Chapter Four

A Problem in Gay Heroics

John Addington Symonds and l’amour de l’impossible

“When the whole interest of a life centres, not in action, but in mental development and moral experience, truth becomes imperatively necessary with regard to points of apparent insignificance.”

– Symonds, Memoirs

Why did the Victorian poet and essayist John Addington Symonds (1840–1893) call love between men the love of the impossible? What did he consider so impossible about it, and how did the discourse that emerged around homosexuality at the end of the nineteenth century foreclose the possibility of love between men?

We have seen how in Gide and Carpenter, the sexual element of same-sex love was secondary to a stylistics of existence. In this way, homosexuality as an identity became much more significant than as a sexual proclivity or desire, the sexual act less important than the personality type which became increasingly associated with it. We have also seen how, in Proust especially, the concept of same-sex attraction was subordinated within a heterosexual matrix in which a man’s desire for other men always derives from an immanent femininity. In a similar manner to Carpenter, Symonds attempted to masculinise homosexual love, and this chapter explores the ways in which he tried to do this, but failed, because of the impossibility of accommodating same-sex desire within heterological concepts of desire. For this reason, the homosexual discourse was characterized by anxieties around issues of private/public, knowledge/ignorance, sub-
jectivity/objectivity, from its very inception, with Symonds, one of the first people to theorise about same-sex love.

Like Carpenter, Symonds is seen as a pioneer of a health model of homosexuality, and yet his *Memoirs* express the feeling that he was suffering from an incurable sickness. Between these two statements, where can we locate the truth of homosexuality and its emergence into discourse? How did the initial discursive appearance of a homosexual type relate not only to a medical discourse but also to actual lived experience? How can we make sense of this apparent contradiction?

*The Effect of an Eccentric*

The *Memoirs* of John Addington Symonds, written in the 1890s but not published until 1984, bear the curious subtitle, *The Secret Homosexual Life of a Leading Nineteenth Century Man of Letters*. The secret homosexual life? Anyone familiar with the figure of Symonds and his role in homosexual history (see, for example, Weeks’ *Coming Out*) will find it odd that Symonds’ homosexuality could be referred to as secret. True, it would have been foolish to parade publically one’s sexuality in the light of the Labouchere Amendment of 1885, which criminalized ‘acts of gross indecency’ between men with a sentence of up to two years’ hard labour, but Symonds has earned a place in gay history as a pioneer, not a man with a secret homosexual life. His writing alluded to it, his close friends were aware of it, and as far as it was possible at the time to live as a gay man, Symonds did; so where’s the secret? Bristow refers to the open secret of Symonds’ homosexuality within his circle of friends.¹ According to D.A. Miller, secrecy can function as

The subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established, and the sanctity of their first term kept inviolate. And the phenomenon of the ‘open secret’ does not, as one might think, bring

about the collapse of those binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery.²

For Symonds, as for lesbians and gay men today, the disclosure of one’s sexuality is a constantly negotiable event. By shifting the responsibility of the fate of his memoirs onto his literary executor, Symonds avoided such a negotiation. The real secret, for students of gay history, is the revelation of Symonds’ true feelings about his homosexual desire, which he describes in the memoirs as a “congenital aberration of the passions”, which had been “the poison of [his] life”.³ In public, he was perceived as a political figure, aligned with the aesthetic movement, socialist thought and progressive ideas. In private, he regarded his homosexuality to be an innate sickness from which his abilities as a writer and thinker suffered immeasurably. The ideological effects of the private/public divide are thus fantasmatically recovered, and the crisis of definition is anxiously aroused.⁴

Symonds was acutely aware of the assumed objectivity of science and the so-called subjectivity of literature. When he was scouting for someone with whom he could write a book on inversion, he admitted to Carpenter, “I need somebody of medical importance to collaborate with. Alone, I could make but little effect – the effect of an eccentric.”⁵ The man he approached for this collaboration was Havelock Ellis, a young heterosexual doctor just then making a name for himself in the field of sexology. The pair never met, but the collaborative result of their correspondence was Sexual Inversion, published in 1897, one of the first works on homosexuality to appear in English (although it was originally published in German due to an obscenity charge). Symonds avoided accusations of indecency by speci-

⁴ Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 72.
fying his readership: men interested in scientific phenomenon. In his Memoirs, the chapter dealing with his homosexuality is entitled ‘Containing material which none but students of psychology and ethics need peruse’ (M, 61); everyone else should move on to the next chapter to avoid offence or confusion – this is esoteric stuff.

