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THE CALAMUS ROOT: AMERICAN GAY POETRY SINCE WORLD WAR II

by

WALTER R. HOLLAND

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1998

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Abstract

THE CALAMUS ROOT: AMERICAN GAY POETRY SINCE WORLD WAR II

by

Walter Holland

Adviser: Professor Steven Kruger

This dissertation argues that there is a clear gay poetic tradition dating back to nineteenth century Europe, and it describes an historical taxonomy for gay poetry in America since 1945 by reference to its characteristic themes, influences and leading figures. After a brief discussion of early precursors such as Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Walt Whitman, C.P. Cavafy, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes and W. H. Auden, the dissertation traces, through close explication of texts, the works of Harold Norse, Allen Ginsberg, Tennessee Williams, Frank O'Hara, Adrian Stanford, Richard Howard, Alfred Corn and Essex Hemphill. The influences on such poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969, the women's movement, the proliferation of small gay presses, AIDS activism and queer theory are considered. An argument is made for a separate gay esthetic and poetic, and its development is traced from the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. The influence of pre-World War II homosexual poets on post-World War II gay poets is discussed, as well as the crucial emergence of a gay urbanity and a gay intelligentsia. Bloom's "anxiety of influence," issues of marginality, the representation of masculinity and homoeroticism, Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque (specifically in relation to AIDS literature), and the poetry of multiculturalism, are explored as well for

the purpose of establishing the extensive literary, critical and theoretical intertextuality of^v
gay poetic works.

Preface

In writing about a gay male tradition in American poetry I have for the most part excluded the work of lesbians. This was not intended to devalue the contribution of lesbian writers, but to focus more critically on the esthetics and history of gay men's poetry. A history of lesbian poetry remains to be written.

Given the broad scope of my topic, I can only hope to introduce the field of gay poetry in order to facilitate further research and study. In no way do I intend this project to be exhaustive or the final word on the subject. Gay poetry continues to take shape. I hope only to suggest one taxonomy and narrative of an American gay male poetic tradition in order to help guide the reader toward what I feel are important themes in the work and to provide an overview of its history.

There is a wide body of literature available for the study of gay poetry, including important anthologies such as Joseph Beam's In the Life (1986), Stephen Coote's Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse (1983), Essex Hemphill's Brother to Brother (1991), Rudy Kikel's Gents, Bad Boys & Barbarians (1994), Michael Klein's Poets for Life (1989), David Laurent's The Badboy Book of Erotic Poetry (1995), Winston Leyland's Angels of the Lyre (1975), Carl Morse and Joan Larkin's Gay & Lesbian Poetry In Our Time (1988), Felice Picano's A True Likeness: Lesbian & Gay Writing Today (1975), Assotto Saint's Here to Dare (1992) and The Road Before Us (1991), and Ian Young's The Male Muse (1973). These books have proved invaluable for the initial identification of gay poets of the post-World War II period. Winston Leyland and Ian Young's introductions to their fine anthologies were helpful as well in piecing together a gay poetic history. Where space

has permitted in the body of this work, I have noted the poetry contributors to a few of the many anthologies mentioned.

The National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History at New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center houses the complete collections of such gay magazines as Gay Sunshine, Fag Rag, One, BLK, The Gay Liberator, RFD, COME OUT! and Christopher Street. Also at The Center, the Pat Parker/Vito Russo Library has extensive holdings of gay books of poetry. Interviews in Gay Sunshine with Allen Ginsberg, John Wieners, Robert Duncan and Harold Norse have provided vital historical background. Additionally, I taped personal interviews with Perry Brass, Alfred Corn, Edward Field, Richard Howard, Carl Morse, Assotto Saint and Ian Young, choosing each for their close association with various chronological periods in gay poetry.

In addition, my work is informed by extensive reading in queer theory. Queer theory as a tool facilitates inquiry into gender and sexuality, and how these complex constructs are registered and recorded in mainstream culture. Queer readings of popular movies and fashion have sought to decode long-standing biases and misconceptions. Borrowing from the theoretical work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and French deconstruction, and dependent upon earlier work in feminist theory, such theories have analyzed in a particularly full and revealing way powerful biases of gender and sexuality at work in our own society. Works by Diana Fuss (Inside/Out 1991), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Epistemology of the Closet 1990; Tendencies 1993) and Michael Warner (Fear of a Queer Planet 1993) have been especially important for my work.

Some day, twentieth century studies will look back upon the gay poetry that was

the center of so much controversy and interest, perhaps with nostalgia. I hope that my work will permit scholars to place it in its correct cultural and historical contexts and understand the incredible social forces after World War II and the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion that helped create this rich literary legacy and subcultural identity in America.

This work would not have been possible without the inspiration and memory of many fine poets who were taken by AIDS. AIDS interrupted the fragile bonds of mentorship and guidance. I hope this work will act as a bridge helping to reconnect the collective memory, tradition and history of post-World War II gay writers and expose others to the powerful voice, creativity, and vitality that have yet to live on in the possibility and hope of the next century.

Walter Holland NYC 5/14/97

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Introduction

To date, few have ventured to trace a gay poetic tradition from the broad historical perspective of its many-faceted locales, cultural sites, interests, styles and voicings. It is the hope of this work to trace such a tradition and to establish a relationship between pre- and post-World War II gay poets. I shall suggest that the development of a gay American poetic tradition paralleled the development of a gay sensibility or aesthetic. I propose a separate “gay aesthetic” or “gay poetic” in relation to twentieth century American literature and argue for the recognition of the explosive renaissance in gay poetry which occurred after 1945 (especially in the seventies and eighties), a renaissance not dissimilar to the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties. I hope to define the important role the gay small press movement has had in shaping a gay poetic tradition and creating a gay readership. I shall argue for a poetic taxonomy which will situate American poets who were gay in various movements or gay-subcultural contexts, contexts which take into account shared thematic concerns and stylistics that I feel characterize gay verse. I will show how these thematic concerns parallel newer and more complex interpretations of the male body, sex, gender, love, eroticism and language.

I am further interested in the position of more and less-known canonical gay poets in the development of a gay tradition and the placement of certain figures in both a specifically gay and a more mainstream American poetic tradition. Writers such as W.H. Auden, John Ashbery, Richard Howard, James Merrill and James Schuyler have been frequently included in contemporary American anthologies and taught in universities as part of a general modern and post-modern canon of American poetry. The fact that they

were gay poets and influenced through their prestige, example and style the careers of younger and less accepted gay poets has not been fully discussed. Traveling within the gay poetry ghetto, they have helped publish the works of younger and more risqué writers in mainstream journals. Thus, for instance, Richard Howard as editor of The Paris Review has helped support the work of younger gay poets such as Timothy Liu, Rafael Campo and Mark Bibbins.

Academic journals or scholarly anthologies, however, have tended to place attention on more canonical gay authors, leaving ignored the rich literary legacies of gay poets such as Dennis Cooper, Gavin Dillard, Essex Hemphill, Edward Field, Paul Mariah, Harold Norse, Assotto Saint and Adrian Stanford, to name just a few. Gay poets of color in particular have been ignored, although the recent Norton Anthology of African-American Literature (1996) has made some progress toward addressing that error. Melvin Dixon and Essex Hemphill are both included in that collection.

The theoretical and historical work of the last two decades, from Faderman to Foucault, Duberman to Katz, Sedgwick to Sinfield, has given us a vocabulary and theoretical constructs with which to speak about the culture and experience of gay people. If we are to begin an inquiry into a gay poetic tradition we need to understand the shared sensibility and cultural forces that have shaped gay writing. It is now possible, by virtue of the work of these recent theorists and historians, to recognize and reappropriate a "canon" of American gay poetry and to identify the emerging poetical concerns that have made this poetry both unique and timely. It is also possible to study the development of gay culture and aesthetics in relation to this literature and to recontextualize the writings of former

authors whose work was never appreciated or read with attention to the question of sexuality. The literature of gay and lesbian poets may now be more fully studied in regard to the social milieu, community and publishing industry that informed and supported it.

The post-modernist concern with multiculturalism and diversity has built upon the early modernist construction of a Black-African-American literary tradition during the Harlem Renaissance. Multiculturalism has helped reshape our view of the “other” and given us clear evidence of how the place of the “other” has been a powerful catalyst for new experiments in language and form. It has helped us posit theories of how such an “other” is constructed in the dominant culture and how textuality reflects and can challenge this construction.

Through his study of the history of sexuality and the emergence of a scientific-sexual discourse in the late nineteenth century, Foucault helped open the discussion on discourse and homosexuality. David M. Halperin’s retrospective work on the sexuality of the ancient world identified shifting conventions of sexuality and how these are acculturated to each society and historical period. Byrne R.S. Fone in A Road to Stonewall wonderfully maps a history of gay English and American literary works from 1750 to 1969. Christopher Craft in Another Kind of Love, Eve Sedgwick in Epistemology of the Closet, and Alan Sinfield in Cultural Politics - Queer Readings have also offered radical queer readings of individual literary works both American and British to thresh out their more homophobic and homosexual “textualities.” These studies have given gay and lesbian scholars tools with which to “decode” and reconstruct gay and lesbian subcultures in literature.

* * *

When we try today to understand what constitutes a gay poetic tradition we are faced with a variety of debates and controversies. Some would argue that the attempt to segregate gay poetry from the canon of American poetry is misguided. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., suggests in his book The Disuniting of America (1992), an increased freedom in recent decades has led to changes in the American democratic experience, changes which have accelerated toward the end of the twentieth century. Schlesinger suggests that since the recent collapse of the Cold War a “cult of ethnicity” and “virus of tribalism” have dissolved many common bonds of American unity. This “ethnic chauvinism” coupled with “white guilt” has driven Americans to see history as a weapon. Schlesinger suggests that it has forced us to retreat into the identity politics of a multicultural and perhaps more segregated and separatist American perspective. But though Schlesinger questions the activities of black scholars such as Leonard Jeffries and frets over the cohesiveness of American society, I think he does not fully understand his own sentimental romanticization of American unity. America has always evidenced a disunited and violent cultural and racial experience. Numerous examples illustrate this less than cohesive history: the African slave Diaspora, Custer’s slaughter at Little Big Horn, the Irish race riots at the turn of the century, the terrible legacy of the Mexican-American war, the annexation and destruction of Alaskan Eskimo culture, the exploitation of “coolies” as slave labor in building the Union-Pacific Railroad, the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in detention camps during World War II, the forced lobotomies of

gay men and lesbians in the fifties, and the routine attacks by authorities on working-class gay and lesbian bars during the sixties. The “untying” of history is necessary and vital for the gay scholar’s attempt to see the varied contributions gay men and lesbians have made.

Gay texts have often been twisted and bound by the rhetoric of homophobia, unable fully to speak their own truths in a clear and simple voice. Celebrated trials and notoriety have “saved” some gay and lesbian works, such as The Well of Loneliness, Naked Lunch, City of Night, but countless others never reached print or found readership. Careful gay and queer readings are necessary to reclaim the tradition of gay works.

Censorship has also affected academic, critical inquiry into American poetry. The relevance of a gay sensibility and a gay poetic voice has been easily dismissed by the academy. A review of mainstream anthologies and histories of modern and post-modern American poetry by such eminent editors as Donald Allen and George F. Butterick, A. Poulin, Jr., David Perkins, Helen Vendler and Donald Hall, reinforces the need for re-evaluation. Of course, exceptions have existed: David Kalstone was one critic who openly discussed gay issues in his writing on poetry. But, if we look at David Perkins’ A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After or A. Poulin Jr.’s essay “Contemporary American Poetry: The Radical Tradition,” we are struck by the the necessity for reassessing American poetry from a gay and lesbian perspective. Poulin writes in his essay:

Until recently the sexual preferences of some of this century’s great poets were among the best-kept secrets in literary history—in large part because they were rightfully considered irrelevant to the poetry. Consequently, Allen Ginsberg’s and Robert Duncan’s poems about aspects of their homosexuality, as well as Adrienne

Rich's open and moving explorations of her own sexual preference in some of her more recent poems, may be somewhat startling to some readers. (Poulin 688)

Poulin sees it as "rightfully... irrelevant" that several of the major American poets of the twentieth century (Ginsberg, Duncan, Rich) happened to be gay or lesbian, failing to understand how the complexities and repression of a gay identity and the creation of its "otherness" forced, from Gertrude Stein to the present, new and exciting experimentations in form, a more inventive language for representing gender, race and desire, and situated such poets at the crucial center of the movement toward what Poulin himself calls "the personalization of American poetry since 1945" (Poulin 688).

Perkins writes of O'Hara, Ashbery and Schuyler and the "New York School" that, "their work was light, witty, sophisticated, and ebullient, and beneath their bright surfaces were serious implications" (Perkins 528). Perkins also notes that "these poets were friends, referred to one another in their poems, lived in New York City, and described or alluded in their verses to its sophisticated pleasures" (Perkins 529). He mentions in the same paragraph these poets' affinities to the work of Fairfield Porter and John Cage. What Perkins fails to note is how all these artists were connected by their gay life-styles and their gay friendships. The sophistication, as well as the wittiness of their work was reflective of the milieu they lived in. Gay camp humor, urbanity and sociability along with the erudition of Proust, Cavafy and Auden invigorated their work or at least touched its surface, and the "serious implications" beneath the surface of O'Hara's, Schuyler's and Ashbery's work often involved their homosexuality.

Censorship and homophobia have not only come from the outside, sustained in the critical work of heterosexual scholars, but they have affected gay artists and writers as well. In her book Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England (1984), Annabel Patterson points out in discussing the relationship between politics and art the ways in which censorship shapes a writer's work. As with early gay and lesbian bars where a tacit social contract existed between patrons and authorities as to what could be done, when and where, so a "code of communication," a certain self-censorship, developed in gay writers who felt the subtle pressures of heterosexism. Thomas Yingling in his book Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text (1990) has discussed the "ambiguity" in Crane and how heterosexual critics and friends were perplexed by the encoded and cryptic desire of his verse. The plays of Tennessee Williams in the forties and fifties featured many female characters who displayed the emotions and sensibilities of their gay author. Fear of the "effeminate" in the fifties and its perception as un-American and threatening to the patriarchal Cold-War apparatus created a tension in such fifties' plays as Tea and Sympathy and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

There were a few exceptions to the censorship of the fifties and sixties. Ginsberg's Howl (1956) managed to get published with its lines: "who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy/who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love"; and John Wieners' important Hotel Wentley Poems (San Francisco, 1958) included such titles as "A Poem for Cocksuckers" and "A Poem for the Old Man" (Leyland 8). (Still, of course, such works were subjected to attempted censorship, as witnessed by the sensational 1957 trial

of Howl.) With the sixties and the sexual revolution some gay poems—for instance Auden's pornographic "A Day for a Lay"—found their way into print in journals such as Evergreen Review and Avant-Garde (Leyland 8).

The creation of a gay American publishing industry (beginning with ONE magazine in 1952) and expanding greatly in the mid-seventies, especially with the inception of Gay Sunshine (1970), Christopher Street (1976), and Alyson Publications in Boston (1977), partly freed gay poets from the constraints of heterosexual censorship.¹ By its transformation into a specialized sub-category, gay publishing was removed from the arena of mainstream American arts and letters. Taking their cue from the feminist and women's press movement of the early seventies, gay male presses quickly proliferated. Many influential gay literary magazines and newspapers had their start during the sixties, seventies and eighties: The Los Angeles Advocate (1966), Come Out! (1969), Gay Liberator, Manroot, Sebastian Quill, Gay Sunshine (1970), RFD (1974), Mouth of the Dragon (1974), Fag Rag (1971), Christopher Street (1976), Bay Windows (1983), The James White Review (1983), Other Countries Journal (1988), OutWeek (1989). The period also saw a growing small-press movement: Bhakti Books in California (c.1987), Hanging Loose Press in New York (c.1990), Black Star Press, in San Francisco (c.1987), Amelia in Bakersfield, California (c.1985), Good Gay Poets Press and Alice James Books in Boston (c.1992), Little Caesar's Press in LA; Seahorse Press (1977), Galiens Press

¹ In 1977 Sasha Alyson founded Alyson Publications in Boston. His goal was to distribute books and magazines from small progressive, feminist and gay publishers (Martinac 277). In 1981 Alyson decided to specialize in titles with gay and lesbian themes (Martinac 277). He also began publishing Bay Windows, a news and arts-oriented weekly in 1983.

(1989), and Amethyst Books (c.1990), all in New York. Many influential anthologies appeared as well which first showcased the talents of these writers: Ian Young's The Male Muse (1973) and Son of the Male Muse (1983), Winston Leyland's Angels of the Lyre (1975), Felice Picano's A True Likeness (1975), Martin Humphries' Not Love Alone: A Modern Gay Anthology (1985), Franklin Abbott's New Men, New Minds: Breaking Male Tradition (1987), and Michael Klein's Poets for Life (1989). All helped to foster a renaissance in gay poetry, and I say renaissance because, as I have already suggested, a strong gay tradition had begun at the end of the last century in America and Europe.

This revolution in publishing made gay verse more accessible to the gay and lesbian community. Gay and lesbian books became highly marketable in the eighties. Lambda Book Report (founded in 1987) was established to receive and review new books by lesbian and gay authors. Gay and lesbian bookstores flourished. Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop (founded in 1967) and A Different Light Bookstore in New York, and Lambda Rising Bookstore in Washington DC were in the vanguard.

Indeed, the Stonewall Rebellion in America in 1969 and the advent of gay liberation caused a radical shift in "gay aesthetics" and "gay sensibility." Since Stonewall, "gay men and lesbians have consciously created a culture that is based upon their own analyses, experiences, and perceptions," one that "has not depended significantly upon reacting to mainstream culture or pressures" (Bronski 13). This movement successfully articulated a gay subculture.

The shift toward a truly gay-identified subculture was reflected in gay poetry; for the first time, gay poets were given wide exposure and could escape censorship. A gay

readership developed as a generation of gay liberationists were poised to reinvestigate the past, to reclaim their history, and re-discover the poetic works of Carpenter, Cavafy, Crane, Symonds, Whitman, and many more. Indeed, the encoded (or not so coded) texts of these writers could finally be given radical gay readings to re-appropriate their homosexual content.

Early works on gay poetry included Rupert Croft-Cooke's Feasting with Panthers (New York, 1967), an account of late Victorian writers Symonds, Wilde, Swinburne and Whitman; Timothy d'Arch Smith's Love in Earnest, subtitled "Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889 to 1930" (London, 1970); and Brian Reade's volume Sexual Heretics: Male Homosexuality in English Literature from 1850 to 1900 (New York, 1970), covering works by major and minor British Victorian writers (all with homosexual themes) (Leyland 11).

In December of 1976 Barry Laine in Christopher Street wrote an article entitled "Gay Poetry Reaches Adolescence." Laine discusses the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how the "first poetic closets" began "to inch open" in the nineteenth century with the works of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. He mentions Wilde and the homosexual themes which emerge in the French and Mediterranean poetry of Verlaine, Cavafy, Cocteau, and Lorca. Later, he extols Ginsberg's Howl (1956) as presenting a "sexually explicit homosexual poetry," but one which was lost within the larger "import of the Beat movement." Laine summarizes:

Ultimately, what neither Ginsberg, nor Frank O'Hara
or Jack Spicer, nor somewhat earlier writers like Stein
or Auden, ever possessed was an at-large cultural

identity that integrated their poetry and their homosexuality. In that sense, the first *gay* poem was born when the first beer bottle smashed through the glass at the Stonewall Inn in 1969. (Laine 34)

Laine, however, leaves unexplored in his piece the concept of a gay poetic tradition and the thematic, stylistic, and theoretical influences and developments that provided a “cultural identity” even in the time of Auden, Ginsberg, O’Hara, Spicer and earlier. In his zeal for the openness of post-Stonewall identity and culture, he takes a limited and abbreviated perspective on the pre-Stonewall cultural tradition.

As George Chauncey has shown in his history Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940 (1994), a “highly visible, remarkably complex, and continually changing gay male world” was already around long before Stonewall (1). Chauncey points out to other gay historians that this gay world which flourished before World War II “has been entirely forgotten in popular memory and overlooked by professional historians; it is not supposed to have existed” (1). Chauncey goes on to challenge several historical myths about the history of early gay life: “the myth of isolation,” “the myth of invisibility,” and “the myth of internalization”(2-4).

I cite Chauncey because he reveals that before Stonewall (and, of course, before World War II) it has often been said that “gay people lived in a closet that kept them isolated, invisible and vulnerable to anti-gay ideology” (6). Chauncey tries to counter this by showing the “expansiveness and communal character of the gay world before World War II” (7). He challenges the myth that the gay movement and the gay world “alike were invented virtually overnight after the Stonewall rebellion in 1969” (11).

In 1979, The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry, by Robert K. Martin, identified a gay tradition in American poetry. His introduction goes far to suggest “several ways in which the author’s homosexuality becomes a part of the text” and to show how the need for inquiry into a gay tradition arises “from the critical refusal to consider homosexuality as a factor (in any but the most clinical way) in the makeup of the literary self” (Martin xv, xvii). Martin very carefully places the start of his American gay poetic tradition in Whitman. He discusses the Calamus section of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. He next addresses the nineteenth century Academic Tradition or the American Genteel writers (sometimes referred to as the American Victorians). Martin describes the nineteenth-century views of male friendship and beauty as exemplified in the work of Fitz-Greene Halleck, Bayard Taylor, and George Santayana. These “American Victorians,” Martin tells us, found their counterparts in England with Tennyson, Swinburne, Pater and Wilde (Martin 92). In the twentieth century, Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, Thom Gunn, Edward Field, Richard Howard, James Merrill and Alfred Corn are variously considered. All constitute a tradition of gay white men and men of considerable culture and prestige.

Martin however leaves largely unexplored the rich history of gay writing of the fifties and beyond, such as the early pioneering work of Harold Norse, Paul Mariah, Paul Goodman and the gay black poet, Adrian Stanford. Martin wrote at a time when a critical discussion of gay poetry was untouched by multiculturalism, queer theory and gay aesthetics. He leaves unexplored many counter-currents within the gay writer’s community. Martin also did not have access to the enormous archival information now

readily available thanks to the work of a few dedicated individuals and institutions. What Martin did accomplish admirably was to lay the foundation for understanding one clear American poetic lineage from Whitman through Crane to the present.

Thomas Yingling has given us an astute reading of Hart Crane in his book Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text (1990). Yingling points out the misinterpretation that surrounded Crane as the result of his homosexuality. He shows the pitfalls in quick historical assessments made by heterosexist critics and the extent to which stylistic variants of indeterminacy, romanticism, sublimity and obscurity in Crane's work were linked to his coding of homosexual experience. A veiled homophobia helped critics dismiss Crane's work as brilliant yet flawed and fail to see the importance of Crane's homosexuality. Yingling's critical gay inquiry enables a closer reading of Crane and an appreciation of how an author's homosexuality can subtly inform and illuminate his or her work. Yingling shows us the rewards and validity of such critical inquiry and scholarship by returning to Crane his humanity as a poet and giving us a context in which to appreciate his gift.

David Bergman with Gaiety Transfigured (1991) focuses on poetic identity in gay poetry. His inquiry reveals, as does Yingling's, some of the ways homophobia has complicated the process of formulating a unified poetic voice in gay poetry. In his chapter "Choosing Our Fathers," Bergman looks at the issue of poetic identity in works by Whitman, Ashbery and Howard, and how homosexuality affects the positioning of the gay writer in relation to his subject. Bergman gives us wonderful readings of the uses of camp, the AIDS rhetoric of Larry Kramer and the legacy of James Baldwin in regard to gay Black literature; but he does not fully assess the cultural history and development of gay

literature over time and how gay poetry was “transfigured” by gay theoretical, political, and cultural developments.

Another critical work which deals with gay poetry is Gregory Woods’ Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-Eroticism and Modern Poetry (1987). Woods reviews the poetry of Whitman, Rimbaud, Crane, Owen, Lorca, Ginsberg, and Gunn, among others, exploring various themes and tropes of male comradeship and male virility. He interprets Whitman’s view of “love of comrades” as a spiritual expression of the democratic vista. He explores Gunn’s “tough-guy” pose of sexual potency in his poetry and the limiting definitions of maleness it invites. He talks of figures such as cowboys, sailors and soldiers appearing as objects of male desire. He writes of the connection between eroticism and violence, the themes of sportsmanship and the “loved enemy.” He speaks of homoerotic mythology, the myths of Ganymede, Narcissus, Antinous, Hylas, Christ, Dionysus, Saint Sebastian, and Orpheus, which all come into play in modern poetry with their connections to the pagan and the Christian. He explores the iconography of the phallus, and its manifestation as both body and text.

Useful as such critical works have been, it is difficult to find in them a clear and direct appraisal of the broad multi-cultural aspects of the gay tradition; nor is there a full sense of the cultural renaissance that flourished after the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, when gay writers were drawn to verse as a swift, direct and radical vehicle for their sexual liberation.

Western gay poetry developed out of a need to find a language for homosexual male-to-male desire, to give voice to something that was morally condemned by society and relegated to the marginal. In the ancient Greek world and many other cultures, homosexuality was considered part of the human condition, a carnal desire which was included in the daily language of eroticism, love and affection. This desire to express love and eroticism, and its thwarting by the dominant culture in the ensuing Christian centuries caused a variety of strategies for speaking the unspeakable, the “love that dare not speak its name.” Mediterranean cultures were somewhat more tolerant of homosexuality than their more northern and western counterparts, and it is here with Cavafy, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Cocteau, Lorca, and Genet, that its presence was more accepted, if only within certain contexts.

As gay poetry developed, a tradition of intertextuality emerged. Homosexual poets across generations looked to other poets for a sensibility in terms of tone of voice and life perspective. As gay ghettos were created and a subculture was established, gay poetry was shared among a small but knowing readership.

Gay poetry is then a poetry which seeks to express eroticism between men, homosexual passion and affection, and finds its “place” or site of production in a gay subculture. It is poetry which describes, praises, validates and preserves that subculture and expresses a sensibility born of its shared milieu.

Gay sensibility developed and grew out of the historical, political and sociological predicament of homosexual men and women. As Michael Bronski points out in his book

Culture Clash: The Making of a Gay Sensibility (1984), a gay sensibility paralleled the development of homosexual culture with the evolution of homosexual identity (9). A gay aesthetic was the construct of homosexual artists who needed to find their own language and model for beauty: beauty which reflected an eroticization of the male body toward the male gaze; recontextualized tradition-bound masculine-feminine binaries (the female as passive centerpiece, the object of male contemplation and aggression); challenged common assumptions about signs and referents in erotic, domestic and cultural discourse; and expressed a gay lifestyle more honestly and directly. As Auden comments in his introduction to the collected poems of the gay Greek poet, C.P. Cavafy, it is ultimately Cavafy's "truth" in bearing witness and, like any good witness, his not passing a moral "verdict" on human actions or desires, that is to be appreciated (Auden, "Introduction," ix). Auden goes on to say of Cavafy: "As a witness, Cavafy, is exceptionally honest. He neither bowdlerizes nor glamorizes nor giggles" (ix). Auden successfully side-steps issues of morality and propriety, by recommending truth and honesty as the poetic characteristics to be most admired and appreciated by the reader.

