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

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Chapter Three

Beautiful Flowers and Perverse Ruins:
Edward Carpenter’s Intermediate Sex

Nature, it might appear, in mixing the elements
Which go to compose each individual,
Does not always keep her two groups of
Ingredients – which represent the two sexes –
Properly apart, but often throws them
Crosswise in a somewhat baffling manner.

– Edward Carpenter

Edward Carpenter (1844–1929) has long been regarded as a pioneer of same-sex desire, his championing of Whitman’s notion of comradeship seen as progressive and important in the development of a gay identity and history.¹ Yet if we look more closely at what Carpenter was saying it becomes apparent that he never condoned sexual relationships between homosexuals; rather, he flatly denied the importance of sex and promoted instead the spiritual and creative aspects of same-sex love, painting a rather anodine and sexless picture of brotherly affection that is far removed from reality and could be said to have actually distorted the truth of homosexuality as a specifically sexual identity. A close reading of Carpenter’s The Intermediate Sex (1908) reveals his theory as having more in common with homosociality than homosexuality, and therefore highlights once again the absence of a relevant, unprejudiced theory of same-sex desire.

What is radical, however, is Carpenter’s insistence on the important role played by homosexuals in the production of cul-
ture and art by virtue of their non-procreation, an idea I shall explore later in this chapter for its usefulness to this study. Lack of children is undoubtedly seen as one of the major differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals (albeit a recent one, given that prior to the development of a gay lifestyle, many homosexuals married and had children\(^2\)) and may have some bearing on homosexual creativity if we accept that the creative urge is a universal one. As such, homosexual’s non-procreation can be said to be of vital importance for the birth of ideas, of art, indeed of culture itself.

**Literature vs. Science**

Carpenter regarded homosexuality as a *new* phenomenon to be studied, categorized and understood, whilst also acknowledging that homosexual love – or comrade love – had been an important aspect of ancient Greek culture. One way of explaining this apparent contradiction is that, like Gide, Carpenter turned to history as a way of justifying homosexuality. The problem with this is that the past does not always or necessarily aid an understanding of the present. It’s important to remember that Carpenter was writing at a historical juncture between a history in which homosexuality did not exist and a future in which it would become a diacritical marker of ontology. His comprehension of his own same-sex desires found resonance – as it did for many homosexual men – in ancient Greek culture, where love between men was often encouraged in armies, for example, on the understanding that a soldier would fight all the more ferociously if he was defending a lover.\(^3\) At the same time, the new science of sexol-

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2 Until fairly recently, social pressures meant that many lesbians and gay men would have married and had children instead of leading open lives with members of their own sex. Oscar Wilde is a case in point. Having children did not, for him, constitute a sublimation of creative energies. He still produced art. Obviously, the argument runs the risk of being reductive if not seen in its entire complexity.

3 Carpenter’s 1914 text, *Intermediate Types among Primitive Folk*, explicitly states a belief in Uranians’ ability at militarism (see Selected Writings, 1.248). Ironically, gay activist Peter Tatchell employed Carpenter’s theories to support his arguments about gays in the military, suggesting that homosexual men should not want to collude with such a violent and patriarchal institution (*We Don’t Want to March Straight: Masculinity, Gays and the Military*, Cassell, 1995, 49–50). Tatchell ignores the fact that Carpenter thought homosexuals make very good soldiers.
ogy offered men like Carpenter a way of theorizing their desires within the rubric of nature, albeit as (in Krafft-Ebing’s phrase), ‘step-children of nature’. In this sense, the ‘homosexual’ was indeed something new to be analysed and understood, although male–male love remained a transhistorical phenomenon.4

On the publication of his pamphlet *Homogenic Love and its Place in a Free Society* in 1895, Carpenter received a letter of praise from Horatio Brown, commending the “cool, quiet, convincing, scientific way” that Carpenter had treated “this difficult and, at present, obscure problem”. There appears to have been no question hanging over Carpenter’s assumption of scientific authority. Furthermore, the obscurity of the problem is seen as only capable of being clarified by such a scientific approach. Brown expressed concern at the possibility that the issue may remain the exclusive domain of *belles lettres*, insisting that “Doctors and Lawyers must be induced to take off their spectacles and look.”5

Brown’s letter dramatizes the fact that at the turn of the century, many people of the educated classes strongly believed that medicine could achieve what literature could not. Namely, an intelligent and dispassionate analysis of male–male love, devoid of both homophobic vitriol and flamboyant proselytism; an analysis which would educate and liberate, transforming social and judicial prejudice. That it was homosexual men of letters such as Carpenter and Addington Symonds, rather than men of


5 Quoted in Timothy D’Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English ‘Uranian’ Poets 1889–1930*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, 20–1. The metaphor’s implication is confusing: without their glasses, wouldn’t the doctors and lawyers be unable to see clearly? But at the same time, it establishes the homosexual body as a spectacle for the ever-vigilant medico-legal gaze.
science, who took up this challenge, under the guise of objective scientific study, directs me to two conclusions:

1. **Discursive symbiosis.** The discursive fields of literature and medicine were far less mutually exclusive as intellectual practices a century ago than they are now, allowing for traffic between the two areas of study almost unheard of today. This discursive symbiosis not only allowed men of science like Havelock Ellis, Max Nordau and Freud to write on literature and art, it also allowed men of letters and poets, such as Carpenter and Addington Symonds to engage with medicine, employing the medical terminology without being seen as lacking the qualifications or authority to work in that field. The economic drive to establish medicine as an exclusive epistemological field was in part fuelled by a desire to eradicate such interdisciplinary hybridization. Henceforth, medicine was promoted as a field of expertise and esoteric knowledge incomprehensible to the layperson. Herein lies the authoritarian power of the doctor, a vessel of knowledge to which we in the West invariably defer in matters concerning our own bodies, our own lives. In our century, Literature/Science has become a binarism as insurmountable as Hetero/Homo.

2. **Literary influence.** The transmission of ideas – the influence – from literature to medicine remains, on the whole, unrecognized, particularly by medicine. (Recall that the word homosexual was coined by a novelist\(^6\) [see introduction]). Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the German-Austrian psychiatrist whose *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) was the Ur-text of sexology, wrote to Ulrichs stating that “It was the knowledge of your writings alone that induced me to the study of this highly important field.”\(^7\) Ulrichs was not a doctor. Were there no homosexual doctors, men who had read the likes of Ul-

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\(^6\) See Silverstolpe, ‘Benkert Was Not a Doctor’.

richs, Hirschfeld, Westphal et al.? In a very real sense, then, the ‘homosexual was a fictional character.\(^8\)
The invention of the homosexual in nineteenth century medical discourse was aided by the exigencies of homosexual self-invention, sexology being greatly dependent on homosexual self-disclosure. Books like *Psychopathia Sexualis* and *Sexual Inversion* consisted in the main of case histories. In a field reliant on the case history, doctors ingeniously got homosexuals to do their work for them. Homosexuals had no more more interest in science than they did in the opposite sex. Their interest was in liberation, not taxonomy.\(^9\) Their trust in doctors was tragically abused in the interests of power and social control. Rather than liberating homosexuals, sexological discourse exchanged the prison of sin for the diagnosis of sickness (HS, 43–5), incarcerating same-sex desire in an intricate matrix of definitions and essentialisms which reduced homosexuals to monstrous freaks, inhabitants of a dank and dangerous hinterland between ‘real’ men and ‘real’ women. Their one redeeming feature was that, like the archetypal shy, oversensitive victim of the bully, they were good at art.

**Children of the Mind**

Carpenter was interested in courting societal approval for homosexuality on the strength of its cultural worth. To this end, he name-checked famous homosexuals from history and suggested that homosexuality, by its very nature, was responsible for cultural production. He argued that ‘intermediates’ were evolutionary superior to heterosexuals, gifted with great powers of creativity and spirituality. Because they opted out of procreation, Carpenter suggested, ‘intermediates’ channeled their creative energies into culture, bearing instead of bodily offspring, “children of the mind”\(^10\): music, poetry, art and literature. In this

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\(^9\) See Silverstolpe’s interest-model versus power-model in ‘Benkert Was Not a Doctor’.

\(^10\) Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women*, George Allen & Unwin, 1908, 70. Subsequent page references will be indicated in the text by the initials IS.
capacity they therefore play a crucial role in the regeneration of society.

The notion of homosexuals as cultural progenitors carries with it the suggestion of cultural impoverishment in the absence of homosexuality. If the (pro)creative urge is a human universal, and its expression in heterosexuality is the birth of children, then in homosexuals, as non-breeders, one manifestation of the creative urge is the birth of art. Obviously, this is highly oversimplified, for homosexuals can of course have children, just as heterosexuals can be childless; and both can be artless (or artful). It’s not a simple question of producing children or art, depending on your sexual preference. However, the idea that art can be a direct result of the sublimation of procreativity is a radical hypothesis, not only as a direct attack on the monolithic position of procreation within our culture, but also as a powerful defense of non-procreation.

More recently, it is an idea taken up by Susan Sontag in her ‘Notes on Camp’ (1964) and literary critic George Steiner in his essay ‘Eros and Idiom’ (1975). Steiner writes that: “since about 1890 homosexuality has played a vital part in Western culture and, perhaps more significantly, in the myths and emblematic gestures which that culture has used in order to arrive at self-consciousness”.

For him, “homosexuality in part made possible that exercise in solipsism, that remorseless mockery of philistine common sense and bourgeois realism which is modern art” (EI, 118). This is because, according to Steiner, homosexual love constitutes a “creative rejection of the philosophic and conventional realism, of the mundanity and extroversion of classic nineteenth-century feeling”; a feeling which “produces works of art and literature which ‘look outward’ for their meaning and validity, which accept authorities and solicit approvals outside themselves”. The homosexual reversal of this ‘looking outward’, an almost narcissistic ‘looking inward’, produces art and litera-

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11 George Steiner, ‘Eros and Idiom’, in On Difficulty and Other Essays, Oxford University Press, 1978, 118. Subsequent page references will appear bracketed within the text, indicated by the initials EI. For further critique of Steiner and Sontag, see Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence, 307–8.
tute which is “self-sufficient”, which does not court approval but rather forms a critique of the status quo.