Symonds is adopting the highbrow tones of the doctor, and for understandable reasons. Sexology “promised to be a forgiving branch of an implacably homophobic culture”; like Gide, “he longed to blend his voice with the impeccable tones of the doctor”6 to avoid accusations of prurience or, worse, partisanship. The guise of a doctor replaces subjectivity with objectivity, and the homosexual’s own voice becomes subordinate to the authoritative voice of medicine. The reverse discourse was not allowed to function independently; it was contingent on theories and vocabulary and protocols set down by the medical discourse. Like a colonized race learning the master language before being able to articulate dissent, Symonds et al. only had at their disposal the language of science with which to work towards legitimacy.

Symonds’ death in 1893 not only meant he missed the Wilde trials and their horrific impact on the lives of English homosexuals, it also meant he did not see the project with Ellis through to completion and publication. After his death, his writings on homosexuality were suppressed by his literary executor, Horatio Brown, and his role in the writing of Sexual Inversion was effectively erased. However, the nature of discourse clearly works in the face of such erasure, as evidenced by the anonymity of the case histories which constituted the foundation of medical observation. These authorless narratives supply the experiential data upon which medical knowledge was based.

Symonds both resists the medical insistence on sickness whilst at the same time articulating it to explain and defend his sense of same-sex desire as somehow at the very core of his being: “a fierce rejection of the physician’s pathological etiol-“

ogy” and an “acceptance of it as a scientific alibi for his profile of himself having a distinct, inescapable identity”\(^7\). In his correspondence with Ellis Symonds expresses great concern that collaborating with a doctor will present homosexuality in the wrong light, whilst also offering the only valid mode of objective representation.\(^8\)

In a letter to Horatio Brown Symonds refers to the *Memoirs* as having a unique value in its “disclosure of a type of man who has *not yet been classified*” (m, 289); a curious comment when one considers that by the time Symonds wrote the autobiography he was well aware of the medical profession’s zealous taxonomy of inverted/Urnings/homosexuals. Indeed, he could be said to have contributed to such classification with his collaboration with Ellis. Was he, perhaps, referring to the *self*-classification rather than the taxonomic tagging from above, explicitly foregrounding the reversal of discourse which Foucault was later to theorize? Perhaps this hitherto unclassified type was the non-effeminate homosexual, which type Symonds seems to have been, and which medical science ignored in favour of those examples which supported the third sex/inversion theory because it was more in line with their theories of perversion and degeneration.

In the *Memoirs* he describes himself both within and against Ulrichs’ taxonomies:

With regard to Ulrichs, in his peculiar phraseology, I should certainly be tabulated as a *Mittel Urning*, holding a mean between the *Mannling* and the *Weibling*; that is to say, one whose emotions are directed to the male sex during the period of adolescence and early manhood; who is not marked either by an effeminate passion for robust adults or by a predilection for young boys; in other words, one whose comradely instincts are tinged with a distinct sexual partiality. But in this sufficiently accurate description of my attitude, I do not recognize anything which justifies the theory of a


\(^8\) See Koestenbaum, *Double Talk*, 43–67.
female soul. Morally and intellectually, in character and taste and habits, I am more masculine than many men I know who adore women. I have no feminine feeling for the males who rouse my desire (m, 65)

In Urlichs’ taxonomy, a Mannling is a masculine homosexual, a Weibling an effeminate one. Symonds explicitly challenges the medical association of ‘feminine feeling’ with a desire for males, and yet his desire for “sound and vigorous young men of a lower rank” suggests an idealization of working class masculinity which contrasts with his own class position and personal ill-health. Like Carpenter and Forster, he never chose male lovers from his own class. Describing a pick-up with a grenadier, Symonds contrasts himself – “a slight nervous man of fashion in [his] dress clothes” – with the “strapping fellow in a scarlet uniform”, Symonds “strongly attracted by his physical magnetism” (m, 186). A lifetime of illness would seem to have led Symonds to associate his own homosexual desire with sickness, and the objects of his desire with health. While health=masculinity, sickness=femininity. Although Symonds contests the notion of ‘feminine feeling’, he associated his sickness (both his physical maladies and his homosexuality) with a lack of masculinity and virility.