If we are to understand what took place in American poetry after World War II, we need first to investigate pre-World War II history from the honest perspective of its homosexual poetry and its gay sensibility. A gay sensibility and gay poetic tradition found its thematic and cultural roots in the work of previous centuries.

As Stephen Coote's scholarly anthology The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse (1983) demonstrates, "homosexual" poetry has existed at many stages of world history. From Virgil (70-19 BC) to Martial (c. AD 40-104) to anonymous Latin lyrics of the 12th

century, verse of a homoerotic and often pornographic nature was evident. Homosexual love poems by Michael Drayton (1563-1631), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), and William Shakespeare (1564-1616) existed in Elizabethan literature. Of course, these poems often showed an ambiguity in their use of pronouns and their point of view (whether the speaker or addressee of the poem was a young woman or a young man was unclear, etc.). Richard Barnfield (1574-1627) wrote romantic sonnets with declamatory lines such as “Thus was my love, thus was my *Ganymed*,” and “Sometimes I wish that I his pillow were” (Coote 162-166).

Lord Byron (1788-1824) expressed his love and passion for the choirboy John Edleston whom he heard sing at Trinity Chapel, Cambridge, in poems such as “To E---,” “Stanzas to Jessy,” and “The Cornelian” (“which records Edleston’s gift to Byron of a cornelian, which Byron kept with him the rest of his life”) (Russell 153). Byron also had love affairs with Greek boys including Eustathius Georgiou and Nicolo Giraud, “whom he named his heir upon his return to London” (Russell 153). Byron’s bisexuality was documented in a long epic poem “Don Leon” (1833) whose authorship is still under debate, but which is startlingly close to “some crucial points of Byron’s homosexual love life” (Russell 155).

In the Victorian period (1850-1901) homosexual verse (or what I am referring to as “gay poetry”) was strongly influenced by the advent of the British homosexual political rights movement and the development of a theoretical construct for homosexuality. The term “homosexual” was not coined until 1869 by Karoly Marie Benkert. “Gay” began to connote immoral pleasure in 17th century England, and later signified a “prostitute” in the

19th century (Martinac, Gay Almanac 87). In the early 1900s homosexuals used the term “gay” as a camp reference to themselves or to others who were promiscuous, flamboyant and showed a lack of restraint (87).

It was in the Victorian period that a gay sensibility or aesthetic became more visible. Michael Bronski in Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility (1984) and Byrne S. Fone in his A Road to Stonewall (1995) have looked back at the development of this gay aesthetic in the nineteenth century from the perspective of its literary texts.

According to Bronski the nineteenth century exhibited “two key characteristics in the early evolution of the gay sensibility” (9). The first of these characteristics began in the theoretical work of gay thinkers and early pioneers of the gay rights movement. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) in a series of booklets called “Researches into the Riddle of Love Between Men” (beginning in 1864) formulated his important theory on “homosexuality.” Paul Russell in his book The Gay 100 (1995) writes of Ulrichs:

Men who love men, he argued, consist of a female soul trapped in a male body. They are neither male nor female in the conventional sense, but rather a third sex, which he called urning—or uranian—after the famous myth in Plato’s Symposium in which Pausanias calls love between men ‘the beautiful love, the Heavenly love, the love belonging to the Heavenly Muse Urania.’ (31)

This image of the “homosexual” as harboring a female soul trapped in a man’s body was to hold sway over much of Victorian thinking on the subject (Russell 31; Bronski 21). Indeed, the term “uranian” was applied to an entire school of Victorian homosexual poets. The Uranians were also known as the Calamites [a name drawn from Walt Whitman’s (1819-1892) influential and homoerotic “Calamus” section from his



second edition of Leaves of Grass (1860) (Young, "Introduction," The Male Muse, 7)].²

Plato's Symposium became an important text for homosexual poets of the nineteenth century in their pursuit of a valorization of male-male love in relation to heterosexuality (Fone 110). The nineteenth century homosexual poets saw in Greek culture important examples of acceptance and tolerance in regard to homosexuality and a model for a homosexual sensibility and aesthetic.

A Road to Stonewall speaks of the origins of a homosexual aesthetic sensibility as occurring between 1850 and 1895 when homosexual texts appeared which "signaled the disappearance of the rakish and indiscriminate sodomite, concerned only with the gratification of desire" (Fone 92). Classical Hellenistic allusions began to be included in homosexual literary texts in the 1860s and in this Fone sees the birth of a true homosexual aesthetic (93). The Greek text according to Fone becomes a signifier in Victorian writing for homosexuality. According to Fone, the Uranians were deeply influenced by the twelfth book of the Greek Anthology, the *Musa paidik* of Strato of Sardis (first published in 1764), with its themes and images of male adolescent beauty (Johansson 707). The great legends and histories of classical homosexual love affairs---Zeus and Ganymede, Heracles and Hylas, Achilles and Patroclus, and much later Hadrian and Antinous---served these poets well (Johansson 708).

2 The Uranians included John Leslie Barford (1886-1937), Edwin Emmanuel Bradford (1860-1944), Ralph Nicholas Chubb (1892-1960), George Cecil Ives (1867-1950), Charles Philip Castle Kains Jackson (1857-1933), Edmund John (1883-1917), Edward Cracroft Lefroy (1855-1891), Francis Edwin Murray (1854-1932), John Gambriel Francis Nicholson (1886-1931), Marc-Andre Raffalovich (1864-1934), Charles Edward Sayle (1864-1924), Eric Stenbock (1860-1895), Montague Summers (1880-1948), and John Moray Stuart-Young (1881-1939) (Johansson 707-709). The work of these poets which spanned the close of the British Victorian era to the middle of the interwar period dealt with the theme of "love for the adolescent boy" or pederasty (the predominant form of male homosexuality in Greco-Roman antiquity) (Johansson 707).

In Memoriam (1850) by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) and Eudiades (1868) by John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) are discussed at length by Fone (101-103). Fone tells us that other poets of the period were producing “homosexual” verse using classical references: Swinburne’s Hermaphroditus (1863), Roden Noel’s Ganymede (1868), Carpenter’s Narcissus and Other Poems (1873) and Symonds’s Lyra Viginti Cordarum (1875), in which “classical allusions to Hylas, Ganymede, and ‘Uranian Love’ left little doubt” as to the sexual persuasions of the poet (Fone 93). Walter Pater in his essay, “Wincklemann” (1867), proposed that the homosexual German aesthete’s affinity with Hellenism was not merely intellectual “but that the ‘subtler threads of temperament’ interwoven in it were derived from his romantic, fervid friendships with young men” (Fone 93). Wilde’s collected poems were published in 1881. Wilde’s Charmides is a long narrative which extols the beauty and tragedy of a fair Grecian lad and is filled with homoerotic references: “Till from the waist the peplos falling down/Left visible the secret mystery/Which to no lover will Athena show,/The grand cool flanks, the crescent thighs, the bossy hills of/snow” (Wilde 755). Wilde and Douglas (Lord Alfred Douglas, 1870-1945) both looked to classical mythology to frame their verse [Wilde The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde and Douglas (Coote 262-265)].

Fone further discusses recurring themes and characteristics in the language of these Victorian homosexual poems: “the invocation of pain and sexuality” through the sadomasochistic; the “combination of effeminacy and effeteness”; the “manly/unmanly dichotomy,” including “the intersection of the passive/effeminate with the active/masculine”; the use of “Dark, mysterious, claustrophobic, and often sinister

locations”; “Exotic eroticism”; and finally a vision of the homosexual, in Karl Ulrich’s terms, as “a female mind in a male body” (Fone 95-101).

The nineteenth century saw the development of a homosexual rights movement and the beginning of a theoretical debate over the origins of homosexuality. Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) was a strong champion of homosexual rights in England. His books Love’s Coming-of-Age (1896) and The Intermediate Sex (1908), were important theoretical works on homosexuality. Carpenter put forth his notion of “homogenic love” drawing on the “urning theories of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, as well as the figures of the berdache and shaman from Native American cultures” (Russell 36). Carpenter believed that people of an intermediate sex, “because of their doubleness, ‘have a special work to do as reconcilers and interpreters of the two sexes to each other’” (Russell 36). Carpenter looked at Greek conceptions of platonic love, comrade attachment and Whitman’s “fervid comradeship” in relation to homosexuality (Russell 36).

Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) was one of the first modern sexologists (along with Krafft-Ebing and others) and the author of Studies in the Psychology of Sex (1896-1919) which chronicled actual case studies of the lives and experiences of homosexual men. These studies established homosexuality as a more common social phenomenon than previously had been thought.

Symonds was a cultural historian and critic who wrote A Problem in Greek Ethics (1873) and A Problem in Modern Ethics (1891). Symonds looked at Greek society as an example of how the homosexual could fit into a socially acceptable framework. He later discussed how homosexuality was repressed during the Christian era. Symonds spoke of

“paiderastia” or what the Greeks called boy-love (Russell 40). He moved the debate on homosexuality from the “so-called pathological individual toward the broader issue of the social construction of sexuality” (Russell 40-41).

All of these early homosexual writers and thinkers exhibited what Bronski sees characteristically as a “social criticism in reaction to the oppression and ostracism placed upon the homosexual by society” (9). Early gay thinkers criticized “prevailing social norms from the perspective of outsiders” (Bronski 9). They challenged existing ideas about sex and gender. To justify homosexual rights many of these theorists had to analyze their respective societies from the fantasized perspective of an older and more tolerant classical time. As with Symonds, they looked back at the moral and political structures of societies which permitted same-sex relations, notably the Greeks. Hellenistic culture and ideals became an important model for the Victorian homosexual artist, and allusions to Greek culture abounded in the development of a gay aesthetic.

The second characteristic of early gay sensibility as presented by Bronski is a tendency to infuse gay works with a “plethora of signs and codes that allowed the like-minded to identify one another” but not betray the artist’s or writer’s homosexuality to the public (9). This tendency was both conscious and subconscious and can be seen in the poems of Alfred Douglas, the verse of Edward Lear (1812-1888), the plays of James M. Barrie (1860-1937) and the writing of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), as well as elsewhere (Bronski 9-10).

Bronski defines five ways to organize the nineteenth and early twentieth century gay sensibility: the cult of the imagination, the cult of beauty, the cult of male friendship,

the cult of dispossession (gay men who create in their imaginations safer, more congenial places—Edenic situations free from hostility), and the cult of the dandy (40-58). If we look at Victorian culture and literature from the aspect of these cults we can see the strategies by which gay men sought to gain acceptance and legitimize themselves, or to set themselves apart, defining and expressing their own subcultural views.

Imagination and imaginative play were taken up by the gay man to defeat the nineteenth century novelist's emphasis on naturalism. Camp, irony and humor gave the gay writer means to escape and envision a new topsy-turvy social order and code of conventions. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) wrote plays of extreme wit and irony which challenged the gender conventions of a mannered Victorian heterosexual society.

A cult of beauty surrounded the Victorian art for art's sake movement. Oscar Wilde and his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, wrote verse that reflected the Victorian fascination with classical Greece and the Renaissance, and with Walter Pater's (1839-1894) aesthetic dictum: a "pursuit of beauty in all its forms as a sufficient end in life," redeeming "man from the slime" (Rowse 162). The "art for art's sake" movement was anti-utilitarian and declared that "beauty need fulfill no other function than its own existence" (Bronski 47). Such ideas bypassed the strong Victorian tie between beauty and moralism and courted an Epicurean, decadent philosophy. Bronski writes:

Beauty as a separate entity within a repressive culture paralleled the role of the same-sex lover as an outcast: like the isolated beauty he was set apart from his surroundings. This status was viewed as elevated but at the same time, piteous. Their feelings of self-pity signified for many writers their uniqueness. (47)

The worship of piteous beauty for its own sake became a way for the gay

Victorian artist to redeem himself as sensitive and unique. In Douglas's famous poem "Two Loves" of 1894 (originally published in The Chameleon) Douglas dreams of an idyllic glade where he meets a beautiful youth (Douglas 262-264). The youth represents Love and stands alone in the garden, sad and beautiful. Douglas and the youth are joined by Shame who has interrupted Love's solipsistic reveries (the narcissism of the homosexual as he stands alone). The famous last line, "I am the love that dare not speak its name!" closes the poem, becoming as it has a coded phrase for homosexuality (Bronski 49).

As I have suggested, concepts of male friendship were important to Victorian society and were built upon chivalric and Christian Platonic ideals, especially Greek ideals of man-boy relations. The Victorian chasm between men and women had created an exclusively male world where male friendship was often more valued and prized than female (Bronski 50). A cult of Victorian writers, largely gay, sought to extol the virtues of male comradeship.

As discussed, Victorian gay poets chose to establish homosexual Eros in the context of classical myth, comradeship, manly virtue and chivalry, and tended to mimic religious and highly classical literary poetic forms. They offered their own "idealized version of Classical Greece, the Middle Ages and the ritual and code of Christianity" (Young, "The Poetry of Male Love," 265). One concern of Victorian homosexual poetry was the death of a friend or comrade, often employing the elegiac verse form. This poetry tended to follow Christian iconography to evidence male to male love as a virtuous expression, as in the apostles' bonding to Christ and their subsequent idealization of his

death. Tennyson's In Memoriam is one example of this. The poem is Tennyson's testament to his deceased friend Arthur Hallam. The poem contains various homosexual overtones which are melded with Christian imagery to achieve a high level of Christian pathos and suffering (Fone 100-101; Craft 44-70; Bronski 50).

The Victorian cult of male friendship was represented in America by several gay writers who were part of a school of poetry commonly called the Academic or Genteel tradition (Martin 90). These American Victorians included Fitz-Green Halleck (1790-1867) and Bayard Taylor (1825-1878). Robert K. Martin has written extensively on these poets and their works. Bayard Taylor gathered a small circle of poets around him who shared his views and were joined in close and intimate friendship. Two of these confidants were Richard Henry Stoddard and Edward Clarence Stedman (Martin 108). All of these poets wrote with an attention to classical myth, the heroic, and idealized love.

But we cannot speak of the Victorian cult of male friendship and its Hellenistic ideals of beauty without discussing perhaps the most important gay poetic text of the nineteenth century. Whitman created a furor in Europe by his democratic and classical vision of the "love of comrades," and the "adhesive bonds" between men. In Whitman the physicality of the male body became signifier for the ideal, the natural and the godly. Many of J. A. Symonds's British counterparts, from the middle to the end of the 19th century, Carpenter especially, looked to Whitman and his "ideal of democracy" based on homoerotic affections as an update to the Socratic vision (Young, "The Poetry of Male Love," 262). They thought they had found in Whitman a political champion for their fledgling homosexual movement, but as history proved, Whitman was a reclusive and

often reluctant advocate. Bayard Taylor sent Whitman a letter in 1866 praising his treatment of “that tender and noble love of man for man” and his “unwearied, affectionate practical fraternity” (Summers, 28).

Whitman was the transcendental writer of the male body and its orgasmic potential as object of desire and transformative agent; a democratic writer of the everyday urban “glimpse” (wonderfully suggestive of the single glance of gay “cruising”); and the great eulogist of young death (on the battlefields of the American Civil War). Whitman with his open homoeroticism captivated generations of young gay writers.

The “Calamus” and “Children of Adam” sections of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass (1855 and 1860) presented verse of an undisguised homoerotic nature, verse which spoke of masturbation, oral sex, cruising, and the hand-clasped intimacy between men. It also spoke to the idea of the gay pastoral, the vision of a gay Arcadia where a homosexual republic of men who are freed from evil will be established (Summers 740).

Whitman’s expression of the joy to be had in the commerce and society of men reinforced the cult idea of male friendship on both sides of the Atlantic. William Johnson Cory, Digby Mackworth Dolben, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Roden Noel were all English poets of homosexual love and friendship in the 1880’s and 1890’s (Young, “The Poetry of Male Love,” 264).

Bronski’s cult of dispossession or escapism is seen in the pastoral homosexual fantasy of Symonds’s, Wilde’s and Douglas’s verse. Symonds’s Eudiades, Wilde’s Charmides, and Douglas’s “Two Loves” represent retreat into idyllic settings where “pastoral images often dovetailed with the idealization of classical Greece” (Bronski 54).

As Bronski points out about this escapism: “the flight from civilized repression often occurs because of the pain of homosexual oppression, bringing melancholy to even the most idyllic setting” (54). Bronski finds another example of this fantasy of escape in Peter Pan (1904) by Scottish dramatist, James M. Barrie. The play becomes a gay fantasy of escape from the conventions and morals of the Victorian world into the infantile and the nonsensical.

Finally, the cult of the dandy or the “poseur” in society is seen in the extremely cultivated, refined and affected manner which Wilde as well as his predecessor George Bryan “Beau” Brummell (1778-1840) used to gain entry and acceptance into the upper classes. This was further taken up as a way the homosexual might gain social power through positioning himself as an extreme arbiter of taste. The poetry of the dandy was perfected years later by American poets such as James Merrill, Frank O’Hara and Richard Howard. I shall comment further on this in my discussion of O’Hara and Howard and the uses of camp.

* * *

The British Labouchere Amendment of 1885 “which stipulated two years of hard labor for ‘acts of public indecency between males’” and the Wilde scandal of 1895 (Wilde was incarcerated in Reading Gaol under the terms of Labouchere) created a harsh and fearful climate for homosexual poets (Russell 41). Nonetheless, the Uranian poets continued to work, joined by other writers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The well-known British poet, A.E. Housman (1859-1936), is often associated with

the Uranian movement.³ He wrote his homoerotic A Shropshire Lad (1896), which reflected a Victorian impulse toward what Ian Young describes as “repression, religiosity, sentimentality and high ideals” (Young, “The Poetry of Male Love,” 265). Housman’s work shared in the Uranian concern for paganism and sexual unconventionality (Johansson 709). In his personal life, Housman shared an undying homosexual affection for Moses Jackson, a fellow classmate at Cambridge and later for a Venetian gondolier whom he supported for much of his later life (Rowse 223-231).

The adoration and romanticization of young working class youths in Whitman, Housman and the Uranians harkened back to Greco-Roman models of poetry with their pederastic views. They also reflected a growing sexual tension between distinct economic classes which had emerged in the industrialization of Victorian England. The young lads of the shipyard and the fields, the servants and gamekeepers (as E.M. Forster would depict in Maurice) are the equivalent of “rough trade,” manly figureheads for the effete gaze of increasingly “feminized” and cultured modern men. For the “unmanly” homosexual, they were admired as hypermasculine figures.

The Wilde scandal caused a reticence on the part of publishers to print works of a homoerotic or homosexual nature; however, several Victorian poets continued to self-publish or put forward their verse well into the next century. Edwardian writers continued to do so as well, and in the early twentieth century anthologies organized around homosexual themes brought these works to the attention of a cultivated intellectual

³ A recent dissertation on Housman from the perspective of his homosexuality is Randy Lynn Meyer, “A.E. Housman and the Critics,” diss., University of Toledo, 1994.

homosexual readership. Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) managed to publish his book of erotic poems White Stains in 1898. John Moray Stuart-Young and Edmund John also wrote homoerotic volumes. The Victorian poets, Reverend E.E. Bradford, known for his “sunny pederastic narrative fantasies,” and Charles Phillip Castle Kains, published in limited editions (Young, “The Poetry of Male Love,” 265; Young, “Introduction,” The Male Muse 8). The British poet Ralph Chubb (1892-1960) self-published in limited editions (Young, “The Poetry of Male Love,” 267).

In 1902 Edward Carpenter’s Iolaus: An Anthology of Friendship was published in England and contained works by Roman and Greek writers in addition to nineteenth century poets such as Tennyson, Swinburne, William Johnson Cory (1823-1892) and Walt Whitman (Leyland 10). ⁴

The British poet, John Gambril Nicholson, wrote A Garland of Ladslove (1911). Theodore Wratishlaw (1871-1933) and John Barford (1886-1937) contributed homoerotic works (Leyland 10-11). Barford’s Ladslove Lyrics appeared in 1919 (Leyland 10-11).

In 1924 Edmund Edwinson privately printed in New York his anthology Men and Boys: An Anthology (second ed., annotated by Donald H. Mader). ⁵ This included the

⁴ Iolaus: An Anthology of Friendship. Contributors: Anacreon, Anselm, Aristophanes, Athenaeus, Augustine, Sir Francis Bacon, Richard Barnfield, Lord Beaconsfield, Beaumont & Fletcher, Bion, Sir Thomas Browne, Robert Browning, George Gordon Lord Byron, Thomas Carlyle, Catullus, Dante, G. Lowes Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edward Fitzgerald, John Fletcher, Frederick the Great, Ludwig Grey, Goethe, Ernst Haeckel, Hafiz of Shiraz, Leigh Hunt, Joseph Kitir, Ludwig of Bavaria, Martial, Meleager, Herman Melville, Michelangelo, Michel de Montaigne, Moschus, Plato, Pindar, Count August von Platen, Plutarch, Friedrich Ruckert, Jalal-uddin Rumi, Saadi, Sappho, Schiller, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Socrates, John Addington Symonds, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Henry David Thoreau, K.H. Ulrichs, Virgil, Richard Wagner, Walt Whitman.

⁵ Men and Boys: An Anthology. Contributors: A. Schoolmaster, Bert Adair, Anacreon, Richard Barnfield, Francis Beaumont, Mark Beecher, Rev. E. E. Bradford, Lord Byron, Catullus, E. M. Clark, James Fenimore Cooper, D.B.: Digby Mackworth Dolben, Michael Drayton, E.W.H., Edmund Edwinson, Fidian, Giles de Gillies, Wayne Gordon, Johann W. von Goethe, Hafiz, I. Holt, Robert Hillyer, Edmund John, Burges Johnson, H. Lange, Francis Ledwidge, Edward Cracroft Lefroy, Donald Malloch, C.

work of forty-nine American and British poets, many of them obscure and part of the Uranian poetry movement (Leyland 11). According to Winston Leyland, the name of Edmund Edwinston may be a pseudonym for Reginald Bancroft Cooke. Ian Young and Warren Johansson cite the name as the pseudonym of Edward Mark Slocum (Young The Male Homosexual in Literature 62; Johansson 709). American gay poets in this collection include notably William Alexander Percy (1885-1942) and Edward Perry Warren (1860-1928) (Johansson 709).

Decades later, the gay anthology, Eros: An Anthology of Friendship (1961), appeared, edited by Patrick Anderson and Alistair Sutherland.⁶ This anthology built upon

Mansfield, Christopher Marlowe, Giovanni Batista Marino, Meleager, Ernest Meyers, Michelangelo, Richard Middleton, Sanford Middleton, Robert Nichols, John Gambriel Nicolson, David O'Neil, Terriss Owens, A. W. Percy, Louis Saunders Perkins, Philebus, Philostratus, Pindar, Plato, S.B., Saadi, Vincent Scarford, William Shakespeare, M. Snow, Solon, Victor Starbuck, S. Strachan, Strato, J.M. Stuart-Young, Bayard Taylor, Theocritus, Theognis, Tibullus, E. Tietiens, Thomas Traherne, H. Townes, Luis Untermeyer, E. Van Cleve, Vergil, Paul Verlaine, Willard Wattles, Clifford Whitford, Walt Whitman, Sidney Wilmer, F.S. Woodley, C. Worth.

6 Eros: An Anthology of Male Friendship. Contributors: Peter Abelard, J.R. Ackerley, Agathius Scholasticus, Richard Aldington, Al-Isra'ili, Al-Ramadi, Al-Taliq, Patrick Anderson, Sherwood Anderson, St. Anselm, Antipater of Sidon, Marcus Argentarius, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Askepiades of Samos, Athenaeus, W.H. Auden, Augustine of Hippo, Sir Francis Bacon, D. S. Bailey, Richard Barnfield, George Barker, Basil, William Beckford, A.C. Benson, Alexander Berkman, Sir Maurice Bowra, Rev. E.E. Bradford, Sir Thomas Browne, Robert Browning, Burnaby of the Middle-Temple, Lord Byron, Edward Carpenter, Catullus, Frank Cauldwell, C.P. Cavafy, Charlemagne, Cicero, Colman the Irishman, Condivi, Baron Corvo, William Johnson Cory, Hart Crane, Charles Darwin, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Alfred Douglas, Norman Douglas, Edward Fitzgerald, Dudley Fitts, Stefan George, Andre Gide, Robert Graves, Thomas Grey, G.F. Green, Habib of Seville, Ernest Haeckel, Hafiz of Shiraz, Abul Hasan, John Heath-Stubbs, Hilary, Biran Hill, Homer, Horace, A.E. Housman, Hrabanus Maurus, Thomas Hughes, Leigh Hunt, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Edward Hyams, Christopher Isherwood, Werner Jaeger, James I, Jami, Ben Jonson, Justinian, Juvenal, Kai Ka'us Ibn Iskandar, Kallimachos, John Keats, G. Wilson Knight, Hubert Languet, D. H. Lawrence, T.E. Lawrence, Edward Cracroft Lefroy, John Lehmann, Shane Leslie, Lucian, Christopher Marlowe, Meleager, Herman Melville, Michelangelo, Michel de Montaigne, Montesquieu, William Morris, Ibn Muqlana, Nonnos, Walter Pater, Paulinus of Nola, Petonius, Roger Peyrefitte, Philostratus, Pindar, Plato, William Plomer, Contran de Poncins, Alexander Pope, F. T. Prince, Marcel Proust, Ibn Abd Rabbihi, Forrest Reid, Rhianos, Arthur Rimbaud, John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, W.H. D. Rouse, Sir John Sandys, Ibn Sara, Semonides of Amorgos, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Sir Philip Sydney, Stephen Spender, Strabo, Walafrid Strabo, Strato, Suetonius, John Addington Symonds, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Theognis of Megara, Theokritos, Henry David Thoreau, Tibullus, Sylvia

Carpenter's earlier collection of 1902, adding a few more classical authors as well as extensively expanding the list of nineteenth and twentieth century contributors.