Condemned forever to ‘looking inward’ (only possible because the homosexual is constituted as ‘outside’), homosexuals, Steiner argues, create a ‘sensibility’ important for its critique of cultural norms, and the subsequent generation of new forms of modern culture. Carpenter, likewise, saw the children of the mind spawned by homosexuals as “the philosophical conceptions and ideals which transform our lives and those of society” (Is, 70, my emphasis).

In Sontag’s ‘Notes on Camp’, she states that “the two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony”.  

Andrew Sullivan, in his book Virtually Normal, uses a similar argument: “One of the goods that homosexuals bring to society is undoubtedly a more highly developed sense of form, of style.” “Closely connected to this is a sense of irony”, a way of taking things less seriously, of being necessarily skeptical about everything this culture tells us. Humour plays a large – though by no means sole – part in this (lesson one: make ‘em laugh before they sock you – the victim’s best defense). Like Sontag, Sullivan draws a parallel with Jews, arguing that, like them, homosexuals have “developed ways to resist, subvert, and adopt a majority culture”, ways of “ironizing their difference”. And for Sullivan, lack of children is directly linked to this ironization, although his espousal of the cultural value of homosexuals limits itself to the more pedestrian examples of journalism, teaching and the military.

12 Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on Camp’ [1964], in The Susan Sontag Reader, Penguin, 1982, 118. For a useful critique of Sontag’s essay see D.A. Miller’s ‘Sontag’s Urbanity’ in Abelove et al. (eds), The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, 213, where he accuses her of severing camp from gay men, “all of whom are parenthetically assumed to be clones of that familiar figure of psychopathology, ‘the’ homosexual, with his self-evident desire to remain youthful, and the rest”; see also Moe Meyer’s introduction to The Politics and Poetics of Camp, Routledge, 1994, in which he links the cultural form of camp to a specifically Hollywood sensibility.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 200.

15 Ibid., 201.
For Steiner and Sontag, then, this ‘homosexual’ art, style, sensibility or aesthetic – call it what you will – is contingent on the homosexual remaining outside society: a pariahdom that provokes inventive critique. Steiner and Sontag establish a direct correlation between cultural acceptance and cultural value. The exclusion of homosexuals is fruitful to heterosexual culture.

Carpenter’s radicalism, however, is located in his suggestion that a certain sensibility invaluable to modern culture finds its strongest conduits in homosexual men and women as non-procreative members of society, rather than as outsiders. Carpenter links cultural creation to non-procreation, whereas Steiner and Sontag see the homosexual’s outsider status as the key to his/her artistic productivity or value.

Jeffrey Meyers, in his archly homophobic *Homosexuality and Literature 1890–1930*, makes a similar argument, suggesting that increased tolerance for homosexuality has led to a decrease in the quality of their fiction. Because the homosexual’s chances of personal happiness are thwarted, he suggests, their spiritual or creative life must inevitably overcompensate. Paradoxically, this form of the great-homosexuals-of-history argument doesn’t so much help as hinder homosexual emancipation, maintaining as it does that condescending attitude that as long as we entertain them they’ll tolerate us, but only so far: we may entertain them on the doorstep, as it were, but never, ever step foot inside the house.¹⁶

Carpenter’s strategy, however, of linking cultural production to human non-reproduction bypasses the need to perpetuate pariahdom, since the homosexual’s usefulness is thus rooted elsewhere: in their lack of children, and in their confusion of gender distinctions. The former concept is straightforward enough. Freud argued much the same thing with his notion of sublimation. The latter concept, that in their blending of femi-

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¹⁶ Simon Watney criticizes this line of argument in the context of ‘gay abortion’. See his ‘Gene Wars’ in Maurice Berger et al. (eds), *Constructing Masculinity*, Routledge 1995, 163. For Watney, the morality of aborting on the grounds of sexuality is the issue, not whether one is aborting a Michelangelo or a Bacon. In this context, he is quite right. However, in culture that places high value on art, the contribution of homosexuals is a powerful argument in anti-homophobic discourse.
nine and masculine, intermediates exemplify a way forward for humanity by creating new types of human activity, may seem just as straightforward. But on closer inspection it proves to be more than just a little problematic.

**The Good, the Bad, and the Intermediate**

For Carpenter, homosexuals, or intermediates, as he called them, represent a new stage in the evolution of humanity. Like Proust, Carpenter highlights the cultural or societal role played by homosexuals; although Carpenter projects it onto a future society, a culture to come, a culture heralded by this evolutionary development of intermediates. Society should sit back and observe and learn, and allow nature to develop along its own course. As such, his argument is a plea for greater tolerance and compassion before the law. Yet, like Gide, he is clear about exactly which particular type of homosexual he is willing to defend.

Carpenter identifies two types of intermediate: a ‘lower’ and a ‘superior’ type. So far, so bad. The lower type is “extreme and exaggerated”, and “often terribly sentimental”; the superior is “more normal and perfect” and “almost incredibly emotional” (Is, 13; 29). (Elsewhere, “extreme” is used in opposition to “healthy” in Carpenter’s nomination of the two types of intermediate, and therefore equated with unhealthiness [Is, 37]).