Regarding the Memoirs, Symonds was torn between being “anxious […] that this document should not perish”, and desiring that it not be “injurious to my family”.

He wrote: “I have to think of the world’s verdict – since I have given pledges to the future in the shape of my four growing girls.” (One of his daughters, Katherine, demanded access to the manuscript in 1949, but there is no record of her response to the revelations therein). Unsure how to solve the problem, he left it to his executor, Brown, to decide. Brown published a biography

9 Printed as Appendix One in M, 287.
10 Quoted from a letter to H. F. Brown 29 December 1891, printed as Appendix Two in M, 289.
12 Ibid., 275.
of Symonds two years after his death composed almost entirely of extracts from the *Memoirs*, but with all references to his homosexuality excised, thus negating the book’s very *raison d’être*. On Brown’s death, in 1926, the manuscript went to the London Library with a fifty-year ban on publication.

Symonds complained towards the end of his life that he had never properly spoken out on homosexuality. Considering that Symonds never truly intended the autobiography to be published, one would expect a more explicit account of his homosexuality than one actually finds. Even the anonymous case study of himself included in *Sexual Inversion* is reticent about what he actually did with other men, but is more concerned with the genealogy of his homosexual desire. But like the above passage from the *Memoirs*, he refutes any effeminacy: “He is certainly not simply passive and shows no signs of *effeminatio*. He likes sound and vigorous young men of a lower rank from the age of 20 to 25. I gather from his conversation that the mode of pleasure is indifferent to his tastes.” Like Carpenter, Symonds denies any indulgence in sodomy (‘certainly not simply passive”). The message is clear in both cases: sodomy is for cissies. The association of being “simply passive” with *effeminatio* bears witness to the constant anxiety around anal sex as feminizing, as well as effeminacy being seen as the sure sign of passivity.

Koestenbaum points out the subtle yet poignant differences between one scene in the case history and its corresponding description in the *Memoirs*; namely, Symonds’ erotic daydreams of naked sailors:

> Among my earliest recollections I must record certain visions, half-dream, half-reverie, which were certainly erotic in their nature, and which recurred frequently just before sleeping. I used to fancy myself crouched upon the floor amid a company of naked adult men: sailors, such as I had seen about the streets of Bristol. The contact of their bodies afforded me a vivid and mysterious pleasure. (*M*, 62)

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13 Grosskurth, in her Forward to *M*, 11.
14 Printed as Appendix One in *M*, 287–8.
About the age of 8, if not before, he became subject to singular half-waking dreams. He fancied himself seated on the floor among several adult and naked sailors, whose genitals and buttocks he contemplated and handled with relish. He called himself the ‘dirty pig’ of these men, and felt that they were in some way his masters, ordering him to do uncleanly services to their bodies.15

Both his extreme youth and his low position suggest that this is a fantasy about being a bottom. The case history omits any reference to Bristol, yet the anonymity allows for more explicitness. The egality and camaraderie of the first scene gives way to a scenario of sexual subservience in the second, A (the pseudonym chosen by Symonds16) submitting to the self-appellation of ‘dirty pig’ and obeying orders from the sailors to handle and service their genitals and buttocks from a crouched position between their thighs. The more detailed account is only possible, Kosttenbaum concludes, once Symonds had given up his signature.17

Phyllis Grosskurth, in her introduction to the Memoirs, comments on the book’s “curious admixture of candour and evasiveness”, calling it “a hybrid, falling somewhere between literature and a psychological case history”, and wondering why, if he were writing primarily for himself – or for posterity – he could not be entirely frank.18 She sees a contradiction between Symonds’ repeated insistence that the initial impetus for the Memoirs was a desire “to help others as unfortunate as himself”, and her own observation that “the frequency with which he uses the words ‘abnormal’, ‘morbid’, ‘unwholesome’ suggests a growing suspicion that he might be some kind of monster.” Symonds himself talks of “the strain of this attraction and repulsion – the intol-

16 After Symonds’ death, Ellis used the pseudonym Z for Symonds’ contribution to Sexual Inversion, thus demoting him from the primary letter of the alphabet to the ultimate letter. For a detailed account of their collaboration, see Kostenbaum, Double Talk, 43–67.
17 Ibid., 59.
erable desire and the repudiation of mere fleshly satisfaction” (M, 274), the war between “a beauteous angel” and “a devil abhorred” (M, 283). Indeed, the two positions seem to characterize reverse discourse: Carpenter’s perverse ruins and beautiful flowers; Proust’s belief in the “sometimes beautiful, often hideous” accursed race; and Gide’s debauched sodomites and honorable pederasts. The afflictions of a homophobic culture wrestle with the exalted sentiments of homosexual love. It is specifically this repeatability of statements that Foucault recognizes as constituting discourse and defining “the possibilities of reinscription and transcription (but also thresholds and limits), rather than limited and perishable individualities.”