If England's Victorian world was one site of a homosexual subculture in the late nineteenth century, other locales produced poets with homosexual sentiments: C.P. Cavafy (1863-1933) in Egypt; Stefan George (1868-1933) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) in Germany; Anatoly Steiger (1907-1944) and Mikhail Kuzmin (187?-1936) in Russia; Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) in Portugal; Sandro Penna (1906-1977) in Italy; Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936) in Spain; and Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) and Jean Genet (1910-1986) in France. As Byrne S. Fone suggests:

A bibliography of texts dealing with homosexual subjects written by homosexuals and non-homosexual authors in England and on the Continent [between 1850 and 1900] would include the major literary productions of the time: Byron, Tennyson, Symonds, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Honoré de Balzac, Theophile Gautier, August von Platen, Goethe, Paul Verlaine, Alexander Pushkin, C.P. Cavafy, Hopkins, Pater, Swinburne, Carpenter, Oscar Wilde, A.E. Housman, Forster, and Havelock Ellis.
(89)

The French symbolists (Arthur Rimbaud [1854-1891] and Paul Verlaine [1844-1896] in particular), pursued a sensuous aestheticism that was frank and unadulterated, and influenced many writers. The harder line pornography of their work (Paul Verlaine's "Ode: To My Lovers," "Paedophilia," "A Rough Bed-Mate," and Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine's "Sonnet: To the Asshole") invited raw forms which used vernacular language and slang. Verlaine and Rimbaud were associated with the European Decadent Movement. Decadence was a nineteenth century aesthetic movement which had an interest

Townsend-Warner, Henry Vaughan, Paul Verlaine, Virgil, Helen Wadell, Alec Waugh, Denton Welch,

in “mind-altering drugs, the imagination, and physical and mental degeneration and alteration” (Denisoff 188). Decadent works often reflected the taboo subjects of lesbianism and homosexuality. Decadence itself was both a life-style and a style of writing. A few of the decadent writers were gay themselves. Decadence focused on “unnatural” experiences to reflect the sense of “dehumanization and alienation that contemporary progress fostered primarily among members of western European society” (Denisoff 188). It had begun primarily in France with the writings of Baudelaire (1821-1867) and continued with the symbolist works of Mallarmé (1842-1898), and the works of Jean Cocteau (1891-1963), André Gide (1869-1951) and Jean Genet (1910-1986). Stylistically it was experimental, disruptive, and ironic. In the next chapter we will see how it came to influence the writers of the San Francisco Renaissance as well as the Beat movement of the fifties.

* * *

The thematic concerns, topoi and traditions that emerged in the work of poets from the late nineteenth century continued to exert influence on the gay poetry of the early twentieth. Apollonian, Hellenistic concepts of beauty, friendship, valor and chivalry; the Platonic admiration of youthful lads; and the Dionysian with its grounding in the mystical, the liberating, anarchistic, orgiastic and transformative, continued to be associated with early twentieth century verse. In the regenerative powers of nature and sex many gay poets proclaimed, like Whitman, a new sense of gay identity, free from the negativity and

Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, J. Wright, Xenophon, Abu Zaid.

homophobia of Christian morality and Judeo-Christian law. They took up Whitman's celebration of the male body, cloaked in the Victorian and Edwardian penchant for idealized lads and effete, worldly men. But they also saw in their gay pastoral verse a commentary on the "natural" and the "unnatural" definitions of homosexuality. On the one hand, homosexuality was seen as a spiritual experience of wholeness with one's original part (Plato's *Symposium*)--an expansive, democratic expression of brotherhood and Christian bonding with Christ's body; on the other, it was defined as an unnatural, decadent, artificial and hedonistic expression of depravity and escape from the rational--something avant-garde, new and fashionably bold and provocative.

The dandy was replaced by the soldier-poet of World War I.⁷ The homosexual English poet Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) was one of the many who lost their lives in the frontlines of World War I. Owen, whose poetry reflects a sensitive masculine camaraderie like that of Whitman's poetry, is a soldier-poet who captures the intimacies and bonds between men, especially in a time of tragedy (Guy-Bray 533-534; Russell 276). The wistful Victorian gay verse of Greek lads and idyllic beauty is replaced by a gritty, dark, elegiac and politically conscious poetry, one that foreshadows the AIDS elegy and activism of another era. Owen, like gay poets to come, was forced to find imagery that could convey the sadness of watching an entire generation of bright, young men die. As with Whitman, the vision of lost lovers and comrades at the front was to darken the vision of Owen's developing gay muse.

⁷ A dissertation which deals with homosexuality and World War I is: David Arthur Boxwell, " 'Between Idealism and Brutality:' Desire, Conflict, and the British Experience of the Great War," Rutgers University, 1996.

In America, the political work and writings of European homosexual activists had not gone unnoticed. Wilde had made visits to New York, had met Whitman and had visited Fire Island (the notorious bohemian haunt in Cherry Grove) in 1892. His “De Profundis” was read and circulated among homosexuals in Greenwich Village. Carpenter, Symonds, and Ellis were likewise known. As Chauncey’s Gay New York presents it, New York City after the turn of the century had an active gay life. Drag balls in Harlem were major events covered in the society pages. Hotels and bars catering to gays and lesbians were well known in the Village.

The harbor front and docks of New York were sites for assignations between sailors and gay urban dwellers. Indeed, a life at sea with its all-male world and its non-conventional dictates had captured the minds of both Whitman and Melville as settings for homoerotic intrigues. American lore of the Barbary Coast and the rag-time saloons of old New York gave a mythic consciousness to American homosexuals as the solitary outcasts, the restless erotic voyagers, pirates of sexual prey and appetite. They also participated in a gay pastoral vision as conceived by Whitman, an Arcadian vision of the natural world (similar to the gay pastoral writings of the Victorian era which revolved around shepherd boys and youthful lads). To Whitman, the working lads of the Great Plains, the men who labored on farms or at sea were part of a democratic vista, a sensual, organic vision of a whole and bountiful nation. The urban world of the sea front, of open streets, backrooms, alleys, men’s public toilets became the new setting for urban spectacle. It also was the new frontier for male sexual desire, the setting for male bonding outside the constraints of family and home.

Whitman had found his broad gay vision in the spectacle of the city and the concept of the new American Eden. His association with American transcendentalist thinking was a strong one. Whitman, the idle wanderer through the streets of New York with his meditations on the bold, sensual bodies of the working men and women he would see, helped to foster a homosexual poetic born in the driving libidinous splendor of visual desire. Indeed, with Whitman, the male gaze was central. A gay "culture of desire" (a phrase borrowed from Frank Browning's book of the same title) begins with Whitman as broad and expansive as Michelangelo's homoerotic Sistine Chapel frescoes. The seaport and the harbor become the consecrated places for homoerotic worship, the cruising ground where everything is possible and democratic. The gay poetic imagination seems born in an America of lonely seas, backroom port bars and the new urban landscape--the cities, the skyscrapers, the bridges that only America could build--big, abstract, alienating, and new.

A gay pastoral vision and the spectacle and voyeurism of the urban had touched the souls of two other American gay poets of the pre-World War II era, Hart Crane (1899-1933) and Langston Hughes (1902-1967).⁸ Crane was perhaps, as Fone suggests, "the greatest homosexual poet after Whitman" (257). Crane published his "first poem in 1916 and titled it 'C33,' the number of Oscar Wilde's cell in Reading Gaol" (Fone 257). Fone discusses various of Crane's works, notably "Episode of Hands," for the way the work speaks "directly to the secrecy and signs of homosexual passion" (260). Martin's The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry points out how Crane extended

⁸ A dissertation on Crane which touches on his homosexuality is Tim Dean, "Hart Crane's Death Drive," diss. Johns Hopkins University, 1995.

homosexual verse beyond “mere” subject matter. “In Crane the poet’s ‘sexuality’ is rarely the subject of the poem . . . but it nonetheless helps determine the poem’s images and even its structural patterns” (Martin 164).

Crane’s poetry was often found to be obscure and abstract. Yingling studies how Crane’s homosexuality was forced into silence in his poetry, hinted at, alluded to and made invisible. Yingling finds in Crane’s style and language a homosexual sublimity, a sublimity which is not far detached from Whitman’s romanticism and expansiveness, and his gay idylls.

Crane’s sensual language about the sea, his impressionistic poems about the city at night, the colossus of the bridge, as Yingling suggests, become a highly-convoluted language of homosexual longing. Poems such as “Repose of Rivers” or “Voyages” (the latter a cycle of poems commemorating Crane’s love affair with Emil Opffer) built a bridge from Whitman to the present (Fone 259). Crane’s life, however, was to end with a failed marriage, alcohol addiction and apparent suicide aboard a ship returning from Mexico.

Langston Hughes, the black, African-American poet, went to sea and in the merchant marines had his first homosexual encounter in 1923 with a seaman, as documented by Arnold Rampersad (77). As with Hart Crane and Whitman, the alienation of the seafaring world, its uprootedness and its all-male existence must have appealed to the young Hughes. And like Crane and Whitman, Hughes also found in the urban landscape romanticism, theatricality, and intoxication. Just as Whitman was fascinated by the crowded streets of New York with their pleasures and sensations, Crane and Hughes

both lived as voyeurs, gay men who prowled the wilderness of urban desires and addictions that New York had become. New York was the preeminent city of the modern age, the cultural capital of the world.

Hughes' experience as an African-American had already given him a sense of otherness in the dominant culture. His importance to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and 1930's was his willful and imaginative labor, along with other black artists, in forging a true African-American artistic identity. Like Whitman, he sought to blaze a mythic trail for his country and his people. As a gay man, he assumed the roles of witchdoctor, shaman, healer, and visionary, time-honored roles for the homosexual in society. What is new is that he linked them to the African slave experience. The antidote for Hughes's restless and alienated (and sometimes seemingly asexual) perspective on the world was the willful creation of an imaginative persona. The Harlem Renaissance gave identity and voice to generations of African-Americans, who, still haunted by slavery and segregation, had no voice in dominant white culture. This great necessity to lay claim to identity, to "name" one's self in relation to one's racial heritage, and to gather pride and creative empowerment was the crowning achievement of the Harlem Renaissance.

African-American music and theater experienced a creative explosion in the twenties with the rise of Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Louis Armstrong, Gladys Bentley, Josephine Baker and the advent of musical reviews such as "Shuffle Along" (Mullane 478-479). This new attention to black culture was underscored by the publication in 1925 of The New Negro which was edited by Alain Locke (1886-1954), who was at the "center of the Harlem gay coterie" and gave impetus to the career

of Hughes (Mullane 478-480; Reimonenq 359). As Locke states in the book's foreword: "This volume aims to document the New Negro culturally and socially,--to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years . . ." (Mullane 478; Locke).

The gay poet, Countee Cullen (1903-1946), who wrote poems such as "Tableau," "Fruit of the Flower," and "For a Poet" (Summers 359), Locke, the brilliant editor and philosopher, the Jamaican-born Claude McKay (1899-1948), the novelist Wallace Thurman (1902-1934), and the fiction-writer Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1989) were important gay figures in the Renaissance. The political ideas of the Harlem Renaissance were developed and strengthened by the black Civil Rights movement of the fifties and sixties, a movement which provided an important model of empowerment for the Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights Movement. The Harlem Renaissance writers also provided models for the gay, black literary movement of the American eighties.

* * *

The Jazz Age of the Twenties had fostered gay "ghettos" which sprang up in Paris and Berlin, New York and San Francisco. These ghettos had a thriving bar world where transvestism and camp entertainment flourished. In the economic boom of the twenties and its heady ostentation, an atmosphere of free-love and permissiveness flourished. As in the American eighties, strong economic and social forces permitted a vivid gay club world to flourish. Speakeasy clubs in Harlem like Small's Paradise that catered to homosexuals, plays and films that depicted homosexual desire, all contributed to the social culture of the

times.

The champagne age for Europe in the twenties was to end with the rise of Fascism in the late thirties. A few American gay artists were at work in the thirties but they appear to have been restrained and discrete in their manner. The American painter and gay poet, Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) wrote verse during the early war years. Hartley's "Gay World" (later published in 1945 as part of Selected Poems) makes veiled allusions to the homosexual world. Hartley as a painter and friend of the gay artist, Charles Demuth, painted works that explored the brooding landscapes of Maine, sombre visions of a pastoral world of muted colors, emotions and seascapes. His earlier works, completed in Germany, were bright abstractions of German iconography and the opulence and artifice of an urban Europe.

The dandy of the nineteenth century with his mannered ways and ostentatious fashion; the sorrowful Edwardian gay soldier of World War I, Anglican-schooled, principled, and mannered; and the libertine gay bar-hopper of the Roaring Twenties, all were to become psychological elements in the life of W.H. Auden (1907-1973).⁹

Auden was one of the major poets of the modern age. His highly-educated European background and refined aesthetic tastes brought to American gay culture a new cosmopolitanism. Like Cavafy, Auden shared an interest in classicism and politics, and like Cavafy, Auden held an interest in young men as well.

Auden and Isherwood both knew the tragedy of a devastated Europe. Auden spent

⁹ Two dissertations which deal with homosexuality and Auden are Richard Robert Bozorth, "The Angler's Lie: Auden and the Meanings of Homosexuality," University of Virginia, 1995; and, Lorraine Madeleine Pearsall, " 'In the Prison of His Days': Sexuality in the Works of W. H. Auden to 1939," University of Georgia, 1993.

1929 living in Berlin after his graduation from Christ Church College, Oxford. It was there he enjoyed the homosexual demimonde and met the German homosexual rights activist, Magnus Hirschfeld. Hirschfeld had amassed an incredible library of homosexual writings at his Institute for Sex Research (founded in 1919) (Adam 23). Auden partook in the active gay cultural life of Berlin in the twenties, which included gay films such as Anders als die Andern and “more than twenty bars catering to a variety of social classes and tastes, plus restaurants, hotels, *pensions*, and baths as well as dance clubs, party circuits, and drag balls” (Adam 24).

Auden came to the States in 1939 with his gay friend Christopher Isherwood. When Auden arrived in America, he enjoyed the urbane and sophisticated world of another great city, New York. He became an immediate part of the literary and academic establishment. His British upper-middle-class manners and his European education suited the growing intellectual set. Auden was well-read and aware of the classical tradition. His wit and charm, his sense of camp, made him a gay dandy. Auden was especially fascinated with a precocious eighteen-year-old poet from Brooklyn named Chester Kallman, whom he met soon after emigrating to America (Farnan, 19; Osborne, 191; Summers, “W.H. Auden” 64). His life with Kallman was accepted, but little publicized.

Auden appreciated the urban and had a keen political awareness. He brought with him the erudition and cultural baggage of the European homosexual. Like Proust he was an observer of society, like Cavafy an admirer of young men, like Wilde a sharp and pointed commentator on fashion and pretensions. Like so many members of his generation, he was greatly troubled by the moral and political implications of war.

In choosing America, Auden brought with him a sense of gay exile. Summers tells us:

Although most of his early poems have their origins in his personal anxieties, especially those related to his homosexuality and his search for psychic healing, they seemed to voice the fears and uncertainties of his entire generation ("W.H. Auden" 64).

From the alienation of Wilde in Paris at the end of his life to the later alienation of Genet and Rechy, the role of "exile" was to figure heavily in the twentieth century homosexual experience. By linking his voice to the anxiety and modernity of an age in flux and at war, the homosexual (along with the Jewish artist and intellectual) became a true spokesperson for the twentieth century. Solitary, politicized, cognizant of the mutability of culture, religion and fashion, Auden and Isherwood became authentic commentators and raconteurs for their time. Also, as Summers tells us, Auden, by accepting his gayness, gained "new insight into the universal impulse to love" and enlarged "his understanding of all kinds of relationships" ("W.H. Auden" 64).

Auden established a gay urbanity. Coining the word "Homintern" (a take-off on "Comintern" [Communist International]) in 1939 and using it in an article in the Partisan Review about 1941, Auden meant to convey the idea of a global homosexual community (Norse, Bastard Angel 77). In New York, Auden became the "Queen Bee" of a growing gay artistic and intellectual set. His apartment on Cornelia Street and later on St. Mark's Place became a crossroads for gay writers and figures, and, he and Kallman, who referred to Auden affectionately as "Miss Mess" or "Miss Master," became the unique "host" and "hostess" of gay society (Norse, Bastard Angel 68).

Embracing modernism, Auden wrote poetry of a colloquial voicing which combined the banal with the sophisticated, and classical allusions and archaisms with a modern political and social consciousness. His poems often vacillated between an extraordinary classicism and formalism, and a very schoolboyish sense of camp and “naughtiness.” In a way his poetry shows the tension between Agape and Eros--the intellectual abstraction of valorous, civilized love, and the carnal expression of homoerotic desires (Summers, “W.H. Auden” 64). His sexual relationship with Kallman, platonic in later years, became more an expression of Agape as he struggled with his poor health and lack of physical desirability (Farnan 63; Osborne 276).

Kallman introduced Auden to opera and as partners they collaborated on original libretti including Stravinsky’s “The Rakes’s Progress” [1951] (Summers, “W.H.Auden, 64). Auden’s passion for Kallman inspired poems of “fulfilled erotic love, including ‘The Prophets,’ ‘Like a Vocation,’ ‘The Riddle,’ ‘Law Like Love,’ and ‘Heavy Date,’ in which he tells his lover, ‘I have/Found myself in you’ ” (Summers, “W.H.Auden” 64). “The Common Life” [1965] is actually dedicated to Kallman. The poem, perhaps as no other in Auden’s cannon, gives insight into the intimacies of his complex relationship with Kallman. The occasion of the poem appears to be a moment of reverie in Austria where the two are sitting “under the glassy look/ of a Naples Bambino,/ the portrayed regards of Strauss and Stravinsky,/ doing British cross-word puzzles” (715). It is a work which exhibits the fine dissemblance and metaphor which cloaked, out of professional necessity and conditioning, much of Auden’s personal expression. Auden seems to accept the great differences in personality, success, and situation which set him apart from Kallman; and,

yet, even in their tightly confined public world, Auden finds a way to write of his sad and troubled passion for Kallman. Using the image of living-room as metaphor for the Kallman relationship, Auden writes:

There's no *We* at an instant,
only *Thou* and *I*, two regions
of protestant being which nowhere overlap;
a room is too small, therefore,

if its occupants cannot forget at will
that they are not alone, too big
if it gives them any excuse in a quarrel
for raising their voices. (714)

Auden says of his life style and relationship:

ours is a sitting culture
in a generation which prefers comfort
(or is forced to prefer it)

to command, would rather incline its buttocks
on a well-upholstered chair
than the burly back of a slave: a quick glance
at book-titles would tell him

that we belong to the clerisy and spend much
on our food. (714-715)

He ponders his relationship with Kallman rhetorically:

What draws
singular lives together in the first place,
loneliness, lust, ambition

or mere convenience, is obvious, why they drop
or murder one another
clear enough: how they create, though, a common world
between them, like Bombelli's

impossible yet useful numbers, no one
has yet explained. Still, they do
manage to forgive impossible behavior,

to endure by some miracle

conversational tics and larval habits
without wincing (were you to die,
I should miss yours). (715)

Auden has endured by forgiving Kallman's impossible behavior. They have found a commonality and prevailed "after twenty-four years" of being together (the poem is dated July 1963). Later in an ironic tone which seems to allude to the very British Victorian idea of a man's home as being his castle, Auden speaks of the necessities of guarding gay relations in the public arena:

I'm glad the builder gave
our common-room small windows
through which no observed outsider can observe us:
every home should be a fortress (715)

This particular fortress has built on Auden's ability to quell Kallman's wildly erratic illusions and erotic nature. We are told that the home should be:

equipped with all the very latest engines
for keeping Nature at bay,
versed in all ancient magic, the arts of quelling
the Dark Lord and his hungry

animivorous chimaeras. (Any brute
can buy a machine in a shop,
but the sacred spells are secret to the kind,
and if power is what we wish

they won't work.) *The ogre will come in any case:*
so Joyce has warned us. Howbeit,
fasting or feasting, we both know this: without
the Spirit we die, but life

without the Letter is in the worst of taste,
and always, though truth and love

can never really differ, when they seem to,
the subaltern should be truth. (716)

Auden seems to suggest that what is in the subaltern, or the heart, is ultimately necessary for truth and survival. Auden has struck an uneasy balance between honor, Agape, scripture and Eros. It is a theme repeated in a poem such as "September 1, 1939," written apparently after a visit to a gay bar, the Dizzy Club on West 52nd Street, where Auden tells us "Hunger allows no choice/To the citizen or the police;/We must love one another or die" (Norse Bastard Angel 78; Auden Selected Poems 88). These lines of verse not only strike accord with a world at war against Fascism, but with the authoritarian persecution of gay men in a bar who must fear for their lives and well-being for expressing a love after which they "hunger;" erotic love which after all is said and done is a "normal" impulse of the human heart. The poem in essence works on several levels, its language dissembling Auden's own complex feelings of concern for the plight of gay men in a gay bar who become representative of the way society's privileging of heterosexual erotic love does not accept the desire of the homosexual's "normal heart"¹⁰ The homosexual feels forced to accept and project Agape or universal civilized love and deny the expression of his or her own erotic nature or Eros; yet it is Eros, in Auden's mind, which fulfills and illuminates the human spirit. We read with a newer understanding Auden's words in the context of his poem:

The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish:

10 This phrase was used by Larry Kramer for the title of his 1985 gay play about AIDS, "The Normal Heart." The play in its published format begins with a dedication page including the first two stanzas I have excerpted from Auden's "September 1, 1939."

What mad Nijinsky wrote
 About Diaghilev
 Is true of the normal heart;
 For the error bred in the bone
 Of each woman and each man
 Craves what it cannot have,
 Not universal love
 But to be loved alone.

And:

All I have is a voice
 To undo the folded lie,
 The romantic lie in the brain
 Of the sensual man-in-the-street
 And the lie of Authority
 Whose buildings grope the sky:
 There is no such thing as the State
 And no one exists alone;
 Hunger allows no choice
 To the citizen or the police;
 We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies;
 Yet, dotted everywhere,
 Ironical points of light¹¹
 Flash out wherever the Just
 Exchange their messages;
 May I, composed like them
 Of Eros and of dust,
 Beleaguered by the same
 Negation and despair,
 Show an affirming flame (Selected Poems 88-89)

If dissemblance became one aspect of Auden's homosexual aesthetic, Auden also

¹¹ It is indeed ironic that George Bush during his U.S. presidential homophobic administration in the late eighties and early nineties should appropriate this image of "points of light" and their "affirming flame" from Auden's poem, failing to understand that the "points of light" not only is metaphor for nations resisting fascism and individuals that express the positive force of the human spirit, but gay men in a gay bar who in their ironic nature ("ironic points of light" is the line from the poem) express a triumph of the human spirit and erotic desire over the "negation and despair" their lives have been given.

exhibited a wit and erudition reminiscent of Wilde. A certain irony exists in Auden. One must read between the lines. Summers points out that in poems such as “The Aesthetic Point of View” (1960), “Shorts” (1960), the “Marginalia” (1969), “Profile” (1969) or the bawdy “A Day for a Lay,” Auden reveals a humorous camp aesthetic. “A Day for a Lay” is especially raucous for its sexually explicit double-entendres and lascivious tone of voice, as it recounts a sexual encounter with a young man.

Auden was not without his campy, sexual side. Indeed he seemed to play the role of the gay queen with some aplomb, preferring the company of other “highbrow queens” as well as “smart college boys” (Osborne 277). Harold Norse tells us that Auden, after sleeping with Kallman for the first time, admitted to praying that “Chester would be ‘hung’” and exclaimed “Thank God it’s big!” (Norse, Bastard Angel 64). Kallman reportedly said about Auden that “his idea of religious worship is to kneel before the Great God Penis. Talk about groveling—he’d stay down all night if I didn’t remind him that even I am not inexhaustible” (Norse, Bastard Angel 68).

In later years, Auden became an alcoholic and addicted to downers. Richard Howard recalls that Auden once exclaimed that he lived “the chemical life” (Howard, Interview). Auden would retire for bed early often announcing to friends that “carriage is at nine,” this after several hours of heavy drinking (Howard, Interview). But if his life and health had deteriorated, Auden continued to dominate as an icon and patron saint of high gay culture.

Auden is associated with other gay poets such as Richard Howard (1929-), Daryl

Hine, William Meredith,¹² James Merrill (1926-1995), and Howard Moss¹³ who shared in his characteristic gay aestheticism and intellectualism. In Merrill's adventures with a Ouija board (expressed in his book, The Changing Light at Sandover [1982]), Auden is a presence, as Claude Summers would say, "the embodiment of a homosexual artistic sensibility" (Summers, "W.H.Auden" 65). Auden and Merrill were men of classicism and erudition who, by their sophistication and wit, forged a higher style for gay poetry, less influenced by the decadence of a previous century which seemed part and parcel of an old European culture swept away by war.

Two other gay poets at work in the American forties were Dunstan Thompson (1918-1975) and Edwin Denby (1903-1983). Thompson wrote two books of war lyrics, Poems (1943) and Lament for the Sleepwalker (1947), which revealed his homosexuality (Cady 34). Denby wrote In Public, In Private (1948), which was homosexually suggestive (Cady 34). These two writers, especially Thompson, were familiar and influential on the next generation of gay poets, Edward Field (1924-) in particular.

Lincoln Kirstein (1907-) was another gay writer whose work, including the novel Flesh is Heir (1932), the play Rhymes of a PFC (1964) and various collected poems, depicted openly homosexual situations. Kirstein was friendly with E.M. Forster, Alice B. Toklas and Donald Windham (1920-), who wrote diaries which covered luminaries such as Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote as well as the artist Paul Cadmus. Ned Rorem

12 Richard Howard describes Meredith as "attractive, lively, having a lot of taste and a certain glamour and charm," and as being very "macho" and "closeted" (Howard, Interview).

13 Richard Howard met Howard Moss in the fifties at a gay bar called Mary's (Howard, Interview). Moss was the poetry editor at The New Yorker. Moss was of the tradition of "gentility" and "constraint" (Howard, Interview).

(1923-) was another gay memoirist who contributed to the witty and tart gay literary scene of the post-World War I years.

The American writer, Paul Goodman (1911-1972), a contemporary of Auden in New York, was a gay “man of letters” whose early poems were “distinguished by a combination of classical learning and avant-garde experimentation” (McLemee 334). In the thirties Goodman had issued in pamphlet form verse which spoke directly to the gay experience, cruising and other urban delights. “Epode, The New Bus Terminal” (1934) and “Balade to Jean Cocteau” (1937) were two of these works; in the forties Goodman continued his candidly homosexual verse with such poems as “A Meeting” (1941) and “The Cyclist” (1946) (McLemee 334).

