homosexual are not always clearly distinct: there are possible transferences from one to another; but most often the difference among them is such that they experience a profound disgust for one another, a disgust accompanied by a reprobation that in no way yields to that which you (heterosexuals) fiercely show toward all three.

---

4 André Gide, Corydon [1924], trans. Richard Howard, GMP, 1983, 18. All subsequent page references will appear in the text indicated by the abbreviation C.
5 It seems unlikely, given Gide’s knowledge of ancient Greece, that he was not aware of this. One can only put it down to personal distaste. It’s worth remembering that ‘urning’ or ‘uranian’ was the neologism penned by Ulrichs to describe the type of homosexual who suffered from feminization of that part of the psyche which dictated sexual appetite, causing him to desire men just like a heterosexual woman does. It was also the theoretical foundation for Hirschfeld’s Third Sex. Gide’s use of it as a synonym for ‘homosexual’ throughout Corydon is therefore inconsistent with his loathing for effeminacy and Third Sexism.
What these transferences might be (much less what Gide’s own experience of them was) are not revealed, though it’s apparent that Gide, transferences notwithstanding, wishes to maintain the barriers of disgust between the three types. Furthermore, he accuses the inverts of being the bad apples by which the entire crop is judged, their effeminacy justifying the opprobrium and disgust heaped upon them, not least for the fact that by it all homosexuals are tainted: “It has always seemed to me that they alone deserved the reproach of moral or intellectual deformation and were subject to some of the accusations that are commonly addressed to all homosexuals.”

In the light of such comments, we must view Corydon as being strictly concerned with Gide’s own specific sexual preference, and not as a defense for homosexual behaviour per se in all its varied and glorious manifestations. For example, footnoted in the preface to the third edition of Corydon, Gide expresses his dissatisfaction with Hirschfeld’s Third Sex theory:

The theory of the woman-man, of the Sexuelle Zwischenstufen, (intermediate degrees of sexuality) advanced by Dr. Hirschfeld in Germany […] and which Marcel Proust appears to accept – may well be true enough; but that theory explains and concerns only certain cases of homosexuality, precisely those with which this book does not deal – cases of inversion, effeminacy, of sodomy (c, xx)

We are thus informed what the book isn’t about; what Gide isn’t going to discuss. Yet he concedes, in the same footnote, that his omission of these topics is “one of [his] book’s great shortcomings”, because “they turn out to be much more frequent than [he] previously supposed”(c, xx), although their omission is justified on the grounds that:

Even granting that Hirschfeld’s theory accounts for these cases, his ‘third sex’ argument certainly cannot explain what we
habitually call ‘greek love’: pederasty – having not the slightest element of effeminacy on either side.⁶

This positions Gide’s main focus of interest – pederasty – in opposition to the ‘third sex’ argument, which defined the homosexual as an effeminate man-woman. Yet what remains as conceptually inconceivable to Gide as to the sexologists he wishes to refute, is the same-sex relationship between two adult men; much less sodomy between two without one of them being perceived as a woman *manqué*. The impetus to locate desire in a theory of difference renders the sameness of same-sex desire invisible: it must always be reducible to difference, be it of age, social position, race or psychology. Furthermore, by denying love to all but pederasts he is revealing what little he knows about love. A love between equals can never be the outcome of a relationship such as pederasty which relies on disequilibrium for its very existence and has a built-in obsolescence in the fact that at the point of maturity the boy’s desire is meant to be diverted to women. In addition, Gide’s passion for boys sits at odds with Corydon’s claim for ‘virile homosexuality’, for, strictly speaking, ‘virility’ refers only to adult males.

**A Hybrid Production**

The third edition of *Corydon*, published in 1924, was the first public edition. *Dialogues I and II and part of III had appeared in a small private edition in 1911, and in full in a 1920 private edition, both anonymously, and both largely unread (indeed, the 1911 print run of twelve copies were secreted in a drawer⁷). Subtitled ‘Four Socratic Dialogues’, Corydon takes the form of a dialogue between an unnamed narrator and Dr. Corydon, who is preparing a book on pederasty. Patrick Pollard calls it “a hybrid production in that it stands midway between a work of im-

---

⁶ Howard translates this as “in which effeminacy is neither here nor there”. Patrick Pollard, however, translates it as “having not the slightest effeminacy on either side” (*André Gide: Homosexual Moralist*, Yale University Press, 1991, 27). I prefer the latter, and on this occasion have vered from Howard’s version.