The relationships between these texts and their contribution to a mapping out of knowledge become clearer. A truth is emerging.

**Prick to Prick, So Sweet**

Although he recognized his desire for other men at an early age, Symonds repressed those feelings and tried to live a ‘normal’ life according to Victorian morals and social mores. This involved marriage, at the age of twenty four, when he was, he claims, “still unconscious” of the sensuality of his desires for boys, although he was capable of romanticizing about them quite easily. His marriage, he hoped, would “satisfy the side of [his] nature which thrilled so strangely when [he] touched a boy” (M, 184). Yet within fifteen months of marriage his desires, still unsatisfied, threatened the tranquility he sought.

One episode Symonds recounts from this period described some graffito which deeply troubled him. Two cocks, pressed together, crudely scrawled on a slate: “an emphatic diagram of phallic meeting, glued together, gushing”. By it, the words ‘Prick to prick, so sweet’ (M, 187). This phallic imagery was of “so penetrative a character […] that it pierced the very marrow” (emphasis added) of his soul. It became for Symonds a defining mo-

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ment in the discovery of his sexuality, a recognition, however crudely represented, of what he most desired: “That obscene graffito was the sign and symbol of a paramount and permanent craving of my physical and psychical nature” (M, 188). This sign and symbol pornographically condenses the distress of a desire hegemonically invalidated.

In the Memoirs, this revelation is succeeded by the birth of his first daughter, the fruit, not of prick to prick, but, to remain in the vernacular, prick to cunt. This would seem to foreground the sterility of the male–male union, to render that graffiti a cipher, a zero: two gushing pricks cannot procreate. Their sterility is further corroborated by the fact that at that time Symonds was only mentally investing in homosexual imagery and not physically acting on those impulses; a behaviour which, in the light of his procreative signifier (a child) would define his identity as heterosexual, not homosexual: his homosexual identity would appear to amount to zero. In thought, not deed. Which begs the question: where does identity come into being? Is it on the psychological or the physical plane? Is it constituted by desires or the acting out of those desires? Moreover, does the physical have less bearing on discursive reality than the physical, the material than the enunciative?

Foucault’s analysis of sexuality focuses on the discursive impulse to distil every facet of human personality down to the existence of a true, essential and pre-discursive sexuality, with the result that, for the homosexual:

nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away.\(^\text{21}\)

An ‘open secret’, no less. In A Problem in Modern Ethics, Symonds criticizes the physiognomy argument, which saw in the

\(^{21}\) Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 1.43.
body of the homosexual unmistakeable signs of his deviant desire; in the *Memoirs* he colludes with it, confirming Foucault’s argument by believing that his entire personality and ability to function as a writer and a thinker were detrimentally affected by his homosexuality: “It cannot be doubted that the congenital aberration of the passions which I have described has been the poison of my life.” He refers to the time and energy wasted on expressing it, and how it has “interfered with the pursuit of study”, how his marriage “has been spoiled by it” (*M*, 190).

Symonds carries within him “the seeds of what I know to be an incurable malady”, a “deeply rooted perversion of the sexual instincts (uncontrollable, ineradicable, amounting to a monomania) to expose which in its relation to *my whole nature* has been the principle object of these memoirs (*M*, 281, emphasis added). He gives this “uncontrollable” sexual instinct a name: “the wolf”, defined as “that undefined craving coloured with a vague but poignant hankering after males” (*M*, 187).

Upon viewing the prick-to-prick graffiti, “the wolf leapt out: my malaise of the moment was converted into a clairvoyant and tyrannical appetite for the thing which I had rejected five months earlier in the alley by the barracks” (i.e., sex with a grenadier). With this realization comes a clearer definition of that “vague but poignant hankering” as “a precise hunger after sensual pleasure, whereof I had not dreamed before save in repulsive visions of the night” (*M*, 188).