Goodman had begun to explore the newly private and hidden psychological spaces of the homosexual subculture. Married to a woman, Goodman pursued a life of bisexuality, although his preference was decidedly homosexual. A frequent figure at New York gay parties in the forties and fifties, Goodman knew Robert Duncan (he ran off with Duncan’s boyfriend, Jerry Ackerman), and had a strong influence on other gay poets such as Richard Howard (Faas 269-270; Howard, Interview). Howard remembers going to a poetry reading in 1948 and hearing Paul Goodman step up to the podium and say “Come here sailor, I want to suck your cock” (Howard, Interview). Goodman was a frequent guest at Auden and Kallman’s apartment on St. Mark’s Place and he was always invited to Auden’s famous birthday party celebrations (Howard, Interview).

A liberationist, Goodman was equally dedicated to ideals of pacifism and anarchism. In 1963 Goodman was asked what he thought was the single most important

threat to homosexuals; “the hydrogen bomb,” Goodman replied (Howard, Interview). Goodman wrote on diverse subjects such as urban design, literary theory, Gestalt therapy, and “The Politics of Being Queer” (1969). Part of the social and political leftist movement of the thirties and forties, Goodman, like Auden, was part of a socially and morally conscious gay intelligentsia, one that found in homosexual liberation a paradigm for other forms of liberation. Susan Sonntag called Goodman the “Cocteau” of his age (Howard, Interview).

In a way Goodman was ahead of his time. His work anticipated the political stance of liberationist gay poets in the early seventies and the rise of gay and lesbian theory. Like Carpenter and Symonds, Goodman was a gay commentator on society at large. His poems introduced an open homosexual viewpoint.

The theory of homosexuality based on Greek metaphysical concepts that so controlled the nineteenth century was joined in the early twentieth by a purely medical model based on psychological illness, disease and sickness. Freud had introduced his broader ideas of latency, Oedipal conflict and identity formation. It was for Goodman to anticipate the movement from a psychological/medical stance to a sociological/humanitarian/political definition. In a way it was Whitman’s old democratic vision redefined in the realities of leftist politics.

Goodman along with Auden and Kirstein had started a gay American urbanity and intelligentsia, a breed of thinker-poets, classicists who understood modernity. Goodman, more open about his sexuality than Auden, would continue to develop his libertarian views in the coming decades.

In the following chapter, I will present an historical account of the American gay poetic tradition since World War II. In doing so, I wish to establish a taxonomy for this post-War tradition and look at some of the social forces as well as publishing milestones that ushered in a renaissance in gay verse.

Chapter 1

Post-World War II American Gay Men's Poetry: "Scenes," and "Movements": An Historical Overview

The history of American gay poetry from World War II to the present can be described in a series of "movements" or "scenes" often revolving around one or two important and influential figures. As we have just seen, before and during World War II, poets such as W.H. Auden and Paul Goodman were influential in establishing a gay intelligentsia and a gay sense of urbanity which made its presence felt in New York City. The "scenes" I speak of in this chapter consist of various locales or cultural venues which were creatively important in the work of a particular group of poets. These "scenes" were often centered on flamboyant, loquacious, and influential gay men--"divas"--who set the theatrical and oracular tone for other gay writers; be it Ginsberg in a San Francisco gallery delivering his Howl, Frank O'Hara leaving MOMA for a lunch-time stroll down Fifth, or Assotto Saint at a meeting of Other Countries black writers collective in New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Center. These various "divas" and "scenes" fostered "movements" or schools of poetry which were marked by key cultural and literary characteristics, often based on shared stylistic, political and aesthetic elements.

In creating an historical taxonomy, I do not wish to imply that the major poets of these various movements did not share center stage nor that the movements themselves

did not overlap. Many poets were part of two or more movements and certainly were interconnected by style, point of view, and locale; moreover, all of these movements shared in the overriding evolution of a gay urban sensibility, one that embraced extremes of aestheticism, camp and social class-consciousness as well as countercultural rebelliousness, liberationist zeal and anarchistic irreverence. Sometimes poets socialized closely together although their individual work shows diverging sensibilities and influences. In more cases than not a poet's work may embrace many currents or themes in the gay literary sensibility. I merely have sought one way we might organize a post-war gay poetic tradition so that we can better understand some of its essential themes and characteristics. The titles I have arrived at for each movement are drawn from what I see as certain unifying ideas or concepts which link the various poets of a period or scene. Movements were not only influenced by the divas that helped shape them, but by their publication histories and their generational viewpoint.

Critics such as David Bergman have chosen to organize gay poetry in a taxonomy which suggests two camps, "formalists" and "free verse" writers (Bergman, "American Literature: Gay Male, Post-Stonewall" 46), but I see such an approach as too simplistic. Many gay poets have written concurrently in both free verse and form. I have sought to organize gay poetry from the perspectives of content, theme, form, cultural history and gay sensibility.

* * *

In the forties, as we have just discussed, a generation of single gay men heard the call to travel and sought the urban cultures of New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and

Boston. World War II devastated Europe and ended in the extermination of many homosexuals in the death camps of Nazi Germany. Disruptive and volatile, it changed society both abroad and at home. Large numbers of young men were mobilized far from home for the first time, creating greater social freedom. Larger numbers of single men and women and the easy availability of work made a single life in America outside the constraints of marriage and family more possible. Urban and suburban areas became steadily more populous. The exodus from Europe of many intellectuals and artists also gave America a new cultural heritage and sophistication. Allan Berube and John D'Emilio have chronicled the impact of World War II on gay culture and have shown how it made possible the proliferation of many gay bars as well as new gay social networks (Chauncey 11). There can be little doubt that, as Chauncey confirms in Gay New York, there was a "dramatic growth of the gay subculture [in America] after the war [World War II]" (10).

THE GAY BEATS

The American poet, Robert Duncan (1919-1988), born in Oakland, California, became an important figure in the cultural transition from pre-War to post-World War II America and the start of the Gay Beats in the late forties and fifties.¹⁴ Duncan's early poetry was shaped by "adoption, double vision, hermetic philosophy (his foster parents belonged to the Hermetic Brotherhood) and homosexuality" (Johnson, "Robert Duncan"

¹⁴ A dissertation dealing with homosexuality in Duncan is Heather Kay Johnstone, "Robert Duncan as Homosexual and Love Poet," York University, 1979.

209). After college at U.C. Berkeley he moved to New York where he published his 1944 essay "The Homosexual in Society." Duncan called for an end of the "ghettoized locales often found in homosexual novels and the separatist condescension often to be found especially in urban homosexual enclaves" (Fone 262). The homosexual, for Duncan, must not look for a certain cult of superiority and separatism but toward his shared sense of humanity. He should be devoted to the "liberation of human love" (Fone 262) and not the "cultivation of a secret language, the 'camp,' a tone and vocabulary that is loaded with contempt for the human" (Faas 150). Although Duncan had published several poems and shown great promise, his essay caused him to be rebuffed by the literary establishment. As a result of the essay, John Crowe Ransom refused to publish in Kenyon Review Duncan's previously accepted poem, "An African Elegy" (Faas 152). Ransom suggested that Duncan was "palming off the homosexual symbols on the innocent little magazine" and he adamantly proclaimed that the magazine was "not in the market for literature of this type—overt homosexuality" (Faas 152). The move by Ransom successfully excluded Duncan from the mainstream of American poetry (Summers, Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage, 209-210). Duncan continued to write and became friends with the young Tennessee Williams (1911-1983). The two writers discussed gay literary influences—Henry James, Proust and Melville being foremost (Faas 157). In the early nineteen-forties Duncan suffered a breakdown and went to stay with his aunt in Sacramento (Faas 176). From there he moved to San Francisco with the ambition of starting a literary magazine. In San Francisco at Berkeley he joined up with Kenneth Rexroth in the local poetry scene (Faas 213). Sometime in 1946 at an anarchist's gathering he met Jack Spicer (1925-1965)

(Faas 221). Spicer, also gay, was to Duncan what Pound was to Eliot (Faas 221). Duncan also came to know the poet filmmaker, James Broughton, whose mystical poems of physicality and the body are discussed later. In 1947 Duncan met Charles Olson, and later contributed to Origin and the Black Mountain Review (Perkins 515).

In 1956 Duncan taught at Black Mountain College (Perkins 515). While at Black Mountain College Duncan met Jonathan Williams (1929-) a gay poet from North Carolina who with his poet-lover Tom Meyer would go on to establish the Jargon Press and publish Duncan, Broughton, Harold Norse, Paul Metcalf, and other gay writers (Chambers 750).

Duncan returned to San Francisco in the late fifties and began his life-long relationship with the artist Jess Collins. Together with Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (who opened the City Lights bookstore in North Beach) Duncan began a countercultural poetry movement sometimes known as the "San Francisco Renaissance." Influenced by the projective verse theories of Olson from Black Mountain College and the work of such predecessors as Whitman, Williams and Pound, the Renaissance poets reacted to the New Criticism of their time (Perkins 537). Duncan, best known for his visionary poetry with its allusions to esoteric cults and myths and its Romantic symbolism, wrote love poems explicit in their homoeroticism.

One of Duncan's other close friends was Spicer who mystically viewed the poet as a "radio," picking up signals from the "invisible world," and sometimes viewed his own poetry as having been written by "Martians" (Killian 674). Spicer hung out in North Beach in San Francisco and attracted a circle of admirers and students.

The counterculture of North Beach was paralleled by the countercultural world of New York where a small group of restless young men, a few homosexual, a few bisexual, were exploring drugs and mysticism and a desire to write in a spontaneous style. Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) dropped his job in market research in 1951 and, through consultations with a psychiatrist, decided to “do nothing but write poetry and have leisure . . . And cultivate my perceptions, cultivate the visionary thing in me. Just a literary and quiet city-hermit existence” (Perkins 548). The older gay writer, William Burroughs (1914-1997), became Ginsberg’s mentor and helped him to come out. Joined in a close circle of friendship, Ginsberg and Burroughs founded what I have termed the “Gay Beat” movement. Beat is the term used for a group of writers, poets and novelists, notably Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso and Burroughs, who were writing in the late forties and early fifties. By extension it was also applied to the writers of the San Francisco Renaissance. “Beat was used to signify both ‘beaten down’ (that is, by the oppressive culture of the time) and ‘beatific’ (many of the Beat writers cultivated ecstatic states by way of Buddhism, Jewish and Christian mysticism, and/or drugs that induced visionary experiences)” (Abrams 14). What is so often ignored is the homosexual bohemian life which prevailed during the Beat Movement. Ginsberg and Burroughs were both queer and wrote freely about their homoerotic desire.

Harold Norse (1916-), Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), Steve Jonas (1927-1970), John Giorno (1936-), John Wieners (1934-), Frank O’Hara (1926-1966), Jack Spicer (1925-1965), Robert Duncan (1919-1988), Charles Henri Ford (1910-) and Maurice Kenny (1929-) were all “Gay Beats.” Paul Mariah (1937-), Maurice Kenny, Ralph

Pomeroy (1926-), and Richard Tagett (1936-) can be seen as transitional poets from a Beat individualism and counter-cultural aesthetic toward a newer gay subcultural liberationist perspective. Mariah was a researcher/scheduler for the Kinsey study, a literary secretary for Robert Duncan and Kay Boyle, and has written on the oppression of prisoners in American penal institutions (Morse and Larkin 243). Kenny was a native Mohawk Indian and was the editor of several anthologies and books of poetry which have explored his Indian heritage and the spiritual place of the homosexual in Indian society (Morse and Larkin 211). Pomeroy was an artist, curator and writer on art, director of Forum Gallery in New York and a lecturer on modern painting at the New York School of Interior Design (Morse and Larkin 315).

The Gay Beats were influenced by the surrealism of André Breton and Jean Cocteau. Some of their legacy was drawn from Whitman and his frank, direct speech, everyday vernacular, spiritualism and unabashed celebration of the homoerotic. Unlike Hart Crane, the "Gay Beats" felt free to speak their desire in a simple, less opaque and convoluted style. They enthusiastically looked to the past to rediscover homoerotic verse forms. They drew on the American scene of William Carlos Williams's poetry and his delight in the American vernacular. They enjoyed spontaneous and unedited forms of expression such as automatic writing or Surrealist concoctions such as found poetry. They looked to the Decadent Movement of the nineteenth century, especially Rimbaud and Verlaine, as an endorsement for the systematic derangement of the senses through intoxicants, meditation, and other forms of intense experience as a means to reach states of expanded awareness (McLemee 84). Ginsberg was interested in the mysticism of

William Blake. Spicer wrote an homage to the gay Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, while Ginsberg and others were also influenced by Lorca.

However, as rebellious as these Gay Beat poets were, they were still under the influence of Freud and the psychiatrization of homosexuality, sex and gender. The moralistic stance of the forties and fifties toward homosexuality which associated it with decadence, rebellion, effeminacy, depravity, madness and illness forced these poets into positions of marginality and rebellion.

The resultant atmosphere of anxiety led many American gay poets and artists to pursue an expatriate tradition. Harold Norse (1916-) lived in Europe for many years and visited Algeria; Allen Ginsberg made his well-documented forays to Paris, North Africa, and to Mexico. The Gay Beats often chose extreme positions of bohemian/beatnik life, which looked to the occult, Eastern religion and esoteric mythology (Duncan, Ginsberg and Spicer) and they also often continued Dadaist/Surrealist experiments that challenged traditional poetic styles and techniques (O'Hara, Wieners, and Ford). The Gay Beat poets moved through the Bohemian enclaves of New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Paris (the famous "Beat Hotel"). Like Whitman they felt a pull toward the open road, the democracies of desire, and the working-class experience. They shared an iconoclastic streak. Their stance as countercultural liberationists appeared in both their raw, masculine unconventionality and their fascination with the extremes of decadence and romanticism. They were influenced by Surrealist and Dadaist poetry. Notably, gay poets, John Wieners (1934-) and Frank Bidart (1939-), both living in Boston, developed a surrealist direction and saw their work as part of the counter-cultural experience. Wieners even anticipates

the later experiments of the Language Poets of the West Coast in the seventies and eighties.

But it was Ginsberg who represented the rebellious expressive freedom of a truly gay counter-cultural moment. Homoerotic abandon in its unadulterated form and an insistence upon the spiritual legacy of Whitman with his democratic vista of unlimited youth merged with the spontaneity of the Beat Experience to form Ginsberg's poetry.

GAY COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE GAY AESTHETES

In retrospect, the post-war forties and fifties saw an unprecedented number of poets who were conscious of their homosexuality and of the growingly visible gay subculture and sensibility. They sought one another out. They read and reflected upon the homoerotic verse of previous generations. Their associations by friendship were numerous. They moved in a social and cultural milieu, cognizant of other gay happenings in the worlds of art, photography, history, theater and music. Their work anticipated the explosive gay liberation movement of the late sixties and early seventies.

Gay "ghettos" (many having existed from the turn of the century) in places such as the West Village, Harlem and Fire Island in New York; Provincetown in Massachusetts; the Castro district in San Francisco; and Key West in Florida, had grown steadily through the decade. These locales paralleled former European gay settings such as Paris at the turn of the century and in the twenties, and Berlin in the thirties. All began to act as sites of gay subcultural and literary production. This ghettoization occurred alongside greater

industrialization and urbanization.

Ghettoization and urbanization made possible the invention of a gay identity. Through the institution of the gay or lesbian bars (like the molly houses of a previous age), rituals such as “coming out” were facilitated and single men and women were inducted into gay communal life. Ghettoization also allowed the beginnings of a small yet active intelligentsia and the transmission of gay cultural works. But ghettoization also created its constraints. Robert Duncan in his 1944 essay, “The Homosexual in Society,” discusses how the separatist condescension of gays kept them successfully cordoned off and removed from the positive and stabilizing social community at large (Fone 262). Duncan rejected the ghettoized locales often found in homosexual novels (Fone 262). While the urban ghetto permitted mutual protection, recognition and support, it also worked to support the idea of exclusivity and superiority.

For better or for worse, ghettoization paved the way for creating a gay readership which sought out literary works or magazines that reflected gay identity. Through the covert circulation of “underground” mimeographed journals gay writing and cultural information was disseminated in the twenties, thirties, forties and early fifties in America (Fone 250-253).¹⁵

Later in the fifties an underground gay and lesbian publishing industry had its start. A growing homosexual movement on the West Coast of America had led to the

¹⁵ In 1924, before police closed down its operation, the Chicago Society for Human Rights, under the auspices of Henry Gerber, produced two issues of a journal called Friendship and Freedom (Martinac 282). As previously mentioned, Fire!, in 1926 published its first and only issue including the homosexual essay/story “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” by Richard Bruce Nugent (Martinac 284). Chanticleer, a mimeographed newsletter, started in 1934, was circulated by Gerber and Jacob Hauser (Martinac 282). Lisa Ben (an anagram of “lesbian”) in 1947-48 produced nine issues of a magazine entitled Vice Versa

foundation of both the Mattachine Society (1950/51) and the Daughters of Bilitis (1955), with their respective magazines ONE (1952) and The Ladder (1956) (Bronski 145). For the first time, through the work of Harry Hay, gay men in America began to organize themselves politically.

Hay, living on the West Coast, found in the small urban gay world of Los Angeles in the forties and fifties, gay men of similar sentiments. In November of 1950 four of these men (Bob Hull, Chuck Rowland, Dale Jennings, and 'R') met at Hay's home to discuss the formation of a homosexual rights organization which they wanted to call the Mattachine Society, "so named for the Matachinos, court jesters of the Italian Renaissance who, behind their masks, were free to speak the truth" (Russell 89). In April 1951 the Society began circulating a one-page manifesto. This later developed into the magazine ONE which was circulated under great secrecy and fear. It was followed in 1955 by The Mattachine Review, a more scholarly publication which folded in the mid-sixties (Martinac 283; Fone 254-255).

The urban environment had set the scene for a new collective political movement as well as facilitated the underground transmission and reception of gay literary and political literature. The workings of this urbanity would be seen in later decades when small collective groups of gay writers acted to promote underground presses, to transmit gay works and to support each other. One example out of hundreds was Paul Mariah (1937-) who was a well-known figure on the California gay literary scene. A co-editor

(Martinac 282-283). These early publications paralleled developments in the American homophile movement and created a lucrative market for gay images and fiction (Bronski 145).

with Richard Tagett of ManRoot poetry magazine (1969), he worked as an instructor of English at San Francisco State University and a Research Assistant with the (Kinsey) Institute for Sex Research. Mariah, Leyland and Gunn were part of the highly active, visible gay literary scenes of San Francisco's Castro and L.A.'s Silverlake and West Hollywood. They participated in early gay readings at gay bookstores.

Although a gay reader reception was actively developing, state-approved censorship continued to prevail. Censorship sometimes helped draw attention to gay works, as with the much publicized 1957 obscenity trial surrounding Ginsberg's work Howl (1956) and the banning of the mailing of ONE in 1957 (later reversed in a 1958 decision) (Summers 155).¹⁶

This censorship, however, did not preclude the growing establishment of a gay intellectual establishment, a conservative literary community which would take root even as gay liberation was about to roar out of the closet. Much of gay urbanity still operated under the conditions of the closet and drew much of its rigorous aestheticism, camp wit, and sophistication from the need to encode feelings and expressions of same-sex desire, or to "pass" by virtue of economic class and intellect.

The American city was the pinnacle achievement of the modernist movement. It became the center of the American experiment---big, brash and bold. It was also the breeding ground for the aesthetic. Urbanity was the stronghold of gay men who sought a new lexicon for their desires unfettered by the provincial Puritanism of a suburban or rural

16 ONE was the first magazine in the U.S. to reach a wide audience (5,000 readers at its peak). The U.S. Postal Service tried to ban its distribution but in 1958 ONE won a decision from the U.S. Supreme Court to be allowed through the mails, opening the way for other gay/lesbian magazines. It ended publication in 1972 (Martinac 283).

American populace. New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco became centers of the gay intellectual community at home, and gay communities here were in close communication with European gay centers like Paris. As we have mentioned earlier, Auden described this evolving gay cosmopolitanism as the “Homintern” or the global gay community; and, by extension, suggested the idea of a global gay aesthetic and culture.

From Harlem to Auden’s Village apartment, New York especially suited the sophistication of international gay artists and thinkers. Gossip and a Proustian vision of society as spectacle reigned. Inevitably a gay society or a gay aesthetic was built around a certain elitism. An urban identity based on culture and knowledge was formulated around numerous friends, love relationships and literary successes.

Harold Norse, for one, in his memoir Bastard Angel, describes the close gay community which existed between gay poets in New York and Paris during the forties, fifties and sixties. Norse writes: “we moved within circles stretching from New York to Provincetown, and the Ivy League universities, mostly Harvard, Princeton, Yale and Columbia. From Brooklyn College, Chester Kallman and I were part of this Homintern through which gay writers and artists met” (125).

Norse knew Kallman and Auden and visited their apartment frequently. He was Auden’s secretary for a short period of time. In 1943 he met James Baldwin while leaving Bickford’s Cafeteria (Bastard Angel 110).¹⁷ Norse met Ginsberg when Ginsberg was still

¹⁷ Norse recounts how Baldwin was despondent about his chances of publishing Go Tell it on the Mountain, a novel he had started when he was fifteen. Baldwin said of the novel: “Who’d ever take it? Who wants a novel about a black boy anyway, much less a queer one” (Bastard Angel 114). Norse and Baldwin remained in touch and saw each other later in Paris after Baldwin had achieved success with the book.

a virgin and they almost had an affair together in the winter of 1944 (Bastard Angel 139). The following summer Norse stayed in Provincetown with Tennessee Williams where they looked at the handsome young gay boys and spoke about homosexuality as a “psychic wound that never heals” (Bastard Angel 125). Norse went on to live on Horatio Street in the Village and was frequently visited by Williams, Baldwin and Ginsberg. Paul Goodman came to his apartment and translated aloud passages of Genet’s Our Lady of the Flowers which had not yet appeared in print (Bastard Angel 142). Through much of the fifties Norse traveled abroad, meeting Pasolini in Rome, and in April 1960 he settled into the “Beat Hotel”¹⁸ at 9 Rue Git-le-Coeur in the Latin Quarter where he lived with Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky (Ginsberg’s lover), Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Brion Gysin (Bastard Angel 349-350).

I use Norse to illustrate this overlapping and interconnected gay cosmopolitanism. While the social bonds of such a gay community were various and strong and supported the view of a gay cosmopolitanism, there were distinct literary camps, vernaculars and social strata. The Gay Beats subscribed more to “hiptalk” and less to a sophisticated “queer talk” mode of language (Elledge, “Frank O’Hara: to Be True to a City” 66). Norse tells us Auden would have had nothing to do with the world of Billie Holiday, James Baldwin or Billy Strayhorn, which had appealed to the Beats (Bastard Angel 167). Gay cosmopolitanism ran the spectrum from an extreme aestheticism to unruly demonic rebellion.

Such cosmopolitanism and urbanity had already made an appearance in the Harlem

¹⁸ It was at the “Beat Hotel” that experimentation led to the “cut-up” technique (influenced by Tristan Tzara), a technique later made famous by Burroughs (Bastard Angel 355).

Renaissance of the twenties with the gay or bisexual male writers Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Richard Bruce Nugent, Wallace Thurman and the patron Carl Van Vechten. These men had forged a complex yet thriving intellectual gay subculture. Locke, in particular, established a gay coterie and as previously mentioned gave impetus to the careers of Cullen and Hughes and other poets, as much as Auden and Merrill did for their white gay contemporaries.

But it was the poet Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) who personified gay urbanity. Bridging the rebelliousness, spontaneity and sexual frankness of the Gay Beats with the urban sophistication, dissemblance and aestheticism of Auden, O'Hara wrote skillful and artful poems of city life and culture. Like the Beats, O'Hara had appreciated the Dadaist and Surrealist movements in art. He enjoyed the spontaneous dashed-off anti-formalist style of Beat writing (his "lunch poems" were famous for having been written while he wandered Fifth Avenue on his lunch breaks from MOMA). But unlike the Beats, O'Hara worshipped high and low culture and was devoted to sophistication and the artificiality of the urban. O'Hara rejected the communal life espoused by Ginsberg and preferred instead his "Sodom-on-Hudson," as he lovingly called New York City (Elledge, "Frank O'Hara: to Be True to a City" 67).

O'Hara represented a high point in the gay urban cosmos. A pivotal figure in the gay tradition, O'Hara was one of the leading divas in this urban, gay aesthetic revolution. Through his life at the Museum of Modern Art, his travels through the party-scene of gallery openings, art-world happenings, Fire Island and the Hamptons, and his flirtations with high and low society, O'Hara established a new sense of a "gay intelligentsia,"

dressing his verse in the accouterments of glamour and culture. Andy Warhol solidified this cult of the gay personality and the Wildean trickster prevailed once more. As Susan Sontag notes, “homosexual aestheticism and irony, became the underpinnings of modernity, the result of the gay man’s double-edged insight which has resulted from his position simultaneously both inside and outside of the dominant culture” (Bronski 12). Double-edged insight was one of O’Hara’s key virtues. O’Hara flourished in the New York art scene where the gay persona could hold power as the trickster of taste, fashion, and style.

O’Hara found in New York City a cultural crossroads. The appropriation of art and artifice, the mixing of styles both high and low and the growing movement toward Op and Pop coming on the heels of Abstract Expressionism showed the potential for the gay artist as not only “keeper of the code” and the “cultural flame” (“flame” in its more camp element) but its court-jester as well. O’Hara created a very self-conscious and stylized gay poetic, one noted for its wit, sophistication and its attention to high society. O’Hara continued a tradition instigated by Proust with his calculated observations of society and its spectacle. Fashion, society, and gossip became art forms in themselves to be cultivated and studied, parodied and cross-examined. Observations on taste, manners, decorum and social intrigue picked up on sensibilities much earlier displayed in gay writers such as Henry James. O’Hara made the most of camp and its reversals of high and low culture. His urbane literary and artistic sensibility linked him to Auden and to Merrill; his spontaneous sense of wit, surrealist style, irreverence and rebellion tied him to the Beats. His affable sociability connected him to his contemporary friend, James Schuyler. His

surreal abstracted experiments in poetic representation showed affinities to his other contemporary, John Ashbery (1927-). O'Hara could be both mysterious and mystical, and brash and political.

His interest in aesthetics and the artificial, in conventions and mores, gave him the playful inventiveness of a modern-day Oscar Wilde. In some respects his work establishes one sensibility characteristic of gay writing, a deep affinity to the artifice of culture and the vagaries of fashion, an affinity which often overshadows the personal. If one can't speak his own heart, one can use starlets, jazz heroines or glitzy socialites as his objective correlatives. Through the fifties, gay poets had found themselves greatly marginalized as countercultural rebels and renegades. A rift had developed between a dominant heterosexual advertising and entertainment world and the homosexual artists who inhabited it. Ironically enough, as the American art scene heated up and American advertising and fashion entered a golden age, American culture was more than ever in the hands of a talented group of gay men.