⁷ Gide, *Journals*, 2.11.
agination and one of documentary fact”.

Certainly, we can see it as an intervention into a medical discourse which up till that point had disappointed and dissatisfied Gide by promoting the notion of homosexuality as sick and *contra naturam*, examining specimens of the phenomenon found in mental hospitals or doctor’s consulting rooms. In order to refute the Third Sex theory, Gide takes great pains to assure us that Corydon is in no way effeminate: his dress is conventional, even austere (c, 4) and his (heterosexual) interlocutor searches in vain for signs of “that effeminacy which experts manage to discover in everything connected with inverts and by which they claim they are never deceived”. Gide deliberately opposes accepted medical doctrine because, as Pollard explains, “so pervasive was the influence of the writers of the medico-legal works and text books of sexual and mental hygiene that it was as important for Gide to demolish their general credibility as to argue on purely moral grounds the particular case of boy love which was his real concern”. Yet, by singling out pederasty as “his main concern”, Gide contributed to the taxonomic process, supplying another category and reinforcing the intolerance directed at those types which by the time Gide’s book appeared had become all too familiar.

Foucault’s work on the nineteenth century *scientia sexualis* helps elucidate the taxonomic operation by which sexual diversity was both recognized and proscribed – indeed, recognized in order to be proscribed; what Foucault calls an “incorporation of perversions” and a “specification of individuals”. Each behavioural characteristic was seen as a different form of sexuality, even a different sexuality – “all those minor perverts whom nineteenth-century psychiatrists entomologized by giving them strange baptismal names” were no more than representatives of various points along a continuum of human sexual expression. The law and medicine – “the machinery of power” – needed a way to control this diversity of undefined sexualities and to this end, there emerged a formalized and finely-categorised science constructed around sexual behaviours, gestures and experienc-

---

es, giving them an “analytical, visible and permanent reality”. This reality was inaugurated via medical enquiry: “imbedded in bodies, becoming deeply characteristic of individuals, the oddities of sex relied on a technology of health and pathology”. In this way, Foucault argues, power was extended to actual, individual bodies, and an intimate surveillance was established and maintained: “scattered sexualities rigidified, became stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice” (HS, 43–44).

According to Foucault, there is no reason to see any sexuality as a true identity category or an expression of an inner, pre-discursive self. Rather, sexualities are constantly called into being, constantly changing, and constantly altering the nature of sexual discourse. Sexual identity, he suggests, has become a self-imposed mechanism of social control. Yet at the same time, identity has become the only way to make sense of one’s desires. The problem arises when certain identities are promoted and validated whilst others remain marginalized and despised. Social control has been necessary to recognize and proscribe sexual behaviours deemed unacceptable. With equality for all forms of desire, wouldn’t such social control become redundant?

Within sexological discourse, the only concept for theorizing male–male love very quickly became the inversion model, by which one partner, invariably the receptive partner during anal intercourse, was cast as a woman: he was the innate homosexual. The insertive partner was invariably seen as not an innate homosexual; his desire aligned much more with the ‘acquired’

---

10 In France the plight of the homosexual was not so much legal as social. In 1791 sex between consenting men was decriminalized, although with minors it was still illegal. Copley asks whether the leniency of the French legal system on the issue of sex between men can be seen to have inhibited or weakened the emergence of a “self-conscious homosexual movement” (Anthony Copley, Sexual Moralities in France 1780–1980, Routledge, 1989, 135). Whereas in England and Germany the struggle for law reform gave such movements their raison d’être, in France there was no such contrafugal point of resistance. Copley does point out, however, that the regulation of public decency offences in France approximated that in England, so the difference in cultures need not be too exaggerated. In both countries, the medical profession rose in stature and gained political power in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.
model. In 1857, Tardieu claimed to be able to recognize a passive homosexual by examining the anus.\textsuperscript{11}

A distinct identity was thus constructed upon the fact of a particular sexual act. But identities are no less real for being historically or socially constructed.\textsuperscript{12} If homosexuals responded positively to the medical appellation at the end of the last century it was because it appealed to a need for discursive visibility, for coherent identity, regardless of sexual positioning: indeed, Gide is a case in point. Attracted by the opportunity to explain his desires within a biologicist register, he nevertheless refused the medical diagnosis of sickness.