Carpenter delineates extreme cases of the inferior type (inverts), whom, while being “of the greatest value from a scientific point of view as marking tendencies and limits of development in certain directions”, must on no account be looked upon as “representative cases of the whole phase of human evolution concerned” (Is, 32). Carpenter leaves no doubt as to who these lower types are: those men and women who display cross-gender behaviour. He regards these specimens as “not particularly

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17 Carpenter’s argument is compromised somewhat by the contradiction between his statement that “individuals affected with inversion in marked degree do not after all differ from the rest of mankind, or womankind, in any other physical or mental particular which can be distinctly indicated”; and his claim in the footnote attached to this sentence, that “there is no doubt a general tendency towards femininity of type in the male Urning, and towards masculinity in the female” (Is, 57, original emphasis). We might ask, when does a tendency become a characteristic?
attractive, sometimes quite the reverse” (Is, 30). In the case of men, effeminacy is the bête noire, and Carpenter describes a by now familiar figure:

Sentimental, lackadaisical, mincing in gait and manners, something of a chatterbox, skilful at the needle and in woman’s work, sometimes taking pleasure in dressing in woman’s clothes; his figure not unfrequently betraying a tendency towards the feminine, large at the hips, supple, not muscular, the face wanting in hair, the voice inclining to be high-pitched, etc; while his dwelling-room is orderly in the extreme, even natty, and choice of decoration and perfume. His affection, too, is often feminine in character, clinging, dependent and jealous, as of one desiring to be loved almost more than to love (Is, 30)

There is a profound anxiety at work here over what constitutes being a man and what constitutes being a woman, with a clear understanding that the effeminate homosexual is not a man (he’s not a woman, either, but some grotesque hybrid or mockery of the two, clearly, in Carpenter’s mind). And yet effeminacy can just as easily be a heterosexual trait. (Indeed, until the last decade of the nineteenth century, it by no means exclusively connoted same-sex desire). If effeminacy is now almost exclusively associated with homosexual men, this is more likely the result of the establishment of a medical model which posits the gay man as the possessor of a female soul, and the translation of that medical model into a cultural model. Effeminacy has become the most overworked and culturally identifiable sign for representing homosexuality: a stereotype, bearing, at best, a fantasy relation to reality. In reality, effeminacy has no grounding in the gestures of women, and such gestures are not the expression of an essential femininity, anyway, but the consequence of acculturation. Furthermore, homosexuals are as exposed to acculturation as heterosexuals, and internalize the monolithic notions of

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masculinity and femininity peddled by the media just as much as heterosexuals, if not more so (after all, one becomes more aware of the law when one is breaking it). Effeminacy, therefore, emerges as a set of highly problematic gestures culturally available to any body, regardless of biological sex or sexual preference, even if the target for its use as a tool for oppression is invariably gay men (see chapter two).

By allowing his superior intermediates to be defined in opposition to these ‘extreme cases’, even though he claims that the latter constitute a minority, Carpenter is abetting the maintenance of a discursively visible and resilient stereotype. Rather than being seen as revealing the limits of the naturalizing discourse on gender, these extreme cases of femme queens and butch dykes are seen by Carpenter as revealing the limits of cross-gender behaviour. They represent for him nature gone awry rather than the entire artificiality of gender roles. Like Gide, Carpenter insists on the scarcity of effeminate homosexuals, yet cannot resist invoking them in homophobic and self-oppressed terms, establishing an ethics of homosexuality which standardizes normative gender behaviour. A code of conduct is clearly established which polices behaviour and constrains pleasure. Indulgence in sexual please is a sign of inferiority, effeminacy, and degeneracy, a liminality apparent in the salient physiognomy: “large at the hips”, “supple, not muscular, faces wanting in hair, the voice inclining to be high-pitched”; a creature straight out of the nineteenth century freak show; the product of a culture so obsessed with sustaining an unrealistic dimorphic gender system that it panics, bristles with paranoia and disgust, in the presence of bodies that defy such facile categorization.

The question is: “Can a male be homosexual, combine with another male, without a loss of virility?”

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or improperly dominate the masculine in the mixed type, that instead of an extension of the masculine beyond its traditional sphere a subversion of the masculine may result,” and Carpenter’s extreme cases bear witness to this danger.

Carpenter’s superior type of intermediate, unsurprisingly, is masculine in appearance: “fine, healthy specimens of their sex, muscular and well-developed in body, of powerful brain, high standard of conduct, and with nothing abnormal or morbid of any kind observable in their physical structure or constitution” (IS, 23). Given such idealization, surely this type is in the minority: how many human beings – gay or straight – meet such exacting criteria of perfection? Carpenter insists on their strength, their musculature, their similarity in appearance to their straight counterparts (yet how many straight men are in fact, muscular with powerful brains?). But, unlike the heterosexual male – whom Carpenter describes as an “ungrown, half-baked sort of character” – these beings are “extremely complex” emotionally, “tender, sensitive, pitiful and loving” (IS, 33).