American culture in the fifties--television, film, music--had become enshrined and institutionalized. Low and high culture, kitsch and exalted masterworks, intermingled. American heterosexual culture had become even more exaggerated, extreme and grotesque (witness the photographs of Diane Arbus or the poetry of Sylvia Plath) through the McCarthy era and the Kennedy years. O'Hara's work reflects the stereotypes of gay masculinity in 1959, an obsession with trivia, with feelings, with discriminations of taste and the fine arts (Elledge, "Frank O'Hara: to Be True to a City" 388). His works also reflect the complex legacy of homophobia and censorship as they forced O'Hara to use a

somewhat convoluted camp language to describe his sexual escapades and the gay milieu of the city.

O'Hara, like Warhol to follow, became a gay dandy of the cultural. He played with and manipulated the worlds of high and low culture. It is no surprise that O'Hara harbored such a fascination for the art world. In art, O'Hara saw the gay potential for camp, cultural rebellion, and a truly gay vision. O'Hara's aesthetic, born in the creative center of Abstract Expressionism and Pop, was to reflect a newer updated version of the art for art's sake movement of the late nineteenth century. O'Hara saw the flip-flop by which queer artists with their heightened sense of culture and their estrangement from its trappings could develop a bolder, more inventive, less moralizing tone of voice. The moral weight of Auden or Bishop's poems, and the heady confessionalism of Lowell and Plath, were not suited to the gossipy, subversive posturings of O'Hara. In a way O'Hara began "queer culture" by his explorations of the conceptualization of desire, consumerism, and the power of language to eroticize and fetishize as well as reinforce traditional binaries of gender. The gay poet Richard Howard (1929-) says of O'Hara that he was "a great animator," a man who "made things happen and excited people" (Howard, Interview). He was "right in the middle" enjoying the range from the "aristocratic to the demonic" (Howard, Interview).

O'Hara provided commentary on how the homosexual vision or sensibility affects culture and aesthetics. In a way he can be seen as a theoretician as much as a writer. His aesthetic was to be enlarged upon by the visual artists of the Gay Arts Movement (my title) of the seventies and eighties such as Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Keith

Haring. O'Hara's life and death (in 1966) ushered in the gay high-culture of the seventies and eighties. It was also to influence a later generation of gay poets who would find in the surfaces of popular culture a commentary on gender, politics and camp, poets such as Walta Borawski and David Trinidad.

In "Homosexuality" O'Hara described homosexuality as "the law of my own voice." Homosexuals are "remarkable creatures whose delicate feet may never touch the earth again as they--he among them--utter a cry to confuse the brave: It's a summer day,/and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world" (Fone 264).

If as Howard suggests, O'Hara straddled the middle between the demonic and the aristocratic, James Merrill (1926-1995) could be termed as singularly aristocratic. If Ginsberg and the Gay Beats embraced a raw sexual and almost demonic verve, Merrill perhaps best represented a formal academic sensibility and sophistication. As with Auden his elegance and refinement suggested the character of a gay aesthete. This sensibility extends as well to Merrill's associates, namely J.D. McClatchy (1945-) and Howard. It also finds reflection in Ashbery, James Schuyler (1923-1991), Alfred Corn (1943-) and Turner Cassity (1929-). Moving into positions as curators, museum administrators, editors, art critics, journalists, and academic teachers, a few of them became the new arbiters of art and fashion and keepers of the Academy. Though less closeted than Moss or Meredith, these aesthetes aspired to equal stature.

With a status second only to Auden, Merrill's work preserved a certain cosmopolitanism and academicism in gay poetry. Like Auden, Merrill was involved in a relationship of many years. Merrill divided his time between his home in Stonington,

Connecticut, and Key West, Florida, where his lover, the artist Richard Jackson lived (Klawitter 476).

Merrill collected around him a close literary circle of talented gay men, one similar to the salons of nineteenth century Paris and reminiscent of the British Romantic poets (Shelley and his circle of friends in Switzerland, Wordsworth and Coleridge in the Lake District). Richard Howard, J.D. McClatchy and David Kalstone were key figures in this scene. Highly educated, well-versed in European and American traditions, erudite, as well as aware of a new gay aestheticism, these writers shared a deep interest in culture, art and fashion and in the traditions of Auden, Cavafy, Crane, Cocteau, Genet, Gide, Lorca, Proust, Whitman, and Wilde. They aspired to a high cultural profile. They also represented a gay domesticity expressed in dinner parties in Connecticut, houses in Greece, and fashionable art happenings and events. The homosexuality of Merrill and his group was often less spoken in their early works than implied by their wit, erudition, and their deep knowledge of the artful dissembling of discourse. Their verse explored their inner circles of gay friendship.

Poets in this group have written scholarly works and have garnered many prestigious awards. James Merrill won the Pulitzer Prize in 1977 for Divine Comedies and the National Book Award for Nights and Days in 1967 and for Mirabell: Book of Number in 1979. Howard won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for Untitled Subjects. He has translated more than 150 books by French authors. Many among this circle were also friends of the gifted gay fiction writer Edmund White. Alfred Corn was associated with this group, having met Merrill later in his life.

In their early years, the poets of Merrill's circle tended to reject "difference" in their public lives (Fone 262). However, this rejection of difference went against the growing emphasis on homosexual separatism and radical identity-politics (Fone 263). The fine debate about separatism has been played out in the poetry of these gay writers, who have straddled both a high literary world of awards and mainstream anthologies, and the growing, visible gay and lesbian literary community.

These aesthete poets of the cosmopolitan shared several characteristics: an interest in religion, a love of nature, a close attention to formal craft, an abiding sense of history both literary and cultural, and an attendant sense of sadness and sublimity, as well as an ironic humor in regard to the homosexual experience. McClatchy and Corn both question their faith and their relation to organized religion and deal with moral issues as well.

Many gay poets of the seventies, eighties and nineties have admired Merrill's and Howard's high sense of craft and have been drawn to their use of cultural and literary history, narrative autobiography, and spirituality. In the sixties and seventies, Howard and his lover, the novelist, Sanford Friedman, were well-known gay figures (Field, Interview). For many, Howard, a very visibly gay and distinguished writer, has inherited the status of a Merrill or an Auden, by his extended influence and control as editor of The Paris Review.

Howard shared the stage with another academic gay poet, Paul Monette (1945-1995), who managed to graft a strong aesthetic sensibility on a gay liberationist perspective. Other contemporary writers who have carried this aesthetic tradition are David Craig Austin, David Bergman, Mark Doty, Scott Hightower, Daryl Hine, Wayne

Koestenbaum, Carl Phillips, Reginald Shepherd and Gregory Woods. These poets have distinguished themselves by a close attention to language and style, and for want of a better term, a beauty and intricacy of figurative language as well as craft. All of these poets are part of a tradition which reaches back to the high aestheticism of Mallarmé and Walter Pater, and the classicism of C. P. Cavafy. They sustain some of Auden's and Merrill's moral tone as well. David Craig Austin, a lesser known but gifted poet, who died early of AIDS, writes of Christianity in the face of death and grieving, investigating Christian iconography much as Tennyson did a century before. The gay man becomes Christ figure, the sacrificial symbol of redemption, the outcast who struggles toward faith, tenacious in his vision under oppression. Like Auden in relation to World War II, Austin finds moral themes and questions of Agape and Eros in the face of AIDS.

The aestheticism of Merrill's generation sometimes made the work removed, disjunctive, enigmatic and interior. Ashbery, who was a friend of O'Hara and Schuyler, early in his career favored a poetic which was autobiographical, highly allusive to art and art history and philosophic in tone.¹⁹ Gradually his poetry became more concerned with post-modernist issues of the nature of language and its connection to thought, some finding it in danger of becoming solipsistic (Johnson, "John Ashbery" 59). Ashbery's poetry often defies a clear homosexual reading, except in its camp attitudes to culture and its focus on the nature of identity (Johnson 60).

Poetry such as Ashbery's reflected one extreme of a world which was sometimes

19 Two dissertations which deal with Ashbery and his connections to O'Hara as well as his homosexuality are Bruce Hainley, "How to Proceed in Everything I Can Think of," Yale University, 1993; and, Catherine A. Imbriglio, "In and Out of the Stockade: Recontextualizing John Ashbery's Poetry," Brown University, 1995.

closed, interior and self-referential. This interiority reflects part of a gay literary sensibility of the fifties and sixties which enforced a certain isolation in gay writers and made them more mandarin, quirky and eccentric. In essence, they became novelty acts or freakish caricatures of themselves in the dominant straight popular culture—dandies, or gay queens.²⁰ Like Auden, the aging literary queen—erudite, smart, yet self-destructive and sexually frustrated—they suffered alone. Gay writers such as Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) and Truman Capote (1924-1984) reflect some of the complexities of the gay literary queen's life. Turning to gossip and small isolated worlds of friends they retreated into themselves; and yet others, like Schuyler, who suffered from manic-depression, reflected a wonderful quality of honesty, sociability and humanity as well. In a refreshingly straightforward way Schuyler talks of his own self-discoveries about gay life, reminding us that a gay urban culture permitted gay love and domesticity to take root, along with the blithe spirit of an O'Hara-like sophistication. Schuyler's wonderfully structured verse talks about the day to day vicissitudes of friends,²¹ the weather, the seasons, family, suburban and urban settings. Educated, witty, sensitive and cultured, his bucolic poetry, eclogues of a sort, are meditations on gay life.

The poet Edward Field is also a great interpreter of gay urban sociability. Field spent much of the fifties in analysis trying to go straight (Field, Interview). He cruised the railroad and bus stations. Parties at May Swenson's house had introduced him to gay

20 Edward Field tells us that James Baldwin, while living in Paris, was extremely poor. Because of this poverty Baldwin allowed himself to be taken out and patronized by an endless succession of wealthy white Americans who found him amusing and a touch bizarre (Field, Interview).

poets such as Howard Moss, Ralph Pomeroy and Paul Goodman (Field Interview). A brief affair with O'Hara had shown him first hand the close social set that O'Hara traveled with—the Hamptons and the fashionable art world. Field reports that “you couldn't meet O'Hara without meeting all his friends, including James Schuyler and John Ashbery” (Field, Interview). Taking from O'Hara a certain spontaneity, Field would go on to publish his straightforward and sociably gay works, most notably Stand Up Friend With Me (1963), Variety Photoplays (1967), A Full Heart (1977), and more recently Counting Myself Lucky (1992). In Field we have O'Hara's wit, his sense of popular culture and his blithe confessional tone, as well as Schuyler's sense of the domestic and the quotidian.

Corn also captures the quality of sociability and wit, an attention to popular culture, and yet an elegant sense of aesthetic balance. If he discovers his own brand of O'Hara-like Personism,²² he does so without the weight of performance²³ so much a part of O'Hara's work. Corn also shows a trend toward the autobiographical which reflects a larger direction in twentieth century American literature.²⁴

Gay Cosmopolitanism would need to wait until the sixties to reach its zenith with Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and the Warhol Factory. Warhol, the dandy by dress and manner, affected a high cultural profile. His emphasis on experimentation in many media and his sense of camp aesthetics (soup cans, etc.) influenced gay artists such as Keith

21 Schuyler lived on and off in South Hampton in the house of Fairfield Porter and his wife, Ann. He was a close friend of Porter and the Porter family and moved to the Chelsea Hotel in New York City after Fairfield Porter died (Corn, Interview).

22 Title of a poetic “movement” conceived by O'Hara in an essay of the same title.

23 Here I refer to the incessant need to seduce and entertain heterosexual culture by way of wit or sophistication, so much a characteristic of O'Hara's work as well as that of the pre-Stonewall era.

24 Perhaps the gay poet appears under some pressure to construct a poetic identity out of an historical or aesthetic tradition in order to discover a unified whole or self; to discount the divisiveness of homophobia which has largely caricatured gay life.

Haring, who were his protégés. Gay poet, Rene Ricard (1946-) was greatly influenced by both Warhol and John Wieners. Ricard's short surrealist verse captured the artifacts of urban culture in both found language and imagery, the same artifacts that Warhol was drawn to. Spectre of the late seventies and eighties club scene, attracted to the flamboyant hangers-on of high society, Warhol was "fascinated by contemporary culture in all its banality and blatant consumerism" (Russell 137). Warhol's achievement in the visual arts was "analogous to that of John Cage in music" (Russell 137). Cage, the gay musician, had set a musical revolution in motion. By broadening definitions of art and challenging definitions of "good" and "bad" art, "high" and "low," and by emphasizing the need for constant erotic invention and fantasy, Warhol inspired gay writers to glamorize their own outré and abject worlds of spectacle, outrage and excess and set the stage for the next group of poets we are to speak of.

THE GILDED POETS

"The Gilded Poets" were writers who embraced the heady liberation of the post-Stonewall era and continued the urbanity of earlier gay writers, applying themselves wholeheartedly to the task of describing their newfound life style of discos, drugs, sex and political activism. The term "gilded," comes from Felice Picano's poem, "The Gilded Boys,"²⁵ which epitomizes some of the glowing surface and ebullience of the period. The

25 "The Gilded Boys" came out of Picano's experiences at Flamingo, a famous gay New York disco in the seventies. Flamingo, located at Broadway south of Houston was a huge loft space which acted as both art gallery and disco. Picano gave readings at Flamingo along with other gay poets of the period (Picano, Interview).

Gilded Poets drew on a certain lyric, literary and romantic intensity. They wrote in many media, including regular gay monthlies and newspapers. Picano wrote essays and reviews for a wide variety of gay periodicals. He also wrote screenplays and spent time in the movie industry. Tim Dlugos wrote novels, book reviews and feature articles. The Gilded Poets were political-minded and open about their homosexuality and determined to establish a gay subcultural presence. They started small literary presses and published anthologies which made their gayness their central editorial criterion. In New York, they frequented Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookstore²⁶ and gave readings at the Flamingo disco.

The Gilded Poets exhibited a youthful Byronic vision of sexual liberation and a growing confidence in a gay poetic voice. Many shared in the club-drug scene of New York and San Francisco, the ghetto culture, taking their imagery and style from the popular music of the times, the movie and TV culture, and the glimmering surfaces and fast-track lives they experienced. The Castro, Fire Island, Provincetown, and the West Village were again locales of choice. Styles varied from the straightforward language of Edward Field to the formal simplicity of Thom Gunn with his metered regularity, to the sonnets of Rudy Kikel and the lyrics of Perry Brass. The poetry often looked at the coming-out experience, sex and the rituals of gay cruising. The work of these writers was erotic, tender, funny, mystical, angry and outrageous. It found its way into early liberation newspapers and periodicals.

Brass joined the staff of GLF (Gay Liberation Front) in 1969 (Brass, Interview). He wrote poems for the radical paper and helped to edit its early issues. In 1972 Brass began a group called the "Gay Poets" with Andrew Bifrost, a former New York

²⁶ The first gay bookstore in the world, founded in 1967 (Martinac 15).

stockbroker. They had their first reading at the Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse in Soho. Edward Field joined them for the event. In 1974 Bifrost would begin his influential literary journal Mouth of the Dragon ²⁷ which published about eight issues before folding (Brass, Interview).

The Gilded Poets create a certain lyrical, romantic sheen in their writing, or, as in Gunn, a raw economy of vision. Their homosexuality is “out” in their work and becomes their point of departure, not a gritty background. All of these writers shared somewhat in the hedonistic culture after Stonewall. Mark Ameen, Jack Anderson, Perry Brass, Joseph Cady, Dennis Cooper, Daniel Diamond, Gavin Dillard, Tim Dlugos, Thom Gunn, John Iozia, Maurice Kenny, Rudy Kikel, Sean Lawrence, Paul Mariah, Carl Morse, Robert Peters, Felice Picano, Ralph Pomeroy, Steven Riel, Simon Sheppard, Winthrop Smith, David Trinidad, James White, and Ian Young are some of the poets included among this group. A few like Field, Gunn, Mariah and Pomeroy had been writing since the forties and fifties. These early writers in particular were drawn to the locales and haunts of a masculine erotic subculture. The Gilded Poets came of age at a time in the seventies when lesbians and gay men had been largely polarized into separate communities and cultures, with gay men inhabiting a predominantly masculine world.

All of these writers had experienced, as Gunn writes in his poem “Lament,” “Those normal pleasures of the sun's kingdom/The hedonistic body basks within/And takes for granted--summer on the skin” (Gunn, Collected Poems 465). They were indeed the poets of summer, pleasure, skin and the body. They were also part of a golden age for

²⁷ Brass originally conceived of the journal, calling it “Mouth” (Brass, Interview).

American gay literary publishing. Poetry was everywhere.

Felice Picano founded Seahorse Press in 1977 which he started with his own money (Picano, Interview). Picano would go on to publish poetry books by Gavin Dillard, Dennis Cooper, and his seminal anthology of gay and lesbian writing, A True Likeness (1980).²⁸ Winston Leyland produced his groundbreaking anthologies Angels of the Lyre (1975)²⁹ and Organisms of Light (1977)³⁰ from Gay Sunshine Press. These anthologies defined a generation of post-Stonewall poets as well as built a gay poetic canon from previous times. Leyland also published in 1978 volume one of collected interviews from his newspaper, Gay Sunshine.³¹ These interviews exposed a newer generation of gay poets to the lives and histories of more established gay writers.

28 Considered perhaps the first such anthology of both lesbians and gay men, the anthology included poems by James Schuyler, Joan Larkin, Joe Cady, Chuck Ortleb, Judy Grahn, Walta Borawski, Jon Bracker, Kerrie Harvey, Dan Diamond, Rudy Kikel, Pat Kuras, Bink Noll, Ian Young, Susan Belew, Aaron Shurin, and John Iozia.

29 Angels of the Lyre included poems by Hector Tito Alvarez, William Barber, Bruce Boone, Victor Borsa, Joe Brainard, Perry Brass, Adrian Brooks, Ira Cohen, Kirby Congdon, Ed Cox, Emilio Cubeiro, Tim Dlugos, Robert Duncan, David Eberly, Jim Eggeling, Kenneth Elmslie, R. Daniel Evans, Gerald Fabian, Sal Farinella, Edward Field, Charles Henri Ford, James Giancarlo, Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, Robert Gluck, Paul Goodman, Steve Jonas, E.A. Lacey, Michael Lally, Gerrit Lansing, Winston Leyland, Gerard Malanga, Paul Mariah, Wayne McNeill, Taylor Mead, Tom Meyer, James Mitchell, James Nolan, Harold Norse, Frank O'Hara, Charles Ortleb, Stan Persky, Robert Peters, Ron David Emerson Smith, Jack Spicer, George Stanley, Richard Tagett, Hunce Voelcker, John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, Terence Winch, Ian Young.

30 Organisms of Light included poems by Al-Ghazali, Arab Poets of Al-Andalus, Fernando Alegria, Edgar Allen Austin, Tommy Avicelli, Porfirio Barba-Jacob, William Barber, F.D. Blanton, Victor Borsa, Perry Brass, Stuart Byron, C.P. Cavafy, Louis Cernuda, Ira Cohen, Kirby Congdon, Dennis Cooper, Ed Cox, Emilio Cubeiro, Hamza Ibn Abi Daigham, Gavin Dillard, David Eberly, Jim Eggeling, Larry Eigner, Kenward Elmslie, Sergei Esenin, Sal Farinella, Charles Henri Ford, Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, Robert Gluck, Will Inman, Tom Kennedy, Maurice Kenny, James Kirkup, Nikolai Klyuev, Mikhail Kuzmin, E.A. Lacey, Erskine, Lane, Federico García Lorca, Robin Maugham, Tom Meyer, Royal Murdoch, Harold Norse, Abu Nuwas, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Sandro Penna, Robert Peters, Felice Picano, Robert F. Riordan, Eduard Roditi, Frederick Rolfe, Michael Rumaker, Stanley Rutherford, Raymonde Sainte-Pierre, Ron Schreiber, Sultan Selim I, Charley Shively, Aaron Shurin, David Emerson Smith, Jack Spicer, Mutsuo Takahashi, Gennady Trifonov, Xavier Villaurrutia, John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, Ian Young.

31 Interviewees included William S. Burroughs, Charles Henri Ford, Jean Genet, Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, Lou Harrison, Christopher Isherwood, Harold Norse, Peter Orlovsky, John Rechy, Gore Vidal, Tennessee Williams.

In 1973, the Canadian, Ian Young, who frequently visited New York (he would later live in New York from 1975 to 1980) published his important anthology The Male Muse: A Gay Anthology³² to be followed in 1983 by The Son of the Male Muse.³³ Young had already started the Catalyst Press which in the early seventies had published several of his own books. Young directed Bifrost toward many of the important poets who were published in Mouth of the Dragon (Young, Interview).

Carl Morse, who came to New York in the late sixties and worked for a short time at the Museum of Modern Art began his Open Lines gay and lesbian reading series in 1981. Morse conceived of the idea of co-editing with Joan Larkin a lesbian and gay anthology of poetry. The result was Gay & Lesbian Poetry in Our Time: An Anthology (1988).

The advent of Charles Ortleb's Christopher Street in 1976 (with the assistance of Michael Denny, Bertha Harris and Blanche Boyd) with its high literary style and intellectualism was another important publication milestone for this period.

32 Poet/contributors included Robert Adamson, William Barber, Oswald Blakeston, Perry Brass, Jim Chapson, Kirby Congdon, Robert Duncan, Jim Eggeling, Sal Farinella, Edward Field, John Gill, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Goodman, Walter Griffin, Thom Gunn, Michael Higgins, Brian Hill, Christopher Isherwood, Graham Jackson, Ronald Johnson, James Kirkup, Zdzislaw Kurlowicz, E.A. Lacey, John Lehmann, James Liddy, Paul Mariah, Paul Maurice, James Mitchell, Edward Mycue, Harold Norse, Robert Peters, Ralph Pomeroy, Michael Ratcliffe, Jay Socin, Richard Tagett, Burton Weiss, John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, Tennessee Williams, Ian Young.

33 Poetry contributors consisted of Steve Abbott, Jack Anderson, Antler, Jeffery Beam, Bill Bissett, Walta Borawski, Jon Bracker, Donald Britton, Dennis Cooper, James M. Cory, Walt Curtis, Daniel Diamond, Gavin Dillard, Tim Dlugos, Haviland Ferris, Richard George-Murray, Brad Gooch, Jim Holmes, Shelley Jones, Dennis Kelly, Maurice Kenny, Michael Lally, David MacLean, Wayne McNeill, Thomas Meyer, Duncan Mitchell, Charles Ortleb, Jamie Perry, Felice Picano, Rene Ricard, John Robinson, Richard Ronan, Aaron Shurin, David Emerson Smith, Scott Tucker, Keith Vacha, Jack Veasey, Stanley Ward, James L. White.

* * *

Dennis Cooper and Thom Gunn stand out among the Gilded Poets for their attention to a hypermasculine aesthetic. Their verse is focused on sex, drugs, sado-masochism and a cult of hypermasculinity loaded with anger and libidinous desire. Both poets write from a particular nihilistic stance. Some of this tone is captured in Cooper's poem, "The Blank Generation." The terse hypermasculine worlds of Gunn and Cooper are dark and fascinating, evoking the perspective of the homosexual outlaw, suggestive of John Rechy and Jean Genet. Indeed Cooper would go on to write in the early nineties fiction of a troubled, violent and sexually-aggressive nature.³⁴ Cooper and Gunn place themselves at various times in the context of the homosexual rebel, the "enfant terrible." Within this group, we can also see such Gay Beat poets as Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky (and the "Fag Rag" poet, Charles Shively, whom I will discuss next). These poets took their "criminality" in the mind of society and their "carnality" very seriously, embracing pleasure so that their work seems to proclaim itself and discredit the middle-class values that censored it.

THE FAG RAG POETS: BAD BOYS AND BARBARIANS

Charles Shively's Fag Rag magazine in Boston and the rural gay periodical RFD, both published during the seventies and eighties, consistently included poetry that exhibited a rebellious, Dionysian aspect of modern gay sensibility. In RFD in particular, a style of pastoral work returned which saw in rustic charms and magical naturalism a

vehicle for the praise of simple erotic pleasures, a new gay-friendly morality, and liberationist protest. A Greek emphasis on pederasty and the Victorian proclivity toward the love of lads have continued with these writers, who share these interests with such radical gay political groups as N.A.M.B.L.A. (The North American Man-Boy Love Association) and the Radical Fairies.

These "Poets of the Pagan" or "The Fag Rag Poets" were self-styled barbarians and bad boys of the late sixties, seventies and eighties. Many lived in small towns and counties across America, but they also were centered in the underground gay publishing world of Boston. This faction of the group Rudy Kikel has called the "Boston School," as some of these poets were associated with the Boston Gay Review and Gay Community News as well as Fag Rag. Born of a heady liberationism, these writers celebrated the erotic, the radical, the defiant and the pastoral. They extended the rebelliousness of the Gay Beat writers with Ginsberg and Orlovsky's radical faggotry, and the bold drag "gender fuck" aesthetic of such West Coast theater groups as "The Cockettes" (1970), and the "Angels of Light" (1975), whose Dada musicals were audacious and imaginative (Creekmur and Doty 453).³⁵ They also reflected the anti-performance style of Jack Smith, the gay guru of experimental film and theater. These writers appropriated that which had been relegated to the pornographic, the criminal, the pagan and the outlawed. Magicians,

34 Cooper's novel, Closer (1990), looks at connections between self-destruction, death and desire (Andreadis 567-568). Cooper's Frisk (1991) is an S/M novel exploring the boundaries of fantasy, reality, ecstasy and horror (Nashak 624).

35 Allen Ginsberg in recalling "The Cockettes" described their productions as "transvestite-glitter-fairie-theatric masques" (Creekmur and Doty 452). "Angels of Light" produced a dada musical in 1975 called "Paris Sights under the Bourgeois Sea" which stressed opposition to the ruling class (Creekmur and Doty 453).

fairies, “cocksuckers,” “faggots,” and “queens” of all persuasions became the mythical beasts of this gay verse.