By actually excluding inversion, which up to that point had been the central trope of same-sex behaviour within medical discourse, Gide was not only redressing the balance, presenting same-sex behaviour from his own perspective (as a lover of boys), he was also challenging the medical assumption that the Ulrichsian inversion model accounted for all, or even a large part, of cases of homosexuality.

As early as 1894 Gide was expressing a dissatisfaction with medical accounts of homosexuality. After reading Moll’s book, \textit{Les Perversions de l’instinct genital}, he wrote to a friend:

He does not differentiate enough between two classes: the effeminate men and the others – he constantly mixes them together, and nothing is more different, more contrary – because one is opposed to the other – because for that kind of psychophysiology, that which does not attract repels – and each horrifies the other.\textsuperscript{13}

The horror is patently Gide’s own, and not a psychophysiological phenomenon. Less sophisticated than the taxonomies of the


1918 journal entry, he here recognizes only two categories, “the effeminate men and the others”. Clearly unhappy about being grouped together with effeminate men, Gide theorizes a ‘kind of psychophysiology’ that renders both groups mutually horrified and repelled because “nothing is more different, more contrary”. As his journal entry makes clear, he regarded effeminate men as deserving of the opprobrium heaped upon them, while “the others” alone are worthy of respect and tolerance, a remarkably intolerant attitude.

Part of Gide’s brief was to take male–male love out of the clinic and to present arguments in defense of pederasty that had nothing to do with a “technology of health and pathology”. Corydon informs his interlocutor, “the only serious books I know on this subject are certain medical works which reek of the clinic from the very first pages”, and complains that “the doctors who usually write about the subject treat only uranists who are ashamed of themselves – pathetic inverts, sick men. They’re the ones who consult doctors” (c, 17–18).

Ironically, in 1895, aged twenty five, Gide consulted a neurologist prior to marrying Madeleine Rondeaux. To what extent he confessed his homosexual behaviour or desire he does not say, but the doctor seemed not to share Gide’s anxiety and reassured him that marriage would cure him. It would be reasonable to assume that Gide recalled this consultation when employing the Abbe Galiani’s quotation in Corydon: “the important thing is not to be cured but to be able to live with one’s disease” (c, 13). Certainly, the fact that Gide acted so unquestioningly on his doctor’s advice suggests a deference to medical authority which, although it was to lessen with age, never fully disappeared.

Perhaps it was in order to avoid the accusation of disease that Gide demonized sodomites and inverted and idealized pederasts. Homosexuality, in Gide’s work, appears both within a sickness paradigm and a health paradigm, seriously problematizing his claim for either.

Face to face
In If It Die Gide recounts a scene of anal intercourse between his friend Daniel B. and a young Arab boy, Mohammed (Delay writes “between a sodomite and an invert”\textsuperscript{15} in a misapplication of Gide’s own taxonomics):

Daniel seized Mohammed in his arms and carried him over to the bed at the far end of the room. He laid him on his back across the edge of the bed, and soon all I could see was two thin legs dangling on either side of the panting Daniel, who hadn’t even taken off his cloak. Very tall, standing against the bed, in semi-darkness, seen from the back, his face hidden by his long black curly hair, in this cloak that came down to his feet, Daniel looked gigantic leaning over this little body which he hid from view.\textsuperscript{16}

The passage is significant for its obsession with what is hidden from view. The only light in the room is a solitary candle, and Daniel’s cloak\textsuperscript{17} veils the spectacle of anal penetration from Gide’s gaze, as Daniel’s hair hides his face (which would reveal pleasure, no doubt). Anal intercourse is thus something Gide is left to imagine, rather than witness. And his imagination runs riot. With Gothic hyperbole, he compares Daniel to a huge parasitic form, a vampire (always an anti-social, outlaw figure\textsuperscript{18}) feasting on his prey (note how Gide exaggerates the comparative sizes of the two men: Daniel is described as gigantic, towering over Mohammed’s little body). But what horrifies him just as much as Daniel’s unsublimated desire for the anus is Mohammed’s willingness to be penetrated:

\textsuperscript{15} Delay, The Youth of André Gide, 426.
\textsuperscript{16} Andre Gide, If It Die [1926], trans. Dorothy Bussy, Penguin, 1977, 298. Further citations will appear in the text indicated by the abbreviation IID.
\textsuperscript{18} For a discussion of homosexuality and vampirism see Carolyn Brown, ‘Figuring the Vampire: death, desire and the image’ in Golding (ed.), The Eight Technologies of Otherness, 117–33.
As for myself, who can only conceive pleasure face to face, reciprocal and gentle, and who, like Whitman, find satisfaction in the most furtive contact, I was horrified both by Daniel’s way of going at it and by the willing cooperation of Mohammed.\footnote{Gide, If It Die, 287. The original French is “… de voir s’y preter aussi complaisamment Mohammed”, which translates best as “willing cooperation”, although Lucey translates it as “by seeing Mohammed go along with it so complacently”. Complacency is not the same thing as willingness, and for my argument Mohammed’s desire/pleasure is crucial, which is not connoted by Lucey’s translation.}

Gide cannot comprehend why two men would want to do this. He states, “We always find it hard to understand other people’s love-life, their ways of making love” \cite{Gide, If It Die, 286}. Yet there is no attempt at understanding here, only blind antipathy (“I could have screamed in horror”). Note how Gide’s own penchant – for pleasure face to face – is opposed to sodomy, which in this matrix, would be “back to front” (despite the fact that Daniel has laid Mohammed on his back, thus rendering the two men face to face). Irrespective of positioning, use of the anus is seen as antithetical to the mutuality that Gide requires. As Michael Lucey writes, “Fucking represents an excess Gide’s fantasy cannot absorb, a form of pleasure he will not imagine as just sexual; it must also be political.”\footnote{Lucey, Gide’s Bent, 37.}

According to Lucey, the decadence of Daniel and Mohammed’s sex leaves Gide’s own furtive contact egalitarian and beyond reproach. To refuse fucking is to refuse seeing sex as political; Gide’s own pleasures are saved from a politicizing discourse that might render them suspect. As Guy Hocquenghem argues, the anus is private, hidden, anti-social while the phallus is public, social, visible.\footnote{Guy Hocquenghem, Homosexual Desire, trans. Danielle Dangoor, Duke University Press, 1993, 96. See the conclusion of this book for a more detailed account of his work.}

In Leo Bersani’s reading of the final scene in Jean Genet’s Funeral Rites, in which two men fuck doggy style on a rooftop in Paris (i.e., not Gide’s preferred face to face), their positioning renders homosexual intercourse intractably anti-social, for it privileges, for Bersani at least, individual sexual pleasure over shared sexual intimacy. He argues that the intimacy of a mutual
gaze is required by our culture for ultimate privacy and intimate knowledge of the other, an intimacy upon which “the familial cell is built”. Thus sodomy “takes on the value of a break or seismic shift in a culture’s episteme: the injunction to find ourselves, and each other, in the sexual”.22 Traditional phrases like ‘sexual intercourse’, ‘sexual congress’, ‘sexual union’, suggest a sharing or conjoining of souls, a bonding that is starkly at odds with Bersani’s reading of Genet, in which buggery emerges as the opposite of such sharing or bonding: it is, rather, the refusal of it. By seeing Daniel and Mohammed’s coupling as antithetical to his own face to face pleasures, Gide would seem to be projecting onto this act a similarly radical and socially destabilizing potentiality.