This superior intermediate male, then, is a being clearly unlike the third sex, although it does represent some hybrid form between complete masculinity and complete femininity. Moreover, it is only this superior type which will, Carpenter is certain, have “an important part to play in the transformation” of society to a higher form (IS, 122–3). Like Gide, Carpenter’s interest and concern for the inferior type is scant. He consolidates Western medicine’s most reductionist assumptions about gender, maintaining that extreme cross-gendering is most threateningly embodied in effeminate homosexuals and masculine lesbians.

While he vehemently denies a direct link between ‘homoegenic’ love and degeneracy, Carpenter’s condemnation is riddled with anxiety, fear and moral superiority. It is also grounded in normative assumptions of fixed gender categories. The Victorian era, during which Carpenter had grown to adulthood, was

20 Ibid.
21 Miller, in Bringing Out Roland Barthes, writes very well on this aspect of gay male embodiment, “as the body that can fuck, fuck you over” (30–1, original emphasis).
22 Carpenter, ‘Man, the Ungrown’, in Selected Writings, 1.110.
characterized by a hyperbolic paranoia and panic over the dissolution of traditional gender roles, responses Showalter sees as typical of the fin de siècle: “in periods of cultural insecurity, when there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender […] becomes especially intense.”

The messianic, regenerating potential of the superior intermediate is seriously threatened by the degenerating inferior type. The former are assumed to be “the teachers of future society” (IS, 14), each one “a rare and beautiful flower of humanity” (IS, 11), whereas the latter can teach us nothing, every last one of them “a perverse and tangled ruin” (IS, 11). Both being figments of Carpenter’s imagination, neither was particularly useful in the real world, obscuring the conditions of real life. More: these two extremes constitute a polarity which fails to represent the plurality of sexual expression. Whilst being ridiculously utopic, Carpenter’s theory was by no means homotopic.

**Just a Phase**

Carpenter suggests a curious logic to nature’s gender blending: the intermediate’s role is to ensure that the two sexes – the two ends of the gender spectrum – do not “drift into far latitudes and absolutely cease to understand each other” (IS, 17). In other words, homosexuality ensures the harmoniousness of heterosexuality. Like Tiresias, the intermediate has access to two gender worlds, containing “such a union or balance of the feminine and masculine qualities” that he or she is able to negotiate between men and women and repair differences, act as an “[interpreter] of men and women to each other” (IS, 18). Without homosexuals to smooth over the cracks, heterosexuality, Carpenter suggests,

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Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 4, esp. ch. 9: ‘Decadence, Homosexuality and Feminism.’

Of course, it’s easy for us to sit in our privileged position of historical hindsight and ridicule Carpenter’s naivety, but more importantly, his evolutionary argument offered proto-homosexuals a secure haven for their fragile identities, only to pull the rug from under them. According to Carpenter’s theory, they were a dying breed, pawns of nature useful only temporarily. What kind of politicized identity could such an instability produce? Alternatively, Carpenter was right but the human race remains far from perfect, so until it is, queers are here to stay.
would soon break down, “for indeed no one else can possibly respond to and understand, as they do, all the fluctuations and interactions of the masculine and feminine in human life” (IS, 121). One is left to imagine some poor queen flitting between an estranged husband and wife trying his best to appease them both, much like Proust’s Charlus acting as a go-between for the quarreling lovers, Swann and Odette. The deep condescension inherent in such an image hardly needs pointing out.

As well as this male–female continuum, Carpenter also maps a Kinsey-esque sliding scale of “all possible grades of sexual inversion”:

From that in which the instinct is quite exclusively directed towards the same sex, to the other extreme in which it is normally towards the opposite sex but capable, occasionally and under exceptional attractions, of inversion towards its own – this last condition being probably among some peoples very widespread, if not universal. (IS, 56)

The terrain being mapped out here is becoming increasingly fraught with problems. Several inconsistencies or questions arise:

1. What are we evolving towards? Greater tolerance for sexual dissidence? Or everyone becoming intermediate?
2. Does Carpenter believe all human beings are essentially bisexual? If so, where does this leave intermediates, not to mention their pariahdom and its rich seam of cultural critique?
3. What are the mechanisms of this evolution? If intermediates are almost exclusively homosexual, it cannot be by sexual transmission. If there is such open hostility towards intermediates, can such an evolutionary change be seen as natural? Does the rest of humanity need convincing before such change can be implemented (which rather negates the idea of it being evolutionary)?
4. The task would seem to have devolved onto nature, yet what does nature have to gain by making everyone intermediate? Carpenter, in this sense, is positing an anti-evolutionary,
somewhat genocidal (we might say _homicidal_) politics (fear of a queer planet, indeed!).

5. Carpenter’s theory suggests merely an historical transience for homosexuality. If intermediate types are an “indication of some important change actually in progress” (IS, 11), by which “certain new types of human kind may be emerging”, then what to make of the results of such an evolutionary change? Once the utopia promised by the existence of these messianic beings has been achieved, what function would intermediates serve? Would they expire like the dinosaurs? Or would all humans become (superior) intermediate types? All Carpenter has to say on the matter is, “We do not know” (IS, 11).