Michael Bronski underscores how “homosexual activity and passion directly challenges the heterosexual demand that all sexuality be reproductive” (10). Gay culture and a gay sensibility rest upon this threat to the existing power structure (Bronski 10). The Fag Rag poets definitely positioned themselves as a threat to the status quo. Their style of raw verse, evocative of Verlaine and Rimbaud's celebration of the male sexual anatomy and Genet's fascination with the demi-monde and the criminal, proclaimed a new sexual freedom. Less taxed by form, often uneven in language, this verse could be highly-charged and provocative, or spiritual, pastoral and tantric. These “pagan poets” captured the carnal as well as the more spiritual leanings toward a freedom and liberation for the male body and a return to nature. Ginsberg, Orlovsky and John Giorno, coming out of the Beat movement, were already poets of a brash new “faggotry.” James Broughton is one poet of the West Coast who follows in their footsteps, representing a holistic view of male sexuality and returning like Whitman to a sense of masculinity as essential and pure, a mythic and spiritual elemental force. Franklin Abbott, Steve Abbott, Antler, Tomi Avicelli, Walta Borawski, James Broughton, Jimmy Camicia, Kirby Congdon, Louie Crew, Jim Egging, Jim Everhard, Walter Griffin, Will Inman, Gabriel Lampert, Edmund Miller, Larry Mitchell, Carl Morse, Chuck Ortleb, Crazy Owl, Steve Pallagi, David Pini, Kenneth Pitchford, Jim Regan, Ron Schreiber, Charles Shively, Aaron Shurin, Randy Smallwood, David Sunseri, Bill Taorimino, and Roger Weaver all wrote at various times from this perspective.

Gavin Dillard in his extended cycle of poems from Pagan Love Songs (1987) and The Naked Poet (1989) established himself in the vernacular of a gay folk balladeer. His works are evocative of the folk lyrics of Leonard Cohen and Lou Reed. There is an innocence and raw honesty to his work as in Schuyler, an attention to the quotidian. Dillard also shares with Dennis Cooper of the “Gilded Poets” a brash, younger style, an erotic truthfulness and immediacy with an ability to find a fresh and original tone of voice. This spontaneity is reminiscent of the Gay Beat writers.

Many of the characteristics we have spoken of in the above taxonomy of post-World War II gay poetic “movements” and “scenes” are to be found throughout gay poetry. Four of the writers mentioned here--Walta Borawski, Gavin Dillard, Carl Morse, and Chuck Ortleb—can also be associated with the work of the “Gilded Poets”; indeed, their poems appeared in Christopher Street as well as other major gay literary magazines of the seventies and eighties. A poet such as Michael Lassell also expresses in his work some of the aesthetics of this group, but he is connected most strongly to AIDS writing and more recent queer poetry.

IN THE LIFE: THE EXTENDED HARLEM RENAISSANCE:

GAY “NEGRITUDE”

It is interesting to note that RFD was one of the earliest gay periodicals to showcase poetry by gay black poets such as Assotto Saint and Essex Hemphill, whose poetry did not appear in such mainstream publications as Christopher Street and Gay

Sunshine. Melvin Dixon, Roy Gonsalves, Craig G. Harris, Essex Hemphill, Redvers Jeanmarie, Brad Johnson, Cary Alan Johnson, Steve Langley, Alden Reimonenq, Craig A. Reynolds, Colin Robinson, Phillip Robinson, Assotto Saint (a.k.a. Yves Lubin), Adrian Stanford, and Donald W. Woods were black poets who were strongly caught up in the identity politics of the American eighties (Stanford, however, was at work as early as the sixties). This first wave of out gay black poets was centered primarily in New York City, although Hemphill and Reynolds lived in Philadelphia and Washington respectively, and Robinson in Boston. These writers tried to explore their specific racial and sexual identities within the world of affluent white gay culture where they were largely invisible. They wished to re-define for themselves their own separate cultural heritage, much as the Harlem Renaissance artists had attempted.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s had opened the door toward a discussion of race, gender and class. Blackness, gayness and lesbianism had intermixed in the Renaissance years. Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Wallace Thurman all were gay. The close-knit associations and enthusiasm for building a literary presence and a publishing network, as well as establishing a separate collective identity, which thrived during the Renaissance, became a model for the gay black writing collectives and small presses of the eighties. Similar to the Renaissance writers, many of the gay black poets of the eighties were self-published and attempted to revitalize the tradition of such collective Renaissance literary magazines as Fire! (Reimonenq 360). Fire! had published Bruce Nugent's openly homosexual short story, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (Reimonenq 360). Also, in Paris in the twenties and thirties, the

poetry of the straight French African poet, Aimé Césaire, who wrote in a surrealist style, was of interest for its anti-colonial revolutionary messages and its borrowing from traditional African chants, ancestral myths, magic and ancient rites (Preminger 557).³⁶ Looking back to the work of Hughes and Cullen, Thurman, Locke, and Césaire, the gay black poets of the eighties and early nineties shared in the legacy of jazz and blues forms as well as a vivid imagistic diversity and lyricism which drew from the drama and rhetorical power of black literature, political writing and the slave narratives. They explored the uses of ritual, theater, music and performance to heighten their work. They were interested in the new black gay urban culture of disco, house music and voguing.

The publications of such gay black anthologies as Michael J. Smith's Black Men/White Men (1983), Joseph Beam's In the Life: A Gay Black Anthology (1986), Tongues Untied (Aab-Richards, et al. 1987), Other Countries Journal (Other Countries Writers Collective 1988), Essex Hemphill's and Joseph Beam's Brother to Brother (1991), and Assotto Saint's three anthologies, The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets (1991), Here to Dare (1992),³⁷ and Milking Black Bull (1995),³⁸ were highpoints for this eighties renaissance in gay black literature. Indeed they can be compared to the important creative impact Jean Toomer's Cane had on the Harlem Renaissance. By mixing prose and poetry, editors such as Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint, portrayed the

36 Césaire was born in Martinique in 1913 and spent most of his life in Paris. Césaire exhibited a knowledge of the French language almost unsurpassed by French poets (Preminger 557).

37 Contributing poets: Arthur T. Wilson, John D. Williams, Robert Wesley, Harold McNeil Robinson, Craig A. Reynolds, Steve Langley, Cary Alan Johnson, David Warren Frechette, Don Charles, Djola Bernard Branner.

38 Contributing poets: Alden Reimonenq, Robert E. Penn, Jr., Jim Murrell, Bob McNeil, Brad Johnson, Redvers JeanMarie, G. Winston James, Umar Hasan, Thomas Grimes, Thomas Glave, Thom Bean.

broadest possible spectrum of gay African-American, Caribbean-American life. In reprinting Richard Bruce Nugent's short story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (in Smith's anthology), or making allusions to the novels of Wallace Thurman (Thurman's The Infants of Spring [1932] featured a gay character), Hemphill, Saint, Melvin Dixon and others were further underscoring their link to the Harlem Renaissance period.

Gay black writers of the eighties and early nineties took up a theme identified by both Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Countee Cullen in the pre-World War II years-- namely, is a poet first a poet, or first a black (Harper and Walton 1)? Michael S. Harper tells us that this is "an underlying, if often unspoken, theme of African-American poetry since 1945" (Harper and Walton 1). However, gay poets who were black began to ask if they were first gay and secondarily black³⁹ or vice versa.⁴⁰

The Black Arts Movement of the late sixties and seventies (which included black writers such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and Haki Madhubuti) also provided gay black poets with a radical political and cultural model for empowerment and self-expression. The Black Arts Movement poets had grown disenchanted with the reality of American culture and society and the possibility of any kind of "meaningful assimilation by blacks" (Harper and Walton 2). Instead they turned "exclusively to the black community

39 Assotto Saint in the introduction for The Road Before Us writes: "Afrocentrists in our community have chosen the term black gay to identify themselves. As they insist, black comes first. Interracialists in our community have chosen the term gay black to identify themselves. As they insist, gay comes first. Both groups' self-descriptions are ironically erroneous. It's not which word comes first that matters, but rather the grammatical context in which those words are used—either as an adjective or as a noun. An adjective is a modifier of a noun. The former is dependent upon the latter" (xix).

40 Joseph Beam in his introduction to In the Life in 1986 writes, after giving a litany of various gay popular weeklies and magazines says: "Finally, it is certainly possible to read an entire year of Christopher Street and think that there are no Black gay writers worthy of the incestuous bed of New York's gay literati. We ain't family. Very clearly, gay male means: white, middle-class, youthful,

for inspiration and sustenance, and took on roles as teachers and exhorters, often articulating the rage of the black masses with frightening accuracy” (Harper and Walton 2). In a similar fashion gay black poets had grown disenchanted with white gay culture and strove to find inspiration and sustenance for their own unassimilated voices. Gay black poets similarly grew enraged over their own alienation and invisibility within white gay culture and its mirroring of racist tendencies in American culture at large.⁴¹ Articulating their rage over issues such as white gay stereotyping of gay black men, their use as sex toys and their own invisibility, writers of this generation turned to a variety of gay black political voices including Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, James Baldwin and Samuel Delany.

Just as O’Hara proved a key figure in gay cosmopolitanism, Adrian Stanford was an important poet in the movement toward gay black identity politics. Stanford connected the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement poets to the gay black literary movement of the American eighties and nineties. In the sixties Stanford was already exploring an alternative gay experience, a sensibility born of African-American myth and style, of blues and jazz, of drag queens and street hustlers. Trying to find a separate voice for a gay black man, his lyrical poems evoked the solitary territories that Langston Hughes had already discovered. His frustration and rage of language linked him to the work of Sanchez and Baraka as he explored the urban landscape.

nautilized, and probably butch; there is no room for Black gay men within the confines of this gay pentagon” (Beam 15).

41 Joe Beam writes: “There are many reasons for such Black gay invisibility. Hard words come to mind: power, racism, conspiracy, oppression, and privilege—each deserving of a full-fledged discussion in gay history books yet unwritten. But that is not my point here; I’ll leave the discussion of ‘isms’ to rhetoricians and historians... We have yet to become a market of conspicuous consumers, to which everything from beer to Maseratis is pitched, as is the case for white gay men” (15).

Stanford was a native of Philadelphia and was shot and killed in 1981. His collected poems Black & Queer appeared in 1977 from Good Gay Poets, Boston. Even before the time of this book he had published poems individually in ONE magazine. Black & Queer is considered to be the first collection of homoerotic poetry published by a black gay man.

An early poem such as Stanford's "Sacrifice" from ONE, printed in the sixties, shows his great talent at creating poetic imagery and weaving a powerful mythic language around African-American experience. "Remembrance of Rittenhouse Square" which first appeared in ONE in 1965 (and later in Essex Hemphill's 1991 Brother to Brother anthology), is a seminal poem for its invocation of the black drag queen as deity and its revival of the "blues" poem in a new gay context. Stanford's richly imaginative language in this poem became an important influence on later gay black poets.

These later gay poets of the eighties had a sensitivity to myth and the power which verse and language held in their communities. A powerful connection to the myths of an African tradition were manifested in poems which drew from the Yoruban legend of the adodi, homosexual shamans and healers who empowered their communities. Like the Native American berdache, the adodi held special powers by virtue of their transgendered knowledge. Gay black poets also shared with black women writers an interest in the exploration of race, class and gender and the new reconceptualization of community, sisterhood and brotherhood. As a vernacular of the gay black experience in the eighties broadened to include Caribbean, Atlantic Rim cultures as well as a gay black internationalism, a celebration of such varied identities contributed to a rich renaissance in

poetry. An array of forms were explored, and the metaphors and imagery employed were often surprising. This work celebrated and elevated gay black slang in both traditional and non-traditional verse forms. Haiku and tanka, blues poems, and rap were all appropriated.

Assotto Saint (1957-) was part of the Blackheart writers collective which began in New York City in the summer of 1981 (Saint, Interview). Blackheart was started by Isaac Jackson and was dedicated to supporting the work of black gay writers. It put out four issues of a literary journal which went by its same title. When Blackheart disbanded, Daniel Garrett founded Other Countries writers' collective at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in New York in 1986. Garrett introduced fellow members to the works of Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Pat Parker, Barbara Smith, Samuel Delany, the surrealist poets and others (Saint, Interview). Other Countries writers sought to develop a language of metaphors that was targeted specifically at the black gay community, that dealt with issues of community, religiosity, and inter-racial conflict (Saint, Interview).

Like others of his generation, Saint was interested in performance and theater. Other Countries organized numerous readings and Saint, who was also a playwright, developed performance pieces which were staged at various clubs around Manhattan—8BC, Limbo Lounge, and Pyramid (Saint, Interview). Assuming a drag persona at many of his readings, Saint embraced the ferocity and strength of the black drag queens he so admired,⁴² an admiration he shared with Stanford, Hemphill and others.

42 At an early age Yves Lubin was interested in women's clothing and playing at wedding games where he was always the bride (Interview). In New York as an adult, Lubin admired how drag queens would stand their ground reflecting a fierce street-smart air of dignity. He saw such a role as empowering. As his writing career developed he created a persona called "Assotto Saint" that could do things that Lubin would not do and that would draw attention to his message (Interview).

Many of the gay black poets of Dixon, Hemphill and Saint's generation found their start in the wave of gay, black periodicals which flourished in the eighties, periodicals which modeled their success on works from the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement, and black lesbian presses such as Kitchen Table Press. These periodicals were B & G (1990), Black and White Men Together (1972), Blackheart: A Journal of Writing and Graphics by Black Gay Men (1982-1985), Blacklight (1979-1985), Black/Out (1986), BLK (1988), Brother to Brother (1982), Drum (1987), Gay Men of African Descent Newsletter (1987), Habari-Daftari (1983-1984), Men of All Colors Together (1985), Moja: Black and Gay (?), Other Countries: Black Gay Voices (1988), Rafiki (1976), The Pyramid Periodical (1987), The Pyramid Poetry Periodical (1986-1987), and The Real Read (1989).

The second wave of gay writers-of-color were poets whose careers were shaped and influenced by the earlier pioneering works of Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker and Assotto Saint. They took as their mandate the task of further delineating their varied cultural experiences as gay African- and Caribbean-Americans. This second wave of gay black poets continued the exploration of what it means to be gay, black and gifted in America.

Primarily confined to the late eighties and early nineties, this movement announced itself with Saint's previously mentioned seminal anthologies, The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets (1991) and Milking Black Bull (1995). The poets of this group included Thom Bean, Carl Cook, Rodney Dildy, Thomas Glave, Roy Gonsalves, Thomas Grimes, Umar Hasan, B. Michael Hunter, G. Winston James, Bob McNeil, Reginald

Patterson, Robert E. Penn, and Allen Wright. Many of these writers remain committed to the identity politics of the eighties, which rooted identity in a shared racial heritage and cultural expression.

IN MEMORIAM: THE GAY ELEGY AND AIDS

In the eighties the elegy was reinvestigated from the perspective of AIDS. The advent of Michael Klein's 1989 anthology Poets for Life, Rachel Hadas's 1991 Unending Dialogue, the start of the magazine Art & Understanding by David Wagonner in that same year, and the anthologies Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS (Other Countries Writers Collective 1993) and Jugular Defences (Humphries 1994), solidified and defined this genre of work. Love Alone (1988) by Paul Monette became exemplary of a new attention to the elevated artistry of the elegy form. By his wonderful compression of anger, memory, rage, admiration and sorrow into a language wholly contemporary and American, Monette established AIDS elegiac verse as a distinct genre.

David Bergman's The Care and Treatment of Pain (1994), Walta Borawski's Lingering in a Silk Shirt (1994), William Bory's Orpheus in His Underwear (1993), Robert Boucheron's Epitaph for the Plague Dead (1985), Rafael Campo's What the Body Told (1996), Kenny Fries's The Healing Notebooks (1990), Walter Holland's A Journal of the Plague Years (1992), Michael Lassell's Decade Dance (1990), Michael Lynch's These Waves of Dying Friends (1989), Ron Schreiber's False Clues (1977) and John (1989), and Assotto Saint's Wishing for Wings (1995), have all helped establish the gay AIDS elegy as an important contemporary form. David Craig Austin, Raul Martinez-Avila, Charles

Barber, Glenn Besco, William Bory, Cyrus Cassells, Dan Conner, Mark Doty, Tony J. Giordano, Roy Gonsalves, Brad Gooch, Michael Klein, Michael Lassell, Richard McCann, Gustavo Motta, Michael Pelonero, and James Turcotte, as well as many of the poets from previous generations, have written AIDS poetry.⁴³

In the eighties and nineties, elegies reminiscent of Tennyson and the prose poems of Cavafy have gained acceptance. These poems have dealt with AIDS, loss and memory, and are notable for their decorum and control, their lyrical beauty and evocative expression of loss. Established poets such as James Merrill and J.D. McClatchy often chose elegant refined surfaces for their elegiac works where the lyrical excess seemed to emphasize a certain emptiness underneath and a poignant sense of absence. Other poets like Mark Doty and Alfred Corn have sought to describe the cultural and historical landscape of AIDS grief, sometimes finding symbolic and metaphorical imagery in their day-to-day lives and in nature. Another common form of elegy has been defiant and tightly-restricted in ever-confined metrical units. This work is informed by the angry, rhetorical language of ACT-UP. Melvin Dixon, Roy Gonsalves and Assotto Saint were the most accomplished practitioners of these short lyric forms.

THE POETICS OF QUEER: THE MULTICULTURAL AND CROSS-GENDERED NINETIES : FAMILY, LOVE POEMS, PETS AND ECLECTICISM

Queer has been a word to denote homosexuality since the turn of the century, but

⁴³ The works of Martinez-Avila, Barber, Besco, Conner, Giordano, Motta, Pelonero, and Turcotte are all included in Hadas' anthology Unending Dialogue (1991).

queer took on a newer, more political and theoretical meaning in the early eighties, a meaning which encompassed a growing sensibility.⁴⁴ Activist groups such as “ACT-UP” and “Queer Nation” used queer as a more inclusive and radically subversive term to reflect their gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered membership as well as their commitment to subverting the dominant power structures of American culture and society.⁴⁵ The queer sensibility was essentially shaped by poststructuralist and postmodern theories which started in France in the late 1960s and took hold in the American academy as well as with gay theorists and activists in the eighties.⁴⁶

44 Martinac in The Gay Almanac tells us that queer as a derogatory term for homosexual has been around since the early twentieth century; in the 1980s it was appropriated as the term “blurs both gender and sexual orientation and is regarded as more inclusive” (94).

45 Founded in 1990, Queer Nation used the rallying cry: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!” (Martinac 28). They are described as “a multicultural, direct action group dedicated to fighting homophobia, queer invisibility, and all forms of oppression” (Martinac 125). ACT-UP stands for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Begun in 1987 by Larry Kramer and others, it was a direct action group whose purpose was to draw public and government attention to the need for AIDS funding and research (Martinac 26-27).

46 Raman Selden in A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory gives an excellent summation of the history of postmodernism (which he sees as a current in art and literature as well as culture) and its roots in the poststructuralist movement of the 1960’s in France. Poststructuralist thought discovered the essentially *unstable* nature of signification, which was a fixed tenet of the Structuralist system which divided language into units of signifier/signified (71). In Selden’s view the poststructuralist thinkers and critics gave rise to a postmodernist *weltanschauung* which includes themes such as the questioning of all ‘depth models,’ the decentering of the world and the self, the rejection of elitist aesthetics and experimental formalisms, the disruption of all discursive boundaries, the obliteration of the frontiers between high and low culture and between art and commodity, and the resistance to meaning and interpretation (73-74). He describes Fredric Jameson’s belief that late capitalist society and culture has effaced the frontier (strongly defended by modernist art) between high and mass culture and works as pastiche of a stereotypical past; thus postmodernism can no longer represent a real past but our ideas and stereotypes of the past (73). He reviews Terry Eagleton’s continued pursuit of postmodern convergences of art and commodity in late capitalism and the concept of ‘commodity fetishism’ (73). Selden then summarizes the work of various Post-Structuralist thinkers: “langue,” “subject,” “parole” in Structuralism; the “speaking subject” of Post-Structuralism; Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Michel Foucault’s work at mapping discursive formations and Louis Althusser’s work on discourse and ideology; Roland Barthes’ “plural text” and the “process of signification” as well as his seminal 1968 “The Death of the Author” and “S/Z” (1970); Julia Kristeva on “language and revolution;” Jacques Lacan on “language and the unconscious;” Jacques Derrida on “deconstruction;” Michele Foucault and Edward Said on “discourse and power”; and the advent in the 1980s of the New Historicism which tries to establish the

Poststructuralism and postmodernism basically drew closer attention and scrutiny to language and epistemology, first from a Marxist point of view and then more broadly from a cultural studies perspective. Both forms of critique looked at issues of authenticity, logos and identity. Poststructuralism and postmodernism, essentially in the work of Michel Foucault, became a liberationist tool for the gay and lesbian movement which was seeking a way to contextualize itself in the fixed, rigid homophobic world of the American eighties. The deployment of sexuality by society and government, and the history of deviancy and perversion were described in Foucault's seminal 1978 book The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction.⁴⁷ Those who were members of Foucault's "polymorphous perverse" needed to be heard.⁴⁸ Suddenly in the eighties, homosexuality was speaking and demanding its own legitimacy, seeking ways to subvert the nineteenth century discourse on perversity that had once controlled it (Dollimore 225).

The decentering notions of poststructuralist theory began to draw attention to the marginal, the liminal and the "Other" in society (Andreadis 566). This attention placed newer emphasis on gay and lesbian identity and its marginalized status. Queer theory was essentially an outgrowth of gay and lesbian studies, born out of a need to be more inclusive of all gender deviancies and to reconfigure ideas of the "Other" in a dominant heterosexual world (Andreadis 566). Postmodernist thought shaped queer theory in many ways:

interconnections between the literature and the general culture of a period and sees "history" as a discontinuous and contradictory process (74-110).

47 Foucault gives a history of the ways society has deployed sexuality for various ulterior motives (Foucault, History of Sexuality 77-131)

48 Dollimore discusses the post-war sexual politic which sought to desubliminate the polymorphous perverse (Dollimore 205-218).

(1) in distinguishing between sex and sexuality; (2) in describing the tension between social construction (that is, culturally produced meaning) and essentialism (that is, biological determinism) as they apply to sex and gender; (3) in bringing to consciousness in the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered communities crucial issues concerning identity and identity politics; and (4) in exploring, in both life and the arts, modes of gender-bending and gender-performativity, understandings of gender that grow out of postmodern self-reflexivity (Andreadis 566).

If poststructuralist and postmodern theory had brought a new skepticism to the uses of language and ideology, queer theory brought a questioning of the ways in which a dominant homophobic society had controlled mainstream discourse, policed and shaped its literature, and enforced the idea of a closeted, marginalized homosexual "Other."⁴⁹ Queer theory found its home in the academy of the eighties where feminist studies and cultural studies were starting to make inroads. Queer theory owed its debt to women's studies and feminist theory which began a dialogue about power and language, gender and sex.

In the academy, queer theory became a tool for inquiry into finer nuances of interpretation and explication of a wide range of cultural and literary texts. The workings of the closet in western literature were of particular interest to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who, in her important 1990 Epistemology of the Closet, launched a whole new field of literary scholarship.⁵⁰ Michael Moon introduces her critique as follows:

The strategic separation of mutually implied
knowledges--secret knowledge, superior insight,
disavowal, science, coded knowledge, open secrets,

49 Especially in the work of Michel Foucault and in an indirect non-queer context with the work of Edward Said, who looked at issues of ethnicity, colonialism and minority oppression in a dominant culture.

50 The Gay Almanac, edited by Paula Martinac, defines the "closet" as "the confining state of being secretive about one's homosexuality" and refers to George Chauncey's comments that the word "closet" is not found in gay or lesbian literature before the 1960s (84).

amnesia, the unsayable--is a medium of domination
not reducible to other forms of domination, and
one that finds its paradigmatic case in the
homosexual and the closet. (Warner xiv)

Queer is a less stable idea of identity than gay; queer nonetheless retains its radical nature by presently challenging age-old assumptions about gender, homophobia, culture, the family, patriarchy and eroticism. Queer re-invents and subverts older social forms and taboos, and distorts the lines of assimilation and isolationism.

Queer culture has seen the growth of social institutions, such as the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in New York or Gay Men's Health Crisis, which act as umbrella organizations for a whole range of diverse sexual and social "minorities," from the transgendered to the bisexual, from drug abusers to the physically challenged.

A postmodernist critique provided a tool for queer poets to turn a discerning eye upon the dominant heterosexual society as well as themselves. Armed with Foucault's directive of how the sexual is political and postmodernism's self-reflexivity, queer poets created their own "movement" and "scene."

Queer poets in the late eighties and early nineties in New York, LA and Boston began to explore increasingly more rarefied boundaries of the "perverse" from S/M, incest, and rape to transgendered identities. The exploration in gay and lesbian poetry and fiction anthologies of more and more unique permutations of coming out and the search for more and more novel thematic contextualizations of the gay, lesbian, bi or transgendered experience essentially played out Foucault's own musing that

we need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in
a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no
longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the

power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow. (History of Sexuality 159)

Queer poets in the nineties were influenced not only by the theoretical and political rhetoric of the times, but by trends toward language poetry, performance poetry, multiculturalism, the New Formalism and the explosion in writing workshops on academic campuses. The poetic of African-American and Caribbean-American gay men blended with newer postmodernist literature of the new historicism, black feminism, and postcolonial studies. Filmmakers such as Isaac Julien presented new and arresting postmodern visions of the African-American and Caribbean-American experience.

Queer poets continued to explore the fetishization of high and low popular culture in America and the obsessiveness of the American media. Some of this exploration continued a critique of underlying themes of gender construction and gender performance, as well as contrasting views of the American experience: be it the perspective of a seropositive gay “minority” or an ever affluent vision of gay consumerism.

Queer theory has lent queer poets critical tools to understand gay poetic texts. By “radical readings” (a term drawn from Alan Sinfield’s book of essays Cultural Politics -- Queer Reading) we may recover from a text layerings of homophobia or sublimated gay meanings. We will explore this later in the context of Yingling’s radical reading of Hart Crane and Sinfield’s reading of Tennyson.

A queer sensibility, in questioning the construct of a gay culture, has inevitably questioned a heterosexual one as well. Straight culture has begun re-investigating itself,

questioning, aping, and camping its own forms. This self-parody is now widely disseminated throughout American popular culture from jejeune t.v. comedy to the high-drama of cinema. A queer sensibility is radically performative and confrontative in making the tensions, conflicts and aporia of identity-formation more apparent.

The queer poets who have arrived in the nineties after the death of so many of their predecessors represent a wider and more eclectic, multicultural, erotic and political perspective. Many of them bring fine skills honed from poetry workshops at universities across the country, and their workshop approach to nurturing poems has given them a highly-refined sense of language and form, informed by a knowledge of the poetic trends of mainstream American poetry in the eighties and nineties. They also reflect a general change in the artistic climate of the nineties. As David A. Ross, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, has characterized it, art in the nineties reflects “ ‘the Zen slap’ of the AIDS crisis and a consequent obsession with the body” (Madoff 1). Artists in the nineties have been “driven to introspection,” replacing “the frontal force of Neo-Expressionism with images and scenes full of obscure, unexpected juxtapositions and emotionally charged references to the body” (Madoff 1). Robert Storr, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, characterizes nineties art as “made by artists who aren’t selling shares in their identities, like a lot of artists in the 80s. It’s an art that traffics in the fantasies and the psychological; it’s a kind of home-grown surrealism” (Madoff 45). We can extend this trend in the visual arts to the literature of the nineties.