How much more destabilizing, though, if it were the other way around, Mohammed sodomizing Daniel, the colonized colonizing the colon of the colonizer? Or, perish the thought, if love were involved? If, rather than being seen as anti-relational, sodomy between men were an expression of that intimacy Bersani wants to refute. After all, of whom is that intimacy demanded? Not gay people, surely, against whom the stereotype of anonymous, promiscuous, loveless sexual encounters is all too often employed. As Foucault has suggested, it’s not so much the idea of gay sex that is socially unacceptable but the idea of two men achieving happiness together, of formulating new types of personal relationships.23 This could also go some way to explaining Gide’s excessive disgust at the sight of Daniel and Mohammed going at it hammer and tongs. Perhaps it is that very intimacy that sodomy requires which Gide finds so distasteful. It is a meeting of two equal forces in a rather violently passionate manner that makes him almost scream in horror. Gide could not equate sex with love and therefore refused to equate sex with intimacy. Recounting his own encounter with Mohammed two years earlier, he writes, “My joy was unbounded, and I cannot imagine it greater, even if love had been added. How could love have entered into this? How could I have left my heart at the mercy

23 Quoted in ibid., 77.
of my desire?” (IID, 284). Gide was clearly terrified of emotional vulnerability, to the point where he was unable, or unwilling, to allow himself to feel any emotion other than physical pleasure, and then, after the boy’s departure, Gide masturbated repeatedly to the point of numb exhaustion, because when one is exhausted one can feel nothing but one’s exhaustion.

The fact that Mohammed had been Gide’s partner in pederasty two years prior to being Daniel’s in sodomy does not lead Gide to reflect on the instability and possible futility of such identity categories as sodomite or pederast; rather, it makes him all the more determined to maintain those barriers of disgust referred to earlier. Neither does it occur to him that Mohammed is in a subservient position to colonials like Gide and Daniel B, rendering him obliged to respond to their sexual demands: he is a prostitute.

In If It Die Gide writes: “We always find it hard to understand other people’s love-life, their ways of making love […] nothing is so disconcerting as the methods, varying so much from species to species, by which each of them finds his pleasure” (IID, 286). Coming as it does after the scene in which Daniel sodomizes Mohammed, we can see here a dramatization of Foucault’s claim that while the sodomite had been an aberration, the homosexual – via medicalization – became a species (HS, 43). Under Gide’s essentializing gaze what is no more than a sexual act becomes a personality type, a species. The fact that the same body (Mohammed’s) can engage itself at one time in pederastic practices (according to Delay, Gide went no further than mutual masturbation24) and at another time in sodomy, significantly undermines any theory (such as sexology) that would base identity on behaviour. Gide contradicts himself, shifting as he does between an insistence on essentialist notions of authenticity and selfhood and a desire to discredit those medical theories that would see in the homosexual a distinct and essential personality type. Gide wrote in his Journals, “desire loses all value and does not deserve to be taken into consideration the moment it ceases to be in

harmony with, and similar to, [heterosexuals].” Yet is he not a victim of the same prejudice when faced with a form of desire not in harmony with his own? Is his intolerance of sodomites any different to society’s hatred of all homosexuals, of which he is highly critical? And what ‘makes’ a sodomite, anyway? Is it an act or an identity? Or, following Judith Butler, is it the repetition of acts parading as an identity? Moreover, in Bersani’s words, “How does the wish to repeat pleasurable stimulations of the body translate into, or come to constitute, intersubjectivity?”

Mohammed’s fluctuation between sodomy and pederasty presents Gide with an incomprehensibly fluid model of desire, one which causes those barriers of disgust of which he is so fond to come crashing down around his ears.

An Entirely Human Invention
In The Youth of Andre Gide, Jean Delay reassures us that Gide’s was not an innate homosexuality, “and therefore fatal, but acquired, and therefore modifiable.” Delay’s diagnosis is based on the fact that Gide was not effeminate, whereas for Delay an innate homosexual dreams, feels and loves like a woman due to his over-identification with a mother who is extremely feminine, “thus very different from Mme. Paul Gide”. Delay thus overlooks Gide’s own affirmative statements on his acceptance of his true nature – “I now found what was normal in me” – and instead laments the passing of Gide’s opportunity to be heterosexual.

This judgemental attitude renders Delay incapable of seeing Gide as anything other than flawed or damaged and in need of a cure: “He had a homosexuality neurosis […] which is susceptible of medical treatment, at least today”; an attitude wildly at odds with Gide’s own view. He also ignores Gide’s confession in If It Die that in order to achieve intercourse with the Arab girl Meriem he imagined he was holding a boy, Mohammed (IID, 255) – interesting, given Gide’s loathing for male penetration.