As with Freud’s *Wolf-Man,* a ‘deviant’ sexuality is linked with a wolf, a wild and predatory carnivore, and an animal closely linked in folklore with unimaginable and unconscious fears. Symonds anthropomorphizes his homosexual desire as brutal and savage, something that preys on the precariously maintained stability of his heterosexual marriage. Symonds’ ‘civilised’ self is at the mercy of a primitive and untamed sexual self which lies in waiting, ready to leap out in moments of

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In a letter Edmund Gosse wrote to Symonds in 1890, where Gosse confesses to his own struggle with homosexual feelings, a similar anthropomorphism occurs:

> I know all that you speak of – the solitude, the rebellion, the despair... Years ago, I wanted to write to you about all this, and withdrew through cowardice. I have had a very fortunate life, but there has always been this obstinate twist in it. I have reached a quieter time – some beginnings of that Sophoclean period when the wild beast dies. He is not dead, but tamer; I understand him and the trick of his claws.²³

Like Symonds, Gosse sees his desire as something separate from and in conflict with the civilized self, a wild beast in need of restraint, something of which he is at the mercy. It is the homosexual's life mission to “understand him and the trick of his claws.”

The wolf would appear to be a potent and popular image in connection with homosexual desire. Proust, for example, when discussing the futility of a Sodomitic movement, or a city of Sodom, because no one would be seen dead in it, reasons that “they would repair to Sodom only on days of supreme necessity, when their own town was empty, at those seasons when hunger drives the wolf from the woods” (_SG_, 37). Homosexual desire is clearly a force to be reckoned with. When it craves fulfillment, there’s no denying it. Symonds commits himself strongly to the belief that his desire for males is instinctual and innate, and believes that his attempt at redirecting it towards his wife forced his ‘true’ instincts to reassert themselves all the more violently. He presents the image of a man at the mercy of a brutal force:

> God help me! I cried. I felt humiliated, frightened, gripped in the clutch of doom. Nothing remained but to parry, palliate, procrastinate. There was no hope of escape. And all the

²³ Grosskurth, _A Biography_, 280–1.
while the demon ravished my imagination with ‘the love of the impossible’... From this decisive moment forward to the end, my life had to fly on a broken wing, and my main ambition has been to constitute a working compromise (M, 188)

For Symonds, desire is a demon with fangs and claws with which one must compromise in order to survive, the cause of great anxiety: a rather post-modern concept of sexuality as something threatening to one’s sense of self. An intelligent, civilized man is reduced to blind panic – “gripped in the clutch of doom” – at the merest whiff of that demon, desire, the almost Gothic signified of ‘the love of the impossible’, or ‘a love that dares not speak its name’. This is wildly at odds with Symonds’ liberationist position in *Modern Ethics*, where it becomes simply a question of liberating the homosexual from the social and legal constraints on his true self. If he wasn’t forced – by fear of vilification and imprisonment – to hide his desire, the homosexual, Symonds argued, would be a noble and socially useful person. The public perception of homosexuals as suspicious and delinquent people is merely the inevitable result of their position in a culture that refuses to allow them to express themselves, he claimed. If only society would get off our backs we would all be happy. This ignores the often disturbing, unsettling and threatening ways in which sexual desire – especially dissident desire – is experienced in terms of its destabilizing effect on our sense of coherence and equilibrium. In *Modern Ethics*, Symonds argues that social education is the answer to oppression; a popular myth of sexual liberationist discourse.

The image of a man in torment would seem to contradict the more popular portrait of Symonds as a sexual pioneer at ease with his sexuality and fighting for greater tolerance. Is the best a homosexual can hope for “a working compromise” with a demonic, voracious sexual appetite over which he has no control? At best, a life flown “on a broken wing”? He was caught between wanting to emphasize the pain experienced by homosexuals in

24 See Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’.
a homophobic culture, and wanting to expound a theory of homosexual desire as an innate, healthy and natural phenomenon. Although not necessarily mutually exclusive positions, the dilemma this created in Symonds resulted in a concept of identity as precariously contingent on oppression and the medicalization of teleologically conceived sex behaviour. Without the torture, the oppression, from which to struggle and forge a sense of self, could one attain the status of a coherent identity? Liberationist gay movements also claim that gay identity is heroically wrestled from an oppressive and life-denying discourse and maintained in the face of complete adversity, a position Foucault criticizes by seeing sexuality as the product of a discourse contingent upon such notions. Grosskurth, in her biography of Symonds, presents “the problem” of Symonds’ homosexuality as not only “the overwhelming obsession of Symonds’ life”, but also the “central fact about the man”, supporting Foucault’s theory on the prediscursive claims of sexuality.