Even Carpenter’s neologism for homosexuals – intermediate – suggests a temporary stage rather than a termination, a point on a journey to somewhere rather than a destination, or ‘a substance formed during one of the stages of a chemical process before the desired product is obtained’ (OED). Carpenter’s employment of the word intermediate certainly implies both this sense of human transformation or evolution, and the idea that the intermediate was a halfway point between exclusive male-ness and exclusive femaleness. Moreover, by introducing a hierarchical two-tier system by which Uranians could be judged, and promoting the notion of superior intermediates as a kind of Master Race (remember his “rare and beautiful flowers of humanity” versus the “perverse and tangled ruin”), Carpenter was skating dangerously close to eugenics. His explicit loathing for the inferior type carries with it an implicit desire for their eradication. His stereotypes of chattering queens doing needlepoint and butch lesbians hunting and smoking pipes are paraded as examples of how not to be a homosexual; a rigid code of sexual conduct emerges against which homosexuals are judged and categorized as good or bad – even, or maybe especially by each other. But the how and why of sexual conduct contain what Sue

25 Sheila Rowbotham also accuses Carpenter of articulating eugenicist ideas (see n. 33, below). For a brief history of the British eugenics movement see Germaine Greer, _Sex & Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility_, Picador, 1984, 155–294.
Golding has called the Trojan Horse Dilemma, whereby the assumption of what is to be proven is embedded in the given.

These twin problems of ‘the how to’ and ‘the why’ of sexual comportment and its resulting moral codes, usually do no better than to take as a given what it is they are trying to prove, and then make us live up to it, to boot, or get mad at us if we don’t, or think there is some profound Reason if we do some of it most of the time and none of it the rest.²⁶

The effort to be oneself becomes mediated by regulations governing the self one is to be: identity is policed.

For Carpenter, the assumptions he brought to his grounding of ‘truth’ were a biological fixity to sexual behaviour. “The assumption that sexual behaviour was grounded in biology prevented Carpenter from seeing sexual stereotypes as malleable and socially constructed.”²⁷ Clearly unable to think outside of the gender binarisms of his day – “to free sexuality from the tyranny of gender”²⁸ – he accepted the traditional allocation of certain traits as feminine and others as masculine, without ever questioning that these might be socially implemented behaviours rather than biologically determined characteristics. Although he rejected the notion that homosexual men must by their very nature be feminine in appearance, he foreclosed a real critique of the social aspect of gender by assuming that femininity and masculinity were fixed, with the result that the “androgynous intermediate sex became just another fixed stereotype, albeit some mixture of the two extremes”.²⁹

The category of ‘sexual intermediate’ emerges as a dubiously infirm foundation for any secure ontological structure: a shifting ground, always already metamorphosising into some new type of human, some unknown mixture between male and female,

²⁸ Ibid.
some formless identity; a chaotic borderland where nothing is safe, nothing is known and paranoia breeds. That explanation familiar to any queer teenager, that it’s just a phase,\textsuperscript{30} springs to mind here, employed as an evolutionist apology for a behaviour deemed culturally unacceptable.

\textit{The Best of Both Worlds?}

Although the political implications of Carpenter’s intermediate ideal are often read as potentially pro-homosexual, his insistence on the fixed attributes of gender have been seen as anti-feminist.\textsuperscript{31} He perpetuated traditional ideas about femininity, taking for granted those traits traditionally attached to women. He saw woman as a higher form, believing their emotional superiority to be the way forward, so for him women who manifested manly gestures signified a devolution, a degeneration. As such, his theory holds no value for lesbians. His intermediate ideal possessed the exterior of a man and the interior of a woman; a muscular physique coupled with a sensitive nature.\textsuperscript{32} He wrote nothing about the female counterpart.\textsuperscript{33}

Carpenter referred to this ideal form of humanity as “the double life”, best described as a form of androgyny, although the cross-genderisation is not a physical manifestation – remember his superior Uranian has a muscular physique. Rather, it is an idealized balance of the masculine and the feminine and is rep-

\textsuperscript{30} In the early 90s a lesbian and gay lifestyle magazine chose the name \textit{Phaze} in an ironic reappropriation of such an accusation, only to be condemned to such transience itself, folding after half a dozen issues.

\textsuperscript{31} See both Thiele, ‘Coming-of-Age’ and Rowbotham, ‘Edward Carpenter’ on this score.

\textsuperscript{32} This is a variation on Ulrichs’ formula, although Carpenter dismissed Ulrichs’ idea because of his use of words such as ‘soul’ and ‘body’ – words which Carpenter saw as “somewhat vague and indefinite” (IS, 20). The words ‘pot’, ‘kettle’ and ‘black’ spring to mind.

\textsuperscript{33} According to Rowbotham, lesbians were omitted from Carpenter’s future race: “the democratic vision of affective sexuality extending itself through the world becomes narrowed to an elite, a superior brotherhood.” In Rowbotham’s view, Carpenter appears as some kind of proto-fascist, condoning certain forms of gender behaviour, condemning others; a view that isn’t altogether inaccurate. “Even within his own terms Carpenter’s notion of transcendent androgyny remained remarkably sex-bound. It was all very well for men to carry fixed feminine characteristics and gain a power to see through the divide between the sexes. But it appears to go wrong when it is applied to women in practice” (Rowbotham, ‘Edward Carpenter’, 112).
resentative of a new form of life: the best of both worlds. But as Rowbotham warns: “an androgynous stereotype ignores how all our notions of what a man is and what a woman is are created by the totality of our social relationships and by the circumstances of our own sexual practice”.