25 Gide, Journals, 2.214.
26 Bersani, Homos, 60.
27 Delay, The Youth of André Gide, 60.
28 Ibid., 441.
29 Ibid., 396. Delay offers no evidence to support this claim, because there isn’t any.
What he imagined doing to Mohammed whilst fucking Meriem is anyone’s guess.

In Delay’s account, effeminacy emerges as the signal factor defining the innate homosexual. For Gide, as we have seen, effeminate homosexuals are the most loathsome, and his reason is clear: they are passive sodomites, taking the role of the woman in intercourse; as such, they are not male, but a Third Sex. Gide therefore ends up supporting and promoting the theory he set out to contest. According to Corydon, procreation cannot be regarded as the primary motor for sexual intercourse; rather, it is a byproduct. The principle motivation is pleasure. Pleasure thus becomes a human universal truth (much like Freud’s libido) possessing the potential to reduce intolerance of the varying ways in which others choose to obtain theirs.

Gide’s own tolerance of the ways some other people choose to obtain their pleasure, as we have seen, was sometimes slim. Anal intercourse, for example, was not within Gide’s scope of understanding or tolerance. For Corydon, sodomy is “an exceptional amusement for the debauched and the blasé” (c, 89). An amusement much less exceptional, however, than Gide first imagined, as he concedes in his journal entry of 1918, where he claims that pederasts are “much rarer, and the sodomites much more numerous, than I first thought”.

Corydon’s argument that procreation is a by-product of the pursuit of pleasure (“The animal seeks pleasure – and finds fertilization by accident” [c, 36]) rests on the dubious (and phallicentric) premise that while females can only participate in intercourse at certain periods (i.e. when they are on heat), males are willing and able to perform at all times, which is why they often indulge in homosexual activity when no females are ovulating.

Not only does this ‘any-port-in-a-storm’ argument, by which desire becomes some sex-blind, free-floating instinct for gratification regardless of object, run counter to the notion of sexual volition or preference (not to mention its complete omission of any form of lesbianism) upon which he aims to base his de-

---

30 Gide, Journals, 2.158.
fense of pederasty; but it is also seriously compromised by his later call for greater self-control over sexual appetite. Corydon is concerned with showing how heterosexuality is socially constructed as an absolute and exclusive condition for the health and perpetuation of the human race, and as such he argues it is custom rather than nature that is being violated by homosexual behaviour: “Where you say ‘against nature’ the phrase ‘against custom’ would do” (c, 27). It is customary for men to have sex with (and impregnate) women, and Corydon argues that an entire psychology (love) has been constructed around this one physical act and qualified its status as ‘natural’ to the extent that any other form of sexual behaviour is deemed ‘unnatural’ precisely because it goes against this custom. Yet man himself, not nature, has drawn the boundary lines over which it is deemed unnatural to transgress: “Love is an entirely human invention – it does not exist in a state of nature” (c, 33).

Gide employs, in *Corydon*, a double-edged meaning of ‘nature’, which not only incorporates the natural world but also the idea of a true and essential self (‘one’s nature’). Given the second sense of the word, to go against nature would be to deny one’s homosexual impulse, while admitting them and acting on them is part of an acceptance of what is one’s true nature. In Algiers, following the acceptance of his homosexual desire, Gide wrote to his mother: “I should like very submissively to follow nature – the unconscious, which is within myself and must be true”, suggesting the existence of an essential, unshakably ‘true’ self which his transgression of sexual conformity has liberated.

This ‘essential’ self would appear to be an original, predis-cursive plenitude to which it is necessary to return if one is to maintain an authentic identity. At the same time, that he wishes “very submissively to follow” this nature denies any autonomy. In the light of such an admission, just how radical is Gide’s essentialism?

**A Radical Essentialism?**

To acknowledge an essential homosexuality within oneself as Gide did was to go some way towards conceding the concept of
innateness, which is something Corydon seems both to accept and resist.\(^{31}\) Accept in as much as Corydon argues against the theory of an acquired homosexuality: “When he imitates it’s because he wants to imitate […] the example corresponded to his secret preference” (c, 30); resist in the sense that Corydon suggests homosexuality “can scarcely be inherited for the plausible reason that the very act which would transmit it is necessarily a heterosexual act” (c, 30. Ellipsis in original). Yet no one knew better than Gide that in order to procreate one didn’t need to be heterosexual, for he had a daughter himself by a woman other than his wife.