As Symonds’ tortured self-oppression indicates, the construction of this discursive belief in a central, true sexuality acted as a powerful means of self-surveillance, policing every gesture, every thought, every appetite. The rigorous examination of oneself for signs of inversion found its apotheosis in Xavier Mayne’s *The Intersexes* (1908), which contained a questionnaire for readers keen to discover whether they were “at all Uranian”. But as Koestenbaum points out, “the book’s secret purpose was to stimulate them to self-knowledge”, a discursive reversal. Symonds’ *Memoirs* – which Bristow calls “a polemic about the specific identity that attended his sexual habits” – could have played a central part in these private recognition scenes, with its dramatization of one individual’s sexual development and its emphasis on a teleological and tragic will to truth. Unfortunately, his rather vague instructions to Brown to put Symonds’ family first in all matters concerning his publications meant the

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26 See, for example, Weeks, *Coming Out*; Silverstolpe, ‘Benkert Was Not a Doctor’.
28 Mayne *The Intersexes*, 621.
29 Koestenbaum, *Double Talk*, 55.
manuscript didn’t see the light of day for nearly a century, thus rendering the Memoirs nothing more than a marginally interesting historical document.

**Writing in the Margins**

Unlike the Memoirs, however, Symonds’ privately printed essay *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891), which both Grosskurth and Weeks see as a counterpart to the Memoirs, circulated within the early 1890s homosexual underground, and was undoubtedly a signal text in the emergence of a coherent sense of the homosexual as a particular type of person/ality. Only fifty copies of the book were printed and despite the appearance on the title page of the disclaimer, ‘Addressed especially to medical psychologists and jurists’, it appears to have been sent out mainly to fellow inverts.

Grosskurth testifies that Symonds received hundreds of letters from men who saw within its pages a mirror image of their own feelings; men whose lives were equally characterized by constant conflict and furtiveness. For the first time, men whose sexual interest was predominantly, if not exclusively, in other men, could read about themselves in a way that did not classify their desires as a sin or a sickness. The margins of *Modern Ethics* were wide in order that recipients could return their copies with written comments, thus reversing the discourse and giving homosexuals themselves a vehicle to speak out via this pseudo-scientific text, or, as Koestenbaum argues, making readers into collaborators.³¹ In this way, Symonds hoped to open up the debate to include inverts.

A tension is thus created between this desire to include the voice of inverts and Symonds’ desire to collaborate with a man of science to lend authority to his voice, and highlights the comment made in chapter three about the absence of homosexual doctors speaking out on the subject. It was left to literary men to wrestle from medical discourse the authority with which to speak out. But that voice must constantly refer back to medi-

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³¹ Koestenbaum, *Double Talk*, 55.
cal authority; as Koestenbaum comments, “The spectre of a homosexual doctor […] dissolves contraries.” Subjectivity, oddly enough, is not seen as an authority. So-called medical objectivity is the only discourse allowed a voice. As Gosse’s words testify: “The position of a young person so tormented is really that of a man buried alive and conscious, but deprived of speech” (my emphasis). This tension between objectivity and subjectivity was one way through which a homosexual discourse was created, producing the concept of a gay identity as something negotiated between medical prescription and free self-inscription – a battle between the subject and a society concerned with objectifying him. The medical categorization made identification possible, but it supplied a rigid and narrow paradigm in which such identification could occur. Science was the only position from which one could speak with impunity and without imputation. All religions require articles of faith and bearers of authority and medical science was rapidly becoming a new religion.

Yet by “describing homosexuality from a position within the subject, and then denying that one has entered the subject and made it one’s own”, imputation constantly threatens to cast a shadow over the speaker, resulting in what Koestenbaum calls “duplicitous double talk”. Medical authority on such an anxious subject is thus constantly threatened by the accusation that too much knowledge hints at personal experience.