Queer poets have been influenced by the growth of performance poetry (most notably at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City) and from the Boston and West

Coast area slam culture. "Slam" is a highly performative style of poetry which stresses rhetorical skill. Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe (Algarin and Holman 1994) is a seminal anthology which presents members of this poetic school. Like the poetry of the Beats several decades earlier, "slam" emphasizes the incantatory strength of verse—its breath, sound and spontaneity. Self-reflexive, performative, ironic, a generation of queer performance poets is being heard: Regie Cabico, Justin Chin, Craig Hickman and Cy K. Jones are representative among these.

Queer poets in the nineties have had the benefit of many fine gay and lesbian anthologies of literature, and have experienced the mass marketing of gay and lesbian titles by the publishing industry. "Niche" publishing of gay and lesbian works has reached an all-time high in the early nineties. With the establishment of university series dealing exclusively with gay and lesbian studies, these writers have also enjoyed works of a highly scholarly and theoretical nature.

If we discuss for a moment some of the broader trends in contemporary American poetry of the last decade, we can position gay poetry and queer poetry in relation to these developments. One of these trends has been "language poetry." Here I use this term to denote a poetry which foregrounds language, often eclipsing the narrative, and which is concerned less with logic and reductive patterns of thinking than with the indeterminate and unstable processes of human language. "Language poetry" came from the West Coast and gained ground in the East with the works of Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Jackson Mac Low, Douglas Messerli, Michael Palmer, Marjorie Welish, and John Yau. While not a gay phenomenon, "language poetry" has left its mark on many gay and queer writers.

From the early experimentation of Gertrude Stein to the surrealist writings of O'Hara and Wieners, lesbians and gay men have been interested in the indeterminacy and play of language and how this circumvents rigid, even patriarchal displays of gender and moralism. Ashbery has created a highly lyrical yet dense and ambiguous language that seems to chart the flux and seasonal shifts of emotions and identity. Ashbery's odd, sometimes humorous inversions of language are not too far from Oscar Wilde's paradoxes of a previous century; both have achieved in camp fashion an inversion of decorous thought and mannered conventions. Both challenge the conventional world of appearances through the art of dissemblance.

Another trend in mainstream poetry has been an increasing personalization of verse, achieving a new standard of realism and autobiography. Beginning with Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop and continuing with poets such as Phillip Levine and James Wright, this poetry presents a deeply self-reflexive vision. The aestheticism of a previous century, experimentation with form and artificiality, the desire for an avant-garde "newness," the psychological distress and "neurosis" of work such as Plath's and Sexton's have collapsed into a muted and somber American realism. This realism shows a meditative precision which challenges the generic borders between prose and poetry.

This newer realism, paralleling trends in fiction, revitalizes a pluralistic attitude, retreating from broad narrative and epic vistas, toward many small individual and limited centers, which explore personal experience as a way to know part of life and thereby act as a "microcosm of all human problems" (John Ashbery, quoted in Charles Simic's introduction to Best American Poetry 1992, xvi). Less bombastic, theatrical or

confessional than Lowell or Plath, less hampered by their Jungian or Freudian baggage of symbolism and imagery, this latter-day American verse springs from the quiet spoken word and a detached analysis of the world. This verse style shows a clean and skillful investigation of line, does not make bold or flashy gestures, or swift maneuvers. As previously discussed in regard to nineties visual arts, it is a style which has traded the Neo-Expressionism and bold identity works of eighties gay literature for emotionally charged references to the body, unexpected juxtapositions and a quieter introspection.

Such poetry writes a darker vision of American experience. It grapples with measured reason and eloquence with issues of the environment, twelve-step self-help programs, childhood sexual abuse, mothers and daughter, fathers and sons, alcoholism, gardening, domestic life, sexual compulsions and obsessions and a myriad of everyday experiences. It returns to the bucolic and the meditative, and revels in the close narrative. Hayden Carruth, Alfred Corn, Mark Doty, Robert Hass, Lynda Hull, Stanley Kunitz, Phillip Levine, Carol Muske, Mary Oliver, Molly Peacock, Gerald Stern, and David Wojahn are some members of this mainstream group. Many of these poets have been featured in such poetry reviews as The Paris Review, The Iowa Review, Ploughshares, APR, and their works tend to reflect the style and values of the “academic” small press and mainstream movement. Gay poets such as Rafael Campo, Alfred Corn, Mark Doty and Michael Klein can be seen in this context.

Another trend in contemporary American poetry has been the continuing re-appraisal of the American experience from a multi-cultural perspective. This has continued a tendency toward identity politics, but one more complicated than before. It was

inevitable that early feminist writings, the civil rights and the lesbian and gay movements, would begin an era of reappraisal of “identity” and ethnic origin. This reappraisal of citizenship and identity began with older issues of race and national origin. Poets claiming identities based on race and origin alone found that such claims were often complicated by the competing and sometimes contradictory experience of gender and sexuality. Such inquiry has produced a whole generation of poets who write to assimilate old heritages and mythic ties into new American lives. Many of these poets have appeared in the anthologies Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry (Gillan and Gillan 1994) and Walk on the Wild Side: Urban American Poetry Since 1975 (Christopher, 1994). Gay poets such as Justin Chin and Timothy Liu can be seen in this context.

Queer poets are a generation raised from adolescence by the gay community, and they have experienced first-hand the devastation of AIDS. They have read gay literature, attended mass marches, games and celebrations, enjoyed the gay community's growing visibility. Many have led openly gay lives from early ages. They now share in the transitional culture from gay to queer and perhaps to an entirely new position. If gay was a libertarian, aggressive spirit and rebellion born of the sexual revolution and a cult of masculinity, as well as a defining need to retrieve a culture and history from a closeted and oppressive past, queer is a broader, less stable entity, one that questions the categories of race and gender and sex, distrusts discourse, revels in aporia, and looks for diverse expressions of community. Queer writing is performative and makes manifest racial stereotypes, gender perspectives, role-playing and shifting biases. It also rethinks old

taboos against the body, sex, fetishism, passion, role-playing, sadism, and homosexuality, trying to push the limits of what is thought permissible or acceptable. In this regard it may be seen as similar to the liberationist, bad-boy poetry of the past, but in some ways it crosses over the divide between straight and homosexual toward a more varied look at sexuality. Queer poetry is also playful, whimsical and ironic.

Thirty years post-Stonewall and at the end of the twentieth century, queer writers evidence a new economy of language, a more skilled and confident poetic voice, and a greater variety of subject matter. No longer restrained to the Beat exigency for travel, rebellion, decadence and the democratic; no longer wholly committed to liberationist eroticism and political posturings, nor enamored of the surfaces of a highly refined and mandarin knowledge of cognoscenti culture, nor drawn to the separateness and urgency of the black gay movement, these younger poets cross a diverse spectrum of American life. The desire to speak the male body is still there but now without the extreme self-consciousness, politicization or anxiety that previously weighted such expressions. The sublimated homosexuality of Crane and Auden, the deviant rebellion of Ginsberg, the liberationist anger of Shively and Hemphill are giving way to a more diverse range of poetry.

Earlier topics, such as homoeroticism, homophobia, AIDS and camp culture, continue to be explored but from a broader and more complex vantage point. More traditional aesthetic sensibilities reflective of Auden, Merrill and the academic workshop classroom also persist. Ken Anderson, Jeffery Beam, Rafael Campo, Alfred Corn, Tom Carey, Jeffrey Conway, Steven Cordova, S.K. Duff, Daniel Hall, Craig V. Hickman, Scott

Hightower, Walter Holland, Matthew Howard, Nathan Kernan, Michael Klein, David Laurents, Timothy Liu, John T. Medeiros, Thomas Paul Miller, M.S. Montgomery, Jon Nalley, Peter Pereira, Carl Phillips, George Piggford, William Reichard, Reginald Shepherd, Dan Stone, Jerl Surratt, L.E. Wilson and Gregory Woods are just a few of the writers in this newer movement.

Chapter 2

Constructing a Gay Poetic Identity: "Fellow Feelings"

Gay poets have sought ways to construct an identity in the midst of great isolation and ostracism. They have been drawn to certain precursors by a need to find mentors who could help them express their feelings. As we know, a certain degree of self-censorship has accompanied gay writing. The workings of the "closet" sometimes leaves expressions of homosexuality encoded. The allusion to other "known" gay writers--hidden or veiled as they sometimes may have been--acted as a sign of mutual identification and signification, shared acts of acknowledgement as telling as a passing nod, glance or smile between two gay men on a street. Literary precursors, consciously or subconsciously, have helped empower gay poets to find their voices and to discover a way of constructing community as well as identity. In some cases--as with Whitman--Whitman's gay literary presence acted almost in a paternal fashion, supplying needed psychological and emotional support to young men conflicted by their sexuality.⁵¹ Whitman's work in essence presented a positive, integrated view of homosexuality. There are no suicides, no tortured recriminations nor abiding guilt about the body and its desires. Whitman does not resort to

51 David Bergman in his chapter "Choosing Our Fathers" from *Gaiety Transfigured* speaks of "a growing tradition of gay literary presence" out of which new gay poets construct an identity (52). In regard to Richard Howard, Bergman suggests this "presence" consists of a dialogue between the gay tradition and the present, Howard's self located in a matrix of history and culture (59,63).

a language of science or medicine, nor view his desires from the perspective of deviancy; indeed, Whitman fashions a “gay” poetic identity in relation to a broad, democratic vista, one that makes homosexuality another integral part of individual expression, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

David Bergman in his book Gaiety Transfigured (1991) includes a chapter about “Choosing Our Fathers,” and the various models for poetic identity presented to young gay writers. Bergman mentions two directions commonly chosen in addressing issues of gay identity. “The first direction is to resolve to go without poetic identity—to regard the unitary and limited construct of the ego as a seductive, but ultimately unnecessary piece of poetic baggage. The other direction is to construct a self out of the growing tradition of gay literary presence” (52). Bergman goes on to say that “the first strategy--the rejection of the heterosexual male ego--is to be found in John Ashbery’s work” (Bergman also cites Whitman’s work in this regard due to its expansive, all encompassing nature) and the “second strategy is best typified by Richard Howard whose erudition and dramatic sense make not only his individual monologues an encounter and reincorporation of the past, but his entire corpus a comic enactment of self-construction” (53). These two strategies play themselves out as well in gay poetry by way of a tendency toward the oblique, the highly aesthetic and sublime, or toward the culturally appropriative and witty.

Harold Bloom’s literary theory of inter-generational rivalry between poets may be applied to the construction of gay poetic identity as well. Bloom suggests that younger belated writers are always under the influence of their “father-poet” precursors (Abrams 240). He speaks of ways in which the belated poet will resort to the “direct ‘borrowing’ or

assimilation of the materials and features found in earlier writers” (Abrams 240). The belated poet, in essence, must move the tradition forward by resolving conflicts with the “parent’s” poetry (Richter 709). Younger poets write poems which are often related to parent-poems. Bloom describes this as an oedipal struggle of a young male poet with his formative elder. In the gay instance, however, kinship and “fellow feelings” rather than competition have been the norm. Gay poets and writers, rather than being antagonized or anxious about their relation to previous gay male precursors, are often bonded by a sense of shared brotherhood and affection.⁵²

If we accept that a brotherly dialogue exists between generations of gay writers, we should not be surprised to discover the numerous gay poems which make reference to Whitman, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Cavafy, Proust, Crane, Lorca, Hughes, Genet, O’Hara, and Ginsberg. Inter-generational dialogues have influenced the form, shape and language of gay poetry as well as its tone of voice.

An allusion to past gay poets has been a frequent device in the works of post-World War II gay writers as well as in post-World War II gay publications. ONE magazine in America in the fifties, billed as the first gay publication, regularly featured essays on Carpenter, Crane, Symonds, Whitman and Wilde.

The growing allusiveness of gay work paralleled developments in the readership and reception of gay literature as a whole. Reader reception of gay and lesbian works has

52 Bergman in Gaiety Transfigured indirectly speaks of Bloom’s anxiety of influence in terms of the Oedipal crisis over identity formation (45). Bergman says that gay poets such as Howard and Ashbery, to the contrary, found in Whitman, “not a father that must be rejected in the Oedipal drama Pound, for instance, enacted, but a companion whose hand can be grasped, whose affection can be accepted, and whose promises of comradeship can be—if not fulfilled—satisfied at least for the moment” (63).

greatly shifted over the course of the twentieth century. Applying Hans Robert Jauss's general theories in Toward an Aesthetics of Reception (1978) to gay poetry, we can suggest that gay poetry started as a coherent literary "event" which was "primarily mediated in the horizon of expectations" formed by early gay readers, critics, and authors, especially at the time of the English homosexual rights movement (Jauss 22). One explanation for the reception of "gay" literature as a discrete entity or genre all its own was the curiosity and mutual interest generated in the English homosexual community by Walt Whitman's openly homoerotic poetry. Whitman gave homosexuals a model for what a "gay" text could convey and how a language for homoerotic affection might be found. Though Whitman, like other early gay poets, did not address primarily a gay readership and was appreciated by a wide spectrum of non-gay-identified readers, his work was avidly appropriated and lionized by gay readers and writers.

Whitman's poetry educated gay readers and writers. It continues to be an important link in the literary tradition which has come about through a "chain of receptions from generation to generation" (Jauss 20). The more classical poems of the Uranian poets which had adhered to classical modes, idyllic scenes and quaint archaisms, gave way to Whitman's vibrant depiction of physically adhesive love.

It is understandable that, after decades of gay-identified literature and verse, an almost "classical" perspective has set in toward earlier gay poetry. Thus, St. Martin's Press may publish Michael Lassell's The Name of Love: Classic Gay Love Poems (1995) and appropriate Shakespeare, Housman, Cavafy, Rimbaud, Ginsberg, Doty and Hemphill into an extended gay tradition. Many gay or homoerotic poetic works of the past have

been appropriated into the present gay cannon. The new gay and lesbian reception which has flourished post-Stonewall has created a new intertextuality. Works such as Tennyson's In Memoriam, Walt Whitman's "Calamus" from Leaves of Grass, Auden's fine introduction to Cavafy's collected poems, Richard Howard's "Decades" for Hart Crane from Fellow Feelings, Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Rimbaud and Verlaine's "Sonnet to an Asshole" (in Coote's Penguin anthology), Genet's Treasures of the Night, Ginsberg's "Sweet Boy, Gimme Yr Ass," Frank O'Hara's culturally effervescent poetry, Adrian Stanford's "Remembrance of Rittenhouse Square" (in Hemphill's Brother to Brother), Alfred Corn's "The Bridge: Palm Sunday" from All Roads at Once, and the poems of Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint represent examples of the ways in which intertextuality and gay literary presence have come together to construct a gay poetic identity.

* * *

We can see, for instance, Tennyson's In Memoriam, as a parent-poem which has influenced later gay verse. Christopher Craft in his book Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850-1920, devotes a chapter, "Descend, and Touch, and Enter: Tennyson's Strange Manner of Address," to the poet and his work. "Tennyson employs heterosexual desire and marriage as a trope to represent his passion for lost Hallam" (Craft 47). Craft sees the poem as a "highly personal erotic myth." The death of Hallam,

when "God's finger touch'd him and he slept"
initiates in the poet both a recuperational
homosexual desire--a desire to restore to its

preschismatic unity the “divided hal[ves] of
such/A friendship as had master’d Time”—and
what is worse, a desperate need to speak
this potentially philosophic “desire and pursuit
of the whole” under the aegis of a transgressive
erotics. (Craft 52)

Hallam becomes Christ figure. In Memoriam articulates its analogy between Hallam and Christ, and how that analogy operates “to relieve the speaker’s desperate erotic distress—a distress, as I have said, indistinguishable from his grief” (Craft 53). The poem finds some relief in the image “of a Chistocentric ‘embrace’ as the elegy’s apparently original gesture” (Craft 55). The extended trope of Christ’s hand, which comes to substitute for Hallam’s own, is repeated throughout the poem, according to Craft: “whatever bliss or agony the poem owns it owes to its insuperable desire for Hallam; nor can the manifold dispersions of that vaster passion displace Hallam as the affective center of ‘In Memoriam’s’ world of desire” (70).

A contemporary “AIDS poem” such as Alfred Corn’s “La Madeleine” from his book Autobiographies (1992), is similar to Tennyson’s work. Tennyson and Corn express in their elegiac forms some of the broad encompassing grief for the loss of a male friend or lover. Desire and loss penetrate their work, along with their attention to Christian catharsis, art and beauty. The poems act as memorials. The poets present moments of recollection which are overlaid with literary and personal allusions. Corn uses Paris (and its corresponding links to a faded golden cultural past), as Tennyson uses the streets of London, as the setting for a fabled grief-stricken present.

Corn’s “La Madeleine” is a lengthy work divided into eight sections. The poem is filled with vivid references to art, literature, religion, history and myth. It was written in

memory of David Kalstone, the brilliant gay literary critic, a contemporary of Corn, McClatchy and Merrill: "Dear David, Happy fifty-sixth birthday. Shall I/This time write (as I daily think of you)/And allow friendship to go on evolving--" (19). As in Tennyson, Corn's poem addresses the loss of a cherished friend. Tennyson writes: "Dear friend, far off, my lost desire/So far, so near in woe and weal;/O loved the most, when most I feel/There is a lower and a higher" (Trilling and Bloom, 464; cxxix, lines 1-4). And Tennyson also writes: "My Arthur, whom I shall not see/Till all my widowed race be run; Dear as the mother to the son/More than my brothers are to me" (Trilling and Bloom, 444; ix, lines 17-20).

And as in Tennyson, the urban setting--the street, the doorway, and a church--become the refined landscape of grief. As Corn describes his church in Paris and later the aging city of Venice, the world is illuminated with mortality, memory and sorrow. Both poems resort to the use of biblical stories that make mention of Mary Magdalene, her sister Martha and brother Lazarus. Tennyson focuses on the resurrection story of Lazarus and his return to Mary's house (cxxx, 1-16), and Corn looks at Mary, Martha and Lazarus's later travels to Gaul where they preached to the barbarians; afterwards, Corn points out, Mary retreated to her cave house in Aix (18-19). Both poems rise to endings that verge on prayer and supplication. Tennyson's culminates with an epilogue:

That God, which ever lives and loves
 One God, one law, one element,
 And one far-off divine event
 To which the whole creation moves.
 ((Trilling and Bloom, 466; cxxx, lines 141-144)

Corn's ends with a short prayer in italics:

*At each new step of the stair,
Blessed Mary, pray for us--
And remember us on that day.* (22)

The sturdiness of Tennyson's poem and its great breadth also bear a similarity to J.D. McClatchy's contemporary elegy, "Fog." "Fog" was included in Michael Klein's 1989 anthology of AIDS poetry, Poets for Life. Tennyson's nineteenth century aesthetic covers the surface of McClatchy's poem, as it does Corn's. There is a great reliance on the visual, on art and on a sense of sublimity. All three poems work toward delicate renderings, glimpses, fragmentary visions, which convey the enormity of human loss and its fracturing power. They also bear witness to the Christian theme of the loss of Christ, the great loss of vision and the more meditative internal suffering of those left behind. McClatchy's poem drifts in and out of regular tetrameter; Tennyson guided his poem in strict tetrameter regularity. McClatchy sets "Fog" in a smooth mournful tone which plays upon images of obscured visibility, distant allusions to the ghostly landscapes of nineteenth century romantic verse. The river becomes an important image for McClatchy as it does for Tennyson, symbolic of the mutable state of human life. Tennyson writes:

The Wye is hushed nor moved along,
And hushed my deepest grief of all,
When filled with tears that cannot fall,
I brim with sorrow drowning song. (Ferguson, et al., lines 9-12, pg. 901)

McClatchy opens his poem with the stanza:

A sheet of water turned over.
Sedge script. River erasure.
The smoke out of the factory

Stacks drifts to the title page—
 Words too big to read, too quickly
 Gone to say what they are.
 The water machine is stalled
 And sighs. There go last night's
 Now forgotten dreams, airborne,
 Homebound, on their way to work. (Klein, Poets for Life 152)

Obviously influenced by more modern works such as Eliot's, McClatchy enlarges upon this idea of grief as erasure, pale, airborne loss. The setting is urban and yet we sense the isolation of its speaker. There is a deep sense of beauty lost. The second stanza of the poem begins:

When my daughter died, from the bottom
 Of every pleasure something bitter
 Rose up, a sour taste of nausea,
 The certain sense of having failed
 Not to save her but in the end to know
 I could not keep her from passing
 As through the last, faintest intake
 Of breath to somewhere unsure of itself,
 The dim landscape that grief supposes.
 I remember how, in the hospital,
 Without a word she put her glasses on
 And stared ahead, just before she died. (Klein, Poets for Life 153)

The sense of occluded visibility, of the loss of full sight of the loved one is as much a part of Tennyson's poem as it is of McClatchy's:

O life as futile, then, as frail!
 O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
 What hope of answer, or redress?
 Behind the veil, behind the veil.
 (Trilling and Bloom, 454; lvi, lines 25-28)

When on my bed the moonlight falls,
 I know that in thy place of rest
 By that broad water of the west

There comes a glory on the walls
(Trilling and Bloom, 454; lxvii, lines 1-5)

And later:

I sleep till dusk is dipped in gray;

And then I know the mist is drawn
 A lucid veil from coast to coast,
 And in the dark church like a ghost
Thy tablet glimmers to the dawn.
(Trilling and Bloom, 454-455; lxvii, lines 12-16)

This sense of veiled shadows and mourning is picked up by McClatchy and continued through the formalistic device of shifting verse form to reflect the transient, fleeting permutations of his mood and imagery. There is a sublimity and a Christian pathos to this poem similar to that we find in Tennyson. McClatchy writes:

the emptiness added daily
 the abstract's hive
quarry of doubts
 earthrise from the dark side
the holy sleeve
 the beatific blindness
white root of heaven
 the hedge around happiness
 (Klein, Poets for Life 156)

The beautiful pale recollection of this poem is filled with nineteenth century romantic images of mist and candle flames, the dark and the transience of nature. Thus McClatchy writes:

Then runs down the cheek,
A single waxen tear.
When last night's grief
Is pulled back from,
Who will be the brighter?
Hush. Be careful. Turn

Those headlights down, low
 As a curtained candle flame
 Shivering in the dark dispelled. (Klein, Poets for Life 157)

We are introduced to the veiled circumstances of the poem (the AIDS death of a gay friend) when McClatchy discloses:

First, the diagnosis: those night sweats
 And thrush, the breathing that misplaces air,
 The clouds gathering on a horizon of lung . . .
 Translated as pneumocystis, the word from a dead
 Language meant to sound like a swab
 On a wound open but everywhere unseen.
 (Klein, Poets for Life 157)

In retrospect, Tennyson's poem foreshadows by a century the AIDS elegy. Tennyson's extended work with its play upon nature, mutability, male friendship and undying love, as well as its great musicality, romantic pathos, and urban setting, gave gay poets such as Corn and McClatchy an imaginative model to work from and to identify with. It was one way for a gay writer of intelligence and urbanity to approach the enormity of loss experienced in the AIDS crisis.

* * *

The advent of Whitman's Leaves of Grass in 1855 and 1860 changed an entire horizon of expectations for gay readers in America and abroad. Especially in England, homosexual men such as Carpenter and Symonds saw in Whitman's verse a way of expressing male love and affection. Whitman brought homoerotic experience to the level of consciousness for many of his male readers in his frequent use of the term

“adhesiveness” for male friendship, affection and bonding (Martin 33-47).⁵³ Whitman’s first audience of gay men wholeheartedly identified with the 1860 “Calamus” section (Martin 49). Mainstream critics found Whitman’s work shocking and yet powerful, but they mostly overlooked Whitman’s homoerotic emphasis by choosing to interpret his brand of love according to Christian (often Quaker) notions (Martin 48, 66). They also made much of his ambiguous use of the pronouns “he” and “she” (Fone 67-73; Martin 17-18).

Edward Carpenter visited Whitman in 1877, and J.A. Symonds and Whitman corresponded at length, though “when Symonds asked Whitman about the homosexual imagery in the ‘Calamus’ poems, Whitman wrote back--perhaps disingenuously--that such questions ‘quite daze me’ and disavowed the possibility in them of what he termed ‘morbid inferences’” (Russell 25). However, Symonds continued to champion Whitman as sympathetic to the homosexual rights movement.

A socially-conscious homosexual rights movement in England, and later in Germany, the first of their kind in the “modern” era, embraced Whitman and found validation in his work. Whitman’s reception fostered a new homosexual readership which looked at poetry from a homosexual perspective. As Edward Carpenter was to claim in 1922:

In the case of Whitman--united as he was by most intimate ties to one or more men-friends--we see already the emergence of a new organic inspiration and a new power of life. His poems radiate this power in all directions. Thousands of people date from their first reading of them *a new era in their lives* . . . How *far* this process may go we hardly yet know, but that it is one of the factors of future evolution we hardly doubt. I mean that

⁵³ A dissertation which deals with Whitman’s concept of male friendship is Juan Antonio Herrero Brasas. “Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship,” University of Southern California, 1993.

the loves of men towards each other--and similarly the loves of women for each other--may become factors of future human evolution just as necessary and well-recognized as the ordinary loves which lead to the . . . propagation of the race. (Russell 26)

The use of terms such as "friendship" in Uranian poetry became commonly associated with or used euphemistically for Whitman's "adhesive, athletic love" or "homosexuality." This "love" was read avidly about in such early anthologies as Carpenter's Iolas: An Anthology of Friendship (1902) which presented homoerotic material under the unifying theme of male friendship.

Whitman became a singular influence on many gay poets who saw in his vision a broad and bold experimental view of human identity. Wilde's mannered, highly erudite and constrained dandyism is contrasted to Whitman's sensual freedom, his voracious appetite to feel, to express and to love. By invoking Whitman, gay poets were able to access the compassionate and feeling side of male identity without reverting to conventional stereotypes. Whitman was unapologetic in his gaze. His was a masculine affection which was aggressive, vital, and showed desire for both sexes. Whitman's women are as physically robust and strong as his men.

Hart Crane borrowed from Whitman. Thomas Yingling has already commented in his book on the romantic lyricism of Crane and his debt to Whitman. Crane created beautiful patterns of language which encoded inward homosexual yearning. The poems share Whitman's broad, encompassing vision of seascape, landscape, and the sensual mysteries of the city.