This points to a separation of act from identity which Gide was incapable of in his reading of Daniel and Mohammed’s fuck scene. He may be willing to divorce pleasure from procreation but cannot, it seems, divorce preference from essence. In Corydon at least, participation in a particular sexual activity, even if only for a short period of time – as in the case of pederasty, where the adolescent, upon reaching his majority, should switch, and be perfectly suited to, heterosexual marriage – would seem to involve an alignment between that activity and the desires of an essential self, or identity. Except that Gide is not interested in the identity or essence of the boys with whom he has sex. His focus is on his own nature and the coherence he can acquire for it.

Leo Bersani argues that Gide’s sexuality is anti-social or anti-relational because of this disinterest in his partners. Indeed, taking his cue from Foucault, in an interview where he stated that homosexuality is capable of “inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of [the body]”, Bersani sees Gide’s account of homosexuality as “more threatening to dominant cultural ideologies” than, for example, an account which included anal penetration. This is because “not only does it play dangerously with the terms of a sexual relation (active and passive, dominant and submissive) – it eliminates from ‘sex’ the necessity of any relation whatsoever”.\(^{32}\)


\(^{32}\) Bersani, *Homos*, 122. Original emphasis.
Bersani’s citation of the scene in *The Immoralist* where Michel gets off on touching the Arab boy Bachir’s “delicate shoulder” would certainly be an example of taking pleasure from “strange parts of the body”, but where does this lead us in an analysis of homosexuality? Whilst acknowledging that Gidean homosexuality is ‘indistinguishable from a homophobic rejection of sex”, Bersani sees in this anti-relationality a radical potential to see all homosexuality as anti-social because, in its emphasis on same-ness, it oblates the discursive command for difference in sexual relationships. I agree with Bersani’s conclusion, though remain unconvinced by his example of Gide’s refusal of a directly sexual relationship with Arab boys, or, when sex does occur, Gide’s refusal to recognize his partners as equals.

Take Gide’s hatred of inverts. It seems clear that he sees their desires as dependent on difference, with one partner acting the role of a man and the other of a woman. Man and woman are fixed terms in this analysis, and only pederasty can avoid such heterosexualization of same-sex behaviour. But his exclusive interest in young Arab men and boys is just as involved in notions of difference, in this case transgenerational and racial.

By concentrating so much on excavating his own ‘true self’, Gide renders himself incapable of relating to or considering others. He could thus be accused of pure essentialism, his concept of the sexual self allowing no room for personal volition or change, and ignoring the social factors in the constitution of human sexuality. He wrote to a friend: “I have not chosen to be thus. I can struggle against my desires, I can overcome them, but I cannot choose the object of these desires nor invent others by imitation […]. I have never felt any desire towards a woman.”

In Gide’s account, we are all subject to an essential, true nature which it is our task to unearth, understand and, ultimately, to express. Is this radical?

Jonathan Dollimore believes so: “For Gide transgression is in the name of a desire and identity rooted in the natural, the

---

33 Ibid., 121.
sincere, and the authentic.” Contrasting Gide’s position with Wilde’s anti-essentialism, Dollimore sees in Gide’s method of appropriating dominant concepts such as ‘the normal’ and ‘the natural’ to legitimate his own deviation a kind of willful perversity in the service of a radical sexual essentialism: “in Gide we find essentialism in the service a radical sexual nonconformity which was and remains largely outlawed by conventional and dominant sexual ideologies, be they bourgeois or socialist”. Dollimore uses Gide’s ‘unified subject’ to argue against postmodernism’s insistence that essentialism has always been the exclusive property of dominant ideologies; always conservative, never subversive. The fact that the category of the ‘natural’ is so central to the dominant culture forces subcultures to appropriate it in their struggle for legitimacy. For Dollimore, Gide “conjoins self-authenticity and sexual dissidence” in the name of a radical politics of desire.

Transgressive desire does not, for Gide, lead to a shattering of self but to a consolidation of what one truly is. The ultimate task is to discover one’s essential, authentic nature: “a new self created from liberated desire”.