In Modern Ethics, Symonds dismantles various medical theories – Moreau, Krafft-Ebing and Lombroso – and argues that medicine’s focus on morbidity (as pathology) as a cause or condition of homosexuality is wide of the mark. He argues that morbidity is, rather, the result of living in a society which legislates against and culturally prohibits homosexuality:

32 Ibid., 62.
33 Quoted in Grosskurth, A Biography, 282.
34 Havelock Ellis’ concerns about writing on homosexuality were alleviated by a lecturer on insanity at the Westminster Hospital, who wrote: “so long as you confine your appeal to the jurist, the alienist and the scientific reader, no shadow of imputation ought to rest upon you”. Quoted in Havelock Ellis, A Note on the Bedborough Trial [1898], D.C. McMurtie, 1925.
35 Kostenbaum, Double Talk, 61.
The grain of truth contained in this vulgar error is that, under the prevalent laws and hostilities of modern society, the inverted passion has to be indulged furtively, spasmodically, hysterically; that the repression of it through fear and shame frequently leads to habits of self-abuse; and that its unconquerable solicitations sometimes convert it from a healthy outlet of the sexual nature into a morbid monomania.\textsuperscript{36}

Although we may find it easy to criticize this in the light of recent work such as that of Foucault, Symonds was, with such an approach, positing homosexual desire as a perfectly natural drive, not as the debauched behaviour of bored libertines or frustrated prisoners. For Symonds, homosexual desire was in-born and therefore natural, and “there is no proof that they are the subjects of disease”\textsuperscript{37}.

Symonds’ main concern in \textit{Modern Ethics} was to disassociate homosexuality from the morbidity/pathology model, a link established by medical writers such as Krafft-Ebing and Tardieu. Using Ulrichs’ theories enabled Symonds to root a discussion on homosexuality within a scientific paradigm without recourse to contemporary theories of morbidity or degeneration. Unfortunately, the appropriation of Ulrichs’ formula for arguing the biological naturalism of same-sex desire imported at the same time a theory of homosexuality based, first and foremost, on gender inversion. The homosexual as constructed within medical discourse was thereby violently at odds with traditional masculinity. In this way, sexual transgression became gender transgression, and \textit{vice versa}.

By his daily correspondence with Ulrichs, who by now lived in Italy, and his inclusion of Ulrichs’ theories in \textit{Modern Ethics}, Symonds acted as the portal through which the inversion trope passed into the consciousness of homosexual Britons. Along with the \textit{Memoirs} and his earlier pamphlet, \textit{A Problem in Greek Ethics}, it can be counted “among the first modern documents to emphasize how human identity must primarily be under-

\textsuperscript{36} Symonds, \textit{Modern Ethics}, 13.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 128.
stood in terms of sexual preference”. At the same time, Wilde’s *A Picture of Dorian Gray* was establishing a literary mirror in which many homosexuals recognized a way of being which refuted traditional masculinity and presented one conduit – arguably, the only visible and culturally permissible identity at that time – through which male–male love could be articulated. In the absence of visible alternatives, the inversion trope became the central trope for homosexuality.

*The Aversa Venus*

Like Gide and Carpenter, Symonds relied on the Greek model of pederasty in his defense of male–male love, whilst at the same time denying that anal sex played any significant role in homosexual relations. Did the anus function as a site of pleasure between men at the time these writers lived? Was its absence in apologies such as those by Gide and Carpenter a deliberate avoidance of a delicate subject? Or was it, rather, a minority taste within a minority taste? And what do the answers to these questions tell us about the symbolic and cultural role of that much-maligned orifice? In *Modern Ethics*, Symonds writes:

It is the common belief that one, and only one, unmentionable act is what the lovers seek as the source of their unnatural gratification, and that this produces spinal disease, epilepsy, consumption, dropsy, and the like. Nothing can be more mistaken, as the scientifically reported cases of avowed and adult sinners demonstrate. Neither do they invariably or even usually prefer the *aversa Venus*; nor, when this happens, do they exhibit peculiar signs of suffering in health.40

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39 After reading Wilde’s novel, Symonds wrote to a friend that he thought the book “odd and very audacious”, “unwholesome in tone”, but nonetheless “artistically and psychologically interesting”, supporting the view of this thesis that a dialectic existed between medical and literary discourses. Quoted in H. M. Hyde, *Oscar Wilde*, Eyre Methuen, 1976, 185.
In the process of denying this “unmentionable act” Symonds finds himself paradoxically defending it as not detrimental to individual health. His position is further complicated when, discussing Mantegazza’s theory that ‘anomalous passions’ can be explained by a misdirection of nerves from the penis to the rectum, he writes “that an intimate connection exists between the nerves of the reproduction organs and the nerves of the rectum is known to anatomists and is felt by everybody”.41 That “felt by everybody” cunningly universalizes rectal pleasure and shifts the topic away from homosexuality.