Androgyny goes beyond sexual difference and threatens to disavow the demarcations of cross-sex versus same-sex desire. For homosexuality, like heterosexuality, requires sexual difference for its very existence. If being homosexual is predicated on a desire for one’s own sex, then it is a preference/orientation contingent on two categories of human being: men and women. Androgyny, in confusing or blending sexual difference, makes categories such as homosexual and heterosexual redundant (or at the very least problematic). If we were all androgynous to the extent that ‘men’ and ‘women’ no longer existed as social categories in which to slot biologically sexed bodies, how would you know whether the person you were attracted to had a penis or a vagina? And more to the point, would it matter? (Carpenter himself was revolted by effeminacy, preferring muscular, working-class men).

So, in striving for the ‘double life’ of androgyny, was Carpenter striving for an end to the great homo/hetero divide? Was he calling for a deconstruction of gender boundaries and the building of a new life in which gender would no longer be the diacritical marker of sexual difference or preference, an egalitarian land where so-called feminine gestures and attributes can become the gestures and attributes of men, and vice versa?

In a word: no.

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34 Ibid., 111.
35 There is much debate about whether homosexuality is an orientation or a preference, the former term suggesting innateness, the latter choice. To avoid going into the debate, I have included both terms. Delete as appropriate. For a fuller account of the debate see Vera Whisman, *Queer By Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men and the Politics of Identity*, Routledge, 1996, pp 40–41; Edward Stein, ‘Conclusion: The Essentials of Constructionism and the Construction of Essentialism’, in Id. (ed.), *Forms of Desire: Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy*, Routledge, 1992.
The superior type of intermediate, in whose combination of big muscles and sensitivity Carpenter saw – through heavily rose-tinted glasses, it has to be said – a “union or balance of the feminine and masculine qualities” (*IS*, 18), carries with it a belief in fixed gender types which does nothing to deconstruct the notion of homosexuals as harbingers of gender dysphoria and sovereign symbols of “a range of deep failures including the demise of masculinity, the abdication of masculine power, the desire for self-destruction, and, beyond that, the loss of difference”. In short, the only possible desire governing one’s choice to be sodomized must be a desire for self-annihilation, and the self that one is annihilating is masculine. The price one pays for enjoying a penis in one’s rectum is one’s masculinity (which is, within patriarchy, beyond value).

**Taking the Sex Out**

Carpenter considered homosexual to be a heteroclite term, “a bastard word” (*IS*, 40n), because it mixed Greek (*homos*) with Latin (*sexualis*), preferring instead his own invention, homogenic, deriving from two Greek words, *homos* (same) and *genos* (sex). More significantly, the term homogenic suggests genetics rather than sexuality, taking the ‘sex’ out of same-sex relationships. Which is exactly what Carpenter did. In *The Intermediate Sex* he argues that in general it is inaccurate to suppose that homogenic attachments “are necessarily sexual, or connected with sexual acts” (*IS*, 26). He draws a distinction between sexual libertines, who indulge in homosexuality out of “a mere carnal curiosity” (*IS*, 50), and Uranians, who are “often purely emotional in their character” (*IS*, 26), and who are driven by “a genuine heart-attachment” (*IS*, 50). Like Gide, Carpenter also denies that anal intercourse is at all common amongst Uranians. Appealing to Krafft-Ebing’s writing on the subject, he claims that “the special act with which they are vulgarly credited is in most cases repug-

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37 Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 263.
38 See Bersani, ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ for a discussion of the ‘suicidal ecstasy’ and shattering of the self involved, according to Bersani, in a man’s adoption of the receptive role in anal sex.
nant to them” (Is, 58). In response to the *British Medical Journal*’s caustic review of *The Intermediate Sex*, Carpenter wrote:

I am certain there is not a single passage in the book where I advocate sexual intercourse of any kind between those of the same sex. I advocate sincere attachment and warm friendship, and allow that this may have fitting expression in ‘caress and embrace’ – but I suppose that to some minds this is sufficient, and it is immediately interpreted as an advocacy of lust.  

Unlike Gide, whose separation of sex from procreation foregrounds a natural, animalistic desire for physical pleasure, Carpenter’s foregrounds spirituality at the expense of any form of *jouissance*; a stance much like the one taken today by the Church of England: it’s okay to be gay as long as you’re celibate. A stylistics of existence around homosexuality begins to emerge which is incapable of dealing with the plain fact of sexual pleasure. Desire is acceptable, so long as it is controlled. Pleasure is unforgivable. According to Foucault, desire has been “used as a tool, as a grid of intelligibility, a calibration in terms of normality”, whereas pleasure “passes from one individual to another […]. [It] has no passport, no identification papers.”