And consequential to the disclosure of this new self is the excavation, within that self, of “the tables of a new law” (IID, 298). Like Michel in The Immoralist, after discovering his true nature Gide renounces his old, false self in favour of this new, liberated one. Such a model of sexuality immediately suggests Foucault’s critique of the category of sexuality as a discursive and disciplinary product: “sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover” (HS, 105). Rather it should be thought of as a category through which the will to truth can activate a strategy for political power.

The true sex which Gide is so anxious to excavate is, in Foucauldian terms, not the cause but the effect of the very discursive impulse which forces Gide to pursue it. Gide’s essentializing of

36 Ibid., 13; 26.
his own particular brand of same-sex desire thus, by the same token, also essentializes those categories he disclaims in the preface to Corydon, and it becomes impossible to salvage Gide for a radicalism he clearly doesn’t possess.

Unlike Wilde, for whom the idea of a true self was preposterous, Gide accepted that one has an essential and discoverable self or nature to which one must always be true. Gide was terrified of Wilde precisely because he felt his own beliefs – his own self – under threat in Wilde’s presence. Rather than, as Wilde did, refute the existence of an authentic self, Gide preferred to appropriate it and inscribe his own homosexual identity within that prevailing discourse. Not content with simply breaking with conformity, he felt the need to vindicate his non-conformity, drawing on the realm of nature to support his claim for sexual authenticity.

As he writes in If It Die, “Emancipation from rule did not suffice me; I boldly claimed to justify my folly, to base my madness upon reason” (IIID, 298). His main justification of his folly was Corydon, in which he refutes concepts such as degeneracy and vice in favour of health and self-control; a stylistics of existence based on the Greek model of ascesis.

Richard Howard grandly claims that “Corydon remains one of the books crucial to an understanding of the development of the Western mind in the first quarter of the twentieth century.”

If we can make sense of that statement at all, it would be in the context of binary thinking, which Gide both maintains – in the case of inverts, sodomites, etc – and also challenges by insisting on healthy uranism. This tradition of attacking and defending binarisms has marked our century’s thinking, particularly on

---

37 See Jonathan Fryer, André and Oscar: Gide, Wilde and the Gay Art of Living, Constable, 1997. See also Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence.
39 Richard Howard, ‘From Exoticism to Homosexuality’, in G. Stambolian and E. Marks, (eds), Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts, Cornell University Press, 1979, 324. Gide considered Corydon to be his most important and useful book, as well as the one he felt least attracted to and the one with which he found the most fault. He called it “the token of a release”, adding: “And who can tell the number of those whom that little book has, likewise, released?”
the contentious site of sexuality. We can see it as one of the strategies by which reverse discourse functions, for reverse discourse is not separate from the discourse it reverses; they are part and parcel of the same field of knowledge. By necessity, they share knowledge in a battle to secure meanings and concepts: the same theoretical tools are taken up both to attack and to defend. It is through this sustained conflict that those meanings and concepts stick, and subsequently make sense of the world.

As Aron and Kempf have noted, “medicine can afford the luxury of cynicism and declare coldly that it is bound only to the principle of objectivity, even if untutored”. Medicine, they claim, was far ahead of literature on the issue of homosexuality because doctors are beyond reproach or suspicion, and therefore “can speak of filth without fear of getting […] dirty”. Gide’s own fear of getting dirty extended to loathing any form of sex which would expose him to dirt. So he made his defender of healthy uranism a doctor and distanced himself from practices such as effeminacy and sodomy, thus perpetuating the cultural conflation of the two terms along the most homophobic and misogynistic lines.

Given that Gide’s rejection of the ‘third sex’ model in the preface to Corydon refers explicitly to Proust’s Sodom et Gomorrhe as not only being responsible for making the public more accustomed to homosexuality, but also for promoting the notion that homosexuals constitute a third sex, we might ask why the Third Sex model was capable of making homosexuality more palatable. Why was it that Proust’s hommes–femmes were more socially acceptable and culturally visible than Gide’s healthy uranians? What function did it serve in the construction of the homosexual as a discursive figure? To answer these questions, the next chapter explores Proust’s theories – theories which in many ways dovetail those of Gide.