Given the stringent anti-buggery laws in place at the time he was writing, it is hardly surprising that the majority of case studies in Sexual Inversion, for example, make no mention of it. As Ellis comments:

> It will be observed that in the preceding ten cases little reference is made to the practice of *paedicatio* or *immissio penis in anum*. It is probable that in none of these cases […] has it been practiced. In the two following cases it has occasionally been practiced, but only with repugnance and not as the satisfaction of an instinct.

42 Anal intercourse is clearly considered not to be instinctual to the homosexual. If performed, it would appear to inspire repugnance, not pleasure (recall Gide’s horror at viewing a scene of sodomy in chapter one). Symonds’ most potent symbol of homosexual desire – “prick to prick” – erases the anus and establishes the sameness of male–male eroticism in purely phallic terms. By foregrounding the phallus and downplaying the anus, rejecting sodomy as the behaviour of effeminate degenerates, Symonds maintains a strong link between sodomy and effeminacy. Masculinity and passive anal sex thus become mutually exclusive phenomena, and effeminacy becomes the ‘natural’ and inevitable behaviour of the passive homosexual. To be anal-ly re-

41 Ibid., 81.
42 Ellis and Symonds, *Sexual Inversion*, 51.
ceptive inevitably emasculates a man within a dimorphic gender system.

Recalling the Wolf-Man’s primal scene, which for Freud was witnessing his parents performing *coitus a tergo*, or from behind, Symonds’ fear of ‘the wolf’ can be read as a fear of sodomy, a fear of the gay anus. Just as the Wolf-Man fears the castration which is the inevitable outcome of allowing the father to penetrate him – a ‘truth’ confirmed by seeing his mother’s lack of a phallus – so too Symonds fears the lycanthropic bestiality of sodomy and its concommitent emasculation and effeminization. Anal sex becomes the true *l’amour de l’impossible*, the thing that terrified not only Symonds but also Gide, Carpenter and Proust. That is not to say that all four men desired to get fucked, but the reiteration of that fear inscribes itself on the surface of homosexual discourse and a deep shame becomes attached to the act itself. It is an act to be avoided, not only for fear of effeminacy but also, and more importantly, for fear of confirming the heterosexual hegemony’s worst fears: that all homosexuals are passive sodomites.

The stylistics of existence ascribed to by these four writers foregrounds comradeship, love, affection, and demonizes physical indulgence, as if these things could not possibly co-exist. Symonds wants no more than “the blameless proximity of [a] pure person” (*M*, 266). (He found peace and tranquility in the last years of his life in a remote part of the Swiss Alps, living in the shadow of a mountain named, ironically, Wolfgang).

The heterological assumption that desire springs from lack demands that sexual receptivity in a man confirms his lack of ‘real’ manhood. Whilst the locker room warning to ‘mind yer backs’ ascribes the active role to the assumed homosexual, *at the same time* it addresses the real fear that desire for anal sex is contagious, that submitting in this way to another male will

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43 See Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance Britain*, Gay Men’s Press, 1982, for a discussion of the signifying potential of homosexuality through mythic association with lycanthropes, or werewolves, in the early modern period.
rob one of one’s masculinity. Homophobic discourse is nothing if not contradictory.44

One thing that fascinated Symonds was the idea that the absorption of semen could masculinize. Whilst he cites experiments by Silvio Ventuir in which semen was injected into patients, one can’t help also conjuring up oral and anal sex as conduits for this ‘injection’: the receptive partner, rather than having his masculinity robbed, has it supplemented within such logic. The discursive impossibility of such logic should be clear from my readings of these four writers’ work and I would like, in the following conclusion, to explore not only the relations between the four texts and their formulation of a specific discourse based on shared ‘truths’, but also to rehearse provocatively ways in which the discourse mapped out by them might be reversed in the interests of the ‘butch bottom’. How might the stigma attached to getting fucked be overcome, the ghost of Ulrichs finally exorcised?