Witness a poem from White Buildings entitled "Paraphrase." By its title, Crane

would seem to imply that there is another way of “saying” or speaking the meaning of this poem. In the second stanza of “Paraphrase” Crane writes:

Above the feet the clever sheets
Lie guard upon the integers of life:
For what skims in between uncurls the toe,
involves the hands in purposeless repose.

But from its bracket how can the tongue tell
When systematic morn shall sometime flood
The pillow . . .

Your head, unrocking to a pulse, already
Hollowed by air, posts a white paraphrase
among bruised roses on the papered wall. (24)

The poem suggests two men making love; the one orgasmic finish literally “posts a white paraphrase.” The poem matches Whitman’s sensuality of detail, but unlike Whitman, it remains more ambiguous, less straightforward. We read in Whitman’s “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand”:

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,
Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your
hip,
Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;
For thus merely touching you is enough, is best,
And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried
eternally. (Whitman 149)

And the closing lines of Whitman’s “When I Heard at the Close of the Day”:

I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed
to me whispering to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same
cover in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was
inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night
I was happy. (Whitman 156)

Strong similarities can be seen as well between Whitman's poem "A Glimpse," in which a youth comes to sit and take the poet's hand in a crowded bar on a winter's night (Whitman 163), and Crane's "Episode of the Hands" (Crane, Collected Poems, 141) which focuses on the rough-hewn hands of a workman and their sensuous homoerotic appeal.

Whitman's expansive free verse, with its extended lines, broad vistas, wide political sweep and sensuality, was conducive to a generation of longer works by gay men who tried to capture Whitman's visionary strength. Ginsberg's Howl (1956) made use of Whitman's lengthy verse lines with their rhetorical power and surprising language. Howl erupted with Whitman's enormous physicality and energy of language. The length and breadth of Whitman's verse line suited Ginsberg, as did Whitman's repetitive use of the "I," his dependence upon exclamation, and his technique of listing, line upon line, life's experiences and observations—often contrasting and contradictory. Both Ginsberg and Whitman share in an Eastern Tantric vision where good and evil, extremes of the carnal and the spiritual, coexist to bring out a more expansive vision of the extended ego. Thus in Song of Myself Whitman might write:

I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over,
 My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, . . .
 Waiting responses from oracles, honoring the gods, saluting
 the sun,
 Making a fetich of the first rock or stump, powowing with
 sticks in the circle of obis,
 Helping the llama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the
 idols,
 Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession, rapt

and austere in the woods a gymnosophist,
 Drinking mead from the skull-cap, to Shastas and Vedas
 admirant, minding the Koran . . . (113)

And in "Salut Au Monde":

I see all the menials of the earth, laboring,
 I see all the prisoners in the prisons,
 I see the defective human bodies of the earth,
 The blind, the deaf and dumb, idiots, hunchbacks, lunatics,
 The pirates, thieves, betrayers, murderers, slave-makers of
 the earth,
 The helpless infants, and the helpless old men and women.

I see male and female everywhere,
 I see the serene brotherhood of philosophers (175)

And Ginsberg writes in Howl:

who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat
 up smoking in the supernatural darkness of
 cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities
 contemplating jazz,
 who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and
 saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tene-
 ment roofs illuminated . . . (9)

who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telep-
 athy and bop kabbalah because the cosmos in-
 stinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas. (12)

Ginsberg extended Whitman's enormous vision of America, of society, of sexuality, into the conservative Republican era of the fifties and interwove these themes into a poem of broad political commentary and epic gestures. Ginsberg also drew from Whitman's pervasive homoeroticism, his laying claim to homosexual experience and desire.

Whitman afforded gay poets a more expansive and inclusive identity than the marginalized role they might play in the gay ghetto. This identity was founded in the belief

in an innate freedom in the natural state of man, a vision of Adam before the Fall without original sin. It is telling that Whitman should call a section of his great work, "Children of Adam." The first poem in this collection, "To the Garden in the World," opens: "To the garden the world anew ascending,/Potent mates, daughters, sons, preluding,/The love, the life of their bodies, meaning and being" (Whitman 125). And of course "I Sing the Body Electric" is in this same collection. There is great "hope" in Whitman and a positive, fearless vision of sexuality undiminished by feelings of guilt, shame or sin. In Whitman, homosexuality is compatible with Christianity.

Whitman again finds reflection in Alfred Corn's book, A Call in the Midst of the Crowd (1978). Corn's title makes reference to Whitman's line from Song of Myself: "A call in the midst of the crowd,/My own voice, orotund sweeping and final" (111). Corn's title poem is divided into four parts and intersperses selections from firsthand accounts--journalistic, historical, literary--from Whitman's own era to create a greater play between the archetypal and the autobiographical. Corn's encounter with New York, his stroll through its streets and its urban life, reflects Whitman's own fondness for the city, the glimpses of its crowds and strange sights. Corn writes: "Vast anonymity, at home again./Free once more to stroll where I'm drawn, hero/Of my own story--as they are of theirs" (90). Corn shares "bull/about records, this season On and Off/Broadway, their 'real prospects for breakthrough/Next month,' what's unique about Balanchine,/Where can you get a good egg cream, well-cut/Bluejeans, or laid" (90). Whitman influences Corn in many ways, acting as his parent-poet, to borrow a phrase from Harold Bloom. Corn looks to Whitman as a model for one way of being in the city and participating in its cultural as

well as sexual life. Like Hart Crane as well, whose vision and encounter with New York and the modern is as voyeur looking out on the infinite multiplicity of sensations, Corn sees in the anonymity of the city freedom and delight.

The urban becomes a setting for the male homosexual gaze. Also in its anonymity, it becomes a place of sexual possibility. We are reminded of Frank O'Hara's lunch time strolls, his veiled allusion to cruising spots such as city parks and movie theaters in poems such as "How to Get There" and "Ave Maria" (O'Hara, Lunch Poems). We think also of Federico Garcia Lorca's poem inspired by his trip to New York City in 1927, "Ode to Walt Whitman" (Coote, 308-312), which takes the city as its backdrop:

Not for a second, Adam of blood, male,
sole man of the sea, beautiful, aged Walt Whitman,
because on the terraces,
congregated in bars,
pouring in waves from the sewers,
shivering between the thighs of chauffeurs,
or spinning on stages of absinthe,
the faggots, Walt Whitman, dreamed of you. (Coote 310)

Faggots of the world, slaughterers of the dove!
Slaves of women, boudoir bitches,
blown across public places with the fever of a fan
or ambushed in frigid and hemlocked lands. (Coote 312)

Whitman has continued to capture the imagination of gay writers. Maurice Kenny's poem "Prison" from his book Only as Far as Brooklyn (1979), mentions Whitman among other precursor writers: "Rechy numbered city pain;/Rimbaud wrote young, died early;/Whitman was lost on the ferry,/The buses of prison Manhattan,/Loved a common soldier/In a Washington hospital . . ./Not shocking, but cruel, cold,/When he could only wipe/The dying boy's sweat" (12).

Perry Brass's "Walt Whitman in 1987" from Sex-Charge draws parallels between Whitman's life as a nurse during the Civil War administering to the young soldiers with compassion and eloquence and the situation of Brass in 1987 as AIDS devastates the gay community (65). This imaginative poetic work links one historical consciousness to another, one poetic identity to the next.

In the nineties, younger queer poets, such as Benjamin Scott Grossberg, continue to reach back to Whitman's gay literary legacy to construct their identities. Walt Whitman remains a seminal precursor. In "A Brief Tour with Whitman," for instance, Grossberg writes: "Let me hold your hand, Walt./Cold? It's the rain. You know, I could kiss you/here and it would be all right" (Kikel, Gents, Bad Boys & Barbarians, 75).

* * *

C.P. Cavafy (1863-1933), the Greek poet who lived most of his life in Alexandria, Egypt, has also had a wide influence on gay poets. Cavafy's emphasis on reflective memory, his rhetorical imperative to perform as chronicler and recorder (forced to "speak" and preserve what heterosexual history leaves silent), his sad, urban, romantic meditations on male youth and ardor lost, have found their way into the works of contemporary gay writers. Cavafy's meditations on classical male youth and beauty paralleled the Victorian sentiments of the Uranian poets in England. Classical and Victorian sentiments mixed with pederastic and sensual detail to characterize Cavafy's verse.

The pathos of Cavafy's poems lies in the recollection of thwarted homosexual desire, of idealized male youths, sensuous and homoerotic, and the love with them that is

lost. As in the cult of Antinous, which developed over the worship of the young lover of Hadrian, who was killed in his prime, Cavafy laments desire and youth too quickly fled. Cavafy presents the voice of the gay queen.⁵⁴ In a poem such as "Half an Hour," we experience Cavafy's characteristic tone of melancholy and sadness:

I neither had you, nor will I ever have you,
 I guess. A few words, a coming close
 as in the bar the other day, and nothing more.
 It is a pity, I do not deny. But we of the world of Art
 sometimes create pleasure with intensity of mind,
 and of course only for a short while,
 which almost gives the effect of the real.
 So in the bar the other day--merciful
 alcohol also helping much--
 I had a perfect erotic half-hour.
 And it seems to me you understood,
 and you purposely stayed somewhat longer.
 That was very necessary. Because
 for all of imagination and the magic alcohol,
 I needed to see your lips too,
 I needed to have your body close to me. (*Collected Poems* 275)

It is no surprise that Auden would champion and support the revival of Cavafy's work. There is a certain kindred spirit between the aging Auden and the older Cavafy,

54 "Queen" historically meant "an effeminate gay man: from sixteenth-century British slang for a woman of low morals or prostitute" (Martinac 94). "Queen," in the early part of the twentieth century, tended to be applied to men who "dressed or behaved in a flamboyantly effeminate manner:" associating it with such terms as "fairy" or "faggot" (Chauncey 16). In later years, queen has been associated with a variety of adjectives to denote the specific preferences in lovers or in sexual acts or specific behaviors or characteristics of gay men; e.g., "drag queen": dresses in women's clothing; "mean queen": into S/M (Martinac 93). Here, however, I am using the term to denote a specific behavior and characteristic of older gay men in the American nineteen-fifties and sixties (Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote are examples). These were gay men, who usually valued culture for culture's sake (often out of a sense of negative self-worth, secondary to the demoralized standing of homosexuals in American society at that time) and who had often known some success in their youth but had not found personal, sexual or romantic fulfillment in their adult lives. Some of this standing captured the tragic "fallen star" status of American popular culture--Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe. The "queen" of the fifties and sixties projected a certain vanity and sadness over aging and the loss of physical attraction, turned his wit and education sometimes toward self-destructive and solipsistic pursuits, and courted younger men of sometimes lower social standing in the pursuit of sexual favors he knew he would never consummate. The voice of the

both men of Art who found a certain inherent sorrow in the great gap between youth and age, between their homosexual nature and the rigid social mores of a heterosexual culture. Both were moral poets who tried to understand their homosexuality in the context of history and religion; Cavafy in relation to classic pagan times, and Auden in relation to the fascist modern world of the thirties and forties. In Auden's introduction to the collection he writes of Cavafy:

Cavafy was a homosexual, and his erotic poems make no attempt to conceal the fact. Poems made by human beings are no more exempt from moral judgement than acts done by human beings, but the moral criterion is not the same. One duty of a poem, among others, is to bear witness to the truth. A moral witness is one who gives true testimony to the best of his ability in order that the court (or the reader) shall be in a better position to judge the case justly. (ix)

Auden makes his defense of Cavafy in relation to the (heterosexual) reader, citing Cavafy's sense of "truth." Cavafy acts as "moral witness," submitting the truthfulness of his carnal desires for the judgment of the reader. It is telling that Auden uses the language of the legal system to appeal to the more judicious, secular sentiments of his readers than their hardy Christian beliefs.

Cavafy, Auden points out, wrote poems about the relations between Christians and pagans in the age of Constantine. Though "Cavafy takes no sides," Auden informs us, "Roman paganism was worldly in the sense that the aim of its ritual practices was to secure prosperity and peace for the state and its citizens. Christianity, while not necessarily

queen thus became one that was satiric, nihilistic, sentiment-ridden, morose, wistful or bitterly jocular. This voice was often projected through female characters in plays and movies.

despising the world, has always insisted that its principal concern was elsewhere: it has never claimed to guarantee worldly prosperity to believers, and it has always condemned excessive preoccupation with success as a sin" (xiv).

Auden it would appear was sympathetic to Cavafy's tone of voice in these poems as well as his perspective on life. Auden cites Cavafy's poem "Julian and the People of Antioch": "Was it ever possible that they should renounce/their lovely way of life; the variety of their/daily amusements; their magnificent theater" (xv). The good people of Antioch have merged Christianity with a pagan world. They have not puritanically renounced any of their former pleasures. Like Cavafy himself, they have managed to integrate the pagan with the Christian in a sensible, worldly manner.

Auden closes his introduction by saying that, in essence, though some readers may find Cavafy's tone of voice and perspective on life "unsympathetic," he [Auden] happens "to like Cavafy's very much indeed" (xv).

The wonderful deception of this essay is that Auden identifies with Cavafy's homosexuality and finds, in his emphasis on the pagan and the classical, a decided solution to Auden's own predicament: Cavafy's tone and perspective suit Auden (the modern Protestant and former socialist and Freudian) who found in Cavafy's "lovely way of life" and "daily amusements," his "virtue of patriotism," his admiration of language, his comic sense, his "aristocratic" attitude "toward the poetic vocation," his "honesty," and his "three principal concerns: love, art, and politics in the original Greek sense," perhaps some affirmation and reflection of Auden's own character and poetic (vii-xv).

Auden in his introduction quotes a passage from Cavafy's poem, "Their

Beginning”:

The fulfillment of their deviate, sensual delight
is done. They rise from the mattress,
and they dress hurriedly without speaking.
They leave the house separately, furtively; and as
they walk somewhat uneasily on the street, it seems
as if they suspect that something about them betrays
into what kind of bed they fell a little while back.
But how the life of the artist has gained.
Tomorrow, the next day, years later, the vigorous verses
will be composed that had their beginning here. (109)

Auden shares with Cavafy his sentiment for youth and a sense of the “fabled disease” and affliction of the homosexual predicament.⁵⁵ A poem such as Auden’s “Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love” (1940) begins: “Lay your sleeping head, my love/Human on my faithless arm,” and later expresses: “Let the living creature lie,/ Mortal, guilty, but to me/The entirely beautiful”. The poem closes: “Nights of insult let you pass/Watched by every human love.” There is a warning to this night of love: “And fashionable madmen raise/Their pedantic boring cry:/Every farthing of the cost,/All the dreaded cards foretell,/Shall be paid” (Morse and Larkin 32-33).

The poem emphasizes the human aspect of Auden’s brand of love (what we infer to be homosexual love and thereby “guilty”) as though to contradict all those “fashionable madmen” who see it as inhuman, ugly and thereby bestial. Auden names his young boy-lover as “the entirely beautiful.” Auden reclaims what some would call the “creaturely” and “bestial” and raises it to the sublime. This is a trope of romanticism which plays against the image of homosexuality, especially pedophilia, as monstrous and grotesque;

the acts of an outcast or a monster. The “fashionable madmen” in this poem we can only guess as the moral, political and religious homophobes of the 1940s as well as the Nazis and Fascists then in power.

Auden’s “Three Posthumous Poems” from his Collected Poems reveal the homoerotic side of the poet so little seen in his public persona and academic profile. Like Cavafy, Auden exposes himself as an older gay poet prone to sexual fascination with street trade and call-boys and the somewhat tarnished urban allure of the city.⁵⁶ Cavafy’s sense of the historical and the sad, his conveyance of a lovelorn vision of homosexuality, cruising in shops, arranging assignations, thwarted in love, seems to match Auden’s own experiences. Auden carries forth Cavafy’s worldly voice. Both men, immensely educated, perceptive and cultured, share in a rather elusive search for fulfillment. Their erotic hunger and desire make them vulnerable as with the older male “queen.”

In the first poem, “Glad” (1965), from Auden’s Collected Poems he writes: “Hugerl, for a decade now/My bed-visitor,/An unexpected blessing/In a lucky life,” and “Glad that I know we enjoy/Mutual pleasure:/Women may cog their lovers/With a feigned passion,/But males are so constructed/We cannot deceive” (746).

Auden, like Cavafy, is aware of the social differences in the boy’s standing from his own but accepts it willingly in exchange for their sexual arrangement:

Glad our worlds of enchantment
Are so several
Neither is tempted to broach:
I cannot tell a

55 “The fabled disease” is a phrase I have borrowed from Richard Howard’s poem “Decades,” included in his book Fellow Feelings, which is clearly a direct reference to homosexuality (5).

56 “Trade” was a term used in dominant prewar homosexual culture for “a ‘real man,’ that is, ideally a sailor, a soldier, or some other embodiment of the aggressive masculine ideal” (Chauncey 16).

Jaguar from a Bentley,
And you never read. (746)

The speaker of the poem is glad his path has crossed with the bed-visitor in the poem. Auden cannot resist playfully alluding to his literary erudition:

Glad, though, we began that way,
That our life-paths crossed,
Like characters in Hardy,
At a moment when
You were in need of money
And I wanted sex. (746)

Love is “far too/Tattered a word” to describe this affair (76). “A romance/In full fig, it ain’t,” Auden tells us (76).

The second poem, “Aubade” (1964), recalls Whitman and Cavafy in its brief urban scene of a lover taking his leave:

At break of dawn
he takes a street-car, happy
after a night of love.

Happy,
but sleepily wondering
how many away is the night

when an ecto-endomorph
cock-sucker must put on
The Widow's Cap. (747)

We think of a poem such as Cavafy’s “Two Young Men, 23 to 24 Years Old” (Collected Poems 143). Cavafy writes:

He'd been sitting in the café since ten-thirty
expecting him to turn up any minute . . .
alone like that for so many hours,
he'd also begun to have disturbing thoughts
about the immoral life he was living (42)

The young man's friend who has made money at cards comes to join him. The two men go off:

--not to the homes of their respectable
families
(where they were no longer wanted anyway)—
they went to a familiar and very special
house of debauchery, and they asked for a bedroom
and expensive drinks, and they drank again.

And when the expensive drinks were finished
and it was close to four in the morning,
happy, they gave themselves to love. (43)

And finally, in the last of Auden's "Three Posthumous Poems," "Minnelied," the speaker is relieved of his loneliness and his self-pity by consorting with a call-boy. "When one is lonely (and You,/My Dearest, know why,/as I know why it must be),/steps can be taken, even/a call-boy can help" (747).

A poem such as James Schuyler's "Tom" from his collection A Few Days is a love poem written by a very intelligent, overly-sophisticated man to a disinterested younger one. Like Cavafy, Auden and the former Uranian poets, Schuyler situates the poem in the context of male friendship and classical pederastic love, although not without a certain awareness of the sad "affliction" in the affair. Schuyler's style and diction are the easy vernacular of Whitman and Cavafy. This reliance on everyday language and slang dialogue creates a personal intimacy to the poem. It is as though the speaker seeks, in the use of dialogue, a greater intimacy and informality (the gay poet literally is allowed to "speak for himself" and address his experience directly). This technique also heightens the experiential in the poem over the conceptual and moralistic. As in Cavafy and in Auden's assessment of Cavafy's work, Schuyler's style permits a truthfulness and tone of moral

honesty—revealing insecurities, weaknesses, homoeroticism, and all—which is there for the pure judgment of the reader. Schuyler also exhibits a classicism and erudition in his work comparable to Cavafy's.

Tom is described as “A god, archaic Greek/Apollo in a blue down/jacket” (36) and the heroic epithet of “Blond glory” is used further in his praise (36). Schuyler prefaces the poem by a quotation: “*They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead*” (36) The poem is thus placed in a classical sphere of reference similar to that of Cavafy's work. Cavafy frequently opened his love poems with a past event (often from ancient history) that rested on an occasion of homosexual or homoerotic recollection. Thus, in Cavafy's poem “Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340,” he writes: “When I heard the terrible news, that Myris was dead,/I went to his house, although I avoid/going to the houses of Christians” (155). Cavafy's poem continues to develop the poet's relationship to the dead youth and his sexual encounters.

As in the homoerotic works of Catullus and the epigrams from the Greek anthology, Schuyler extols the virtues, the physical beauty of the young boy: Tom's eyes are “twin/compendious blue oceans in/which white sails and/gulls wildly fly”(37) (The Greek poet Meleager writes in his epigram:

Lo! Beauty flashed forth sweetly; from his eyes
The flames of love abroad he casts as fire;
Has Eros taught the boy to win the prize
Of love with thunderbolts? (Coote 60)

And much later Schuyler considers the “flesh on flesh,/a head pillowed/on an arm. Touch” (38). These lines are suggestive of Whitman. The metaphors of oceans and sails

are hyper-romantic and subvert the conceits of heterosexual metaphysical poets. As with Catullus and Cavafy, the chatty tone of the speaker and the betrayal of confidences invite a certain intimacy and suggest a validity to the experience of the poem. This intimacy avoids the broad, grandiose universals of dominant heterosexual epistemology which assume metaphors of love will be read “correctly.”

Schuyler hints at his own doubt in the relationship: “We’ll/never make it. Tom’s/twenty-eight, I’m fifty-/six: he isn’t Proust’s/ ‘young man born to love/elderly men.’ He loves E./an eighteen-year-old/poet” (37). The intellectual differences between elder poet and young lover are wonderfully captured: “We settle down/to read: he, a Ross/MacDonald, me Phineas/Redux” (37-38). Schuyler’s synopsis of the actions of Mme. Goesler in Phineas Redux, which bring a bequest of priceless pearls and diamonds to Lady Glencora, the woman who for three years selflessly tended to the needs of the dying Duke of Omnium, reflects the plight of the speaker of the poem. Schuyler’s speaker obviously can identify with Lady Glencora who finds herself in an act of devotion to a hopeless situation. The irony for Schuyler is found in the book Tom is reading, a Ross MacDonald mystery in which a corpse is found in a corrupt upper-middle-class L.A. The brevity of Schuyler’s summary of Tom’s cheap and tawdry book in contrast to Schuyler’s own protracted lovelorn story shows the contrast in intellectual development and tastes. The lavishments of the older man are lost on the young Tom who is more middle class and seems to live a life less “adorned” and “romanticized” than Schuyler’s. Action is the key to Tom’s life; contemplation and selfless devotion, the keys to Schuyler’s. This identity reflects an older sensibility, that of the gay male “queen,” as we have mentioned before.

The “queen” is often an older man, denied sex, but who nonetheless lavishes attention and affections on a younger man and makes all sacrifices to the boy’s happiness. This older sensibility comes through the denial of the self as an object of desire, all attention being freely extended to the youth who takes on this potent role.

“Thomas Paul Carey of/Sherman Oaks, California,” (38) Schuyler proclaims. This naming of the loved one finds reflection in Cavafy, and in a whole line of poems that stretches back to Catullus. The male youth is to be memorialized by the poet, sung and favored. In the classical tradition, this naming of the lover gives greater specificity to the poem, and suggests a possessiveness of tone and obsessive ardor on the part of the poet. It also reflects the greater rhetorical pressure surrounding homosexual writers versus heterosexual poets when faced with naming the object of their desires.⁵⁷ The naming of the lover or the dedication of a love poem, just as the naming of the AIDS dead and the dedication of the AIDS quilt, became an important rhetorical act of visibility for gay culture, one that challenged the invisibility of the closet. Cavafy writes in “Temethos, Antiochian, A.D. 400”:

Lines written by young Temethos, madly in love.
The title: “Emonidis”—the favorite
of Antiochos Epiphanis; a very handsome young man
from Samosata . . .
The poem gives voice to the love Temethos feels,
a beautiful kind of love, worthy of him (Collected Poems 129)

⁵⁷ The naming of the object of one’s affection was a dangerous act. The use of pronouns in Whitman was frequently changed from “he” to “she.” The pressure of self-censorship often forced gay writers to use pseudonyms or to set their poems in more “tolerant” classical times, under cover of myth and history and in a third-person narrative removed from their own voice. Douglas’s “Two Loves” is a good example of this transposition.

The “fabled disease” here is love, love between older man and younger boy, the pederastic theme of poets from classical times through the Uranian poets to the present. The ornate, flowery language of Schuyler’s “Tom” suggests the effiteness and dandyism of a poet erudite, clever and worldly. This urbanity and sophistication, as we also see with Richard Howard, marks one form of male relation. After Tom sings his song in Schuyler’s poem, the speaker says: “His voice/is rich, true, his diction/perfect. I’m so in love/I want to die and take/my happiness to heaven!” (36) Such hyperbole and florid excess are cleverly tinged with irony when we note that Tom is singing a rock song, a song entitled “Manhattan Movie,” the most mundane of titles.

The older speaker of the poem actually tries to intercede on his lover’s behalf and arrange an affair between Tom and the young man E. he so desperately desires. This altruistic and pleasurable act by the elder poet reflects the emotional self-sacrifice and voyeurism toward youth which seem to haunt gay poetry and culture, especially the tradition of the Uranians, Cavafy, Auden and Howard. It also reflects previously discussed aspects of the gay queen’s voice in poetry.

We also see such a pleasure in and admiration of youth at work with a poet like Paul Goodman. Goodman (1911-1972), though married, managed a life of bisexuality. Like many homosexuals of his generation, he took on his identity before a time of true gay separatism and the eventual foundation of separate intellectual fields of discourse for gay scholars. Goodman wrote many books, including studies in psychotherapy, linguistics, sociology, religion and city planning (Young, The Male Muse 120). He was also active in

the peace movement, libertarianism, education and community concerns (Young, The Male Muse 120). Goodman's "Untitled" reads as follows:

He stands there like a gently taut bow
 from which his anger may fly hard
 or like the live strings of a violin
 with many songs in it if rightly touched;
 so light and straight he stands there on the corner
 in the yellow afternoon, his eyes are blue,
 his name is Possible. And I remember
 how my heart used to pound when I too could.
 (Young, The Male Muse 44)

The sentiment of the poem, the recollection of youth and its possibilities reflects the themes inherent in Cavafy, the Victorians and Auden. There is a classicism in the image of the strings, the musical instruments. Like Apollo, "He," the young man, is an instrument of pleasure and strength.

Goodman's poem "Long Lines: Youth and Age" begins with the declarative lines: "I am surprised you lust for a grayhead like me/and what a waste for me to grapple so much pleasure" and "Come, young man...I have come with him for company/to his pounding heart" (Young, The Male Muse 44). These express the tender relation between older poet and youth. In the end it is the poet who says "the words like 'I love you' or 'Thank you.'" This genteel concern