In his case study for Havelock Ellis’ *Sexual Inversion*, Carpenter confesses to never having indulged in “actual pederasty, so called”. He claims to being able to conceive of anal sex – “either active or passive” – only with “one [he] loved very devotedly and who also loved [him] to that degree”. He details his “chief desire in love” as “bodily nearness or contact”. For Carpenter “the specially sexual, though urgent enough, seems a secondary matter”. The primary matter was the spiritual, for this allowed

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39 Quoted in Weeks, *Coming Out*, 81.
40 Quoted in Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 95.
42 Ibid. See Spencer, *Homosexuality*, 301–2, for an account of how Carpenter seduced a man sixty years his junior. Gavin Arthur was taken to see Carpenter in the 1920s, and asked him if he had slept with Walt Whitman. Carpenter said yes. Arthur asked how Whitman had made love. Carpenter said, “I’ll show you.” Spencer writes: “They went to bed together, naked beneath the eiderdown, first holding hands and lying on their backs, then Carpenter kissed his ear and began to fondle his body very lightly, ignoring
him to argue the case from a more evolutionary and less ‘pru-
rient’ position. Whether he genuinely placed little importance
on the sexual aspect of comrade love, or whether he saw it as a
political move to shift the debate away from an exclusive focus
on the specificity of certain sexual acts, Carpenter’s emphasis on
the spiritual gave his politics an idealism (not to mention prud-
ery) rendered virtually impracticable by the real lives of gay men
and lesbians as people who have sex.

I would suggest that the term ‘homosocial’ is a far more ac-
curate description of the type of same-sex relationship advo-
cated by Carpenter. And as Sedgwick has show, homosociality
is violently opposed to homosexuality, the two categories rigidly
and phobically kept apart, the former systematically policed
for traces of the latter, because “for a man to be a man’s man is
separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-
crossed line from being ‘interested in men’”. Carpenter projects

43 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 89. She continues: “Those terms, those congruences, are by
now endemic and perhaps ineradicable in our culture” (89–90). The concept of ho-
mosociality has been extremely useful in formulating my ideas on Carpenter and the
period in which he was writing, a time when relationships between men were fraught
with dangers. Sedgwick argues that our homosocial culture projects onto the abject
body of the homosexual the desires which cannot be articulated within patriarchal-het-
erosexual relationships between men, relationships based on domination and a repu-
diation of erotic bonds. Jane Gallop (via Irigaray) claims something similar: “Irigaray
has discovered that phallic, sexual theory, male sexual science, is homosexual, a sexual-
ity of sames, of identities, excluding otherness. Heterosexuality, once it is exposed as an
exchange of women between men, reveals itself as a mediated form of homosexuality.
All penetration […] is thought according to the model of anal penetration. The dry
anus suffers pain: the penetrated is a humiliated man” (Feminism and Psychoanaly-
homophobia in this passage, one is tempted to write to its author advising some form
of lubrication. If patriarchy were simply a sublimated form of homosexuality, then why
aren’t homosexuals acceptable within patriarchy? Surely by doing without women, gay
men are the apotheosis of patriarchal thought? Whereas Sedgwick usefully distinguish-
es between homosociality (which is a prerequisite of patriarchy) and homosexuality
(which is not), Irigaray and Gallop confuse the two, which is no aid at all in attempt-
ing to untie the knot of problems surrounding the denigration of the female (not only
women, but also the female in men, most typically read as homosexual – especially anal
receptiveness), the sublimation of desire between heterosexual men versus the accen-
any erotic bonds onto a proscribed inferior type of intermediate, whilst condemning the superior type to a life of caress and embrace. Sexuality here is seen as highly destructive to sociality. The social is undermined by the sexual, and the projection onto homosexuals of an exaggerated sexuality which threatens sociality begins to make sense in a culture with such a high investment in the containment of sexuality.

Sedgwick’s definition of homophobia as “a mechanism for regulating the behaviour of the many by the specific oppression of a few” reveals Carpenter’s own ethics as deeply homophobic. For, doesn’t he advocate a regulation of all homosexuals by oppressing the activity of a few, i.e., those who indulge in anal sex? He separates sexuality from procreation only to dilute it into oblivion. By denying that sex played a significant role in the lives of homosexuals (and if sex did occur, it was most definitely not anal), Carpenter maintained a shamefulness about gay sex which has proved hard to shake off.

By privileging the existence of the virile, healthy and distinctly asexual homosexual, Carpenter is guilty of a certain complicity, of merely reiterating and reinforcing the assumption that anal sex was a practice only indulged in by the degenerate and effeminate, and that true homosexuality had nothing to do with it – true homosexuals being musclebound eunuchs who satisfy themselves with mere ‘caress and embrace’. In Carpenter’s thesis, desire for the same becomes nothing more than a form of narcissism because the traditional theories of desire turn on the notion of difference. Yet to desire the same sex is not to desire the self. And this is not because, within sexological discourse, the desiring self for a homosexual is feminine, but because homosexuality should be understood as a desire between men.

Why was this so impossible? What Symonds, in the next chapter, calls l’amour de l’impossible?

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44 Sedgwick, Between Men, 88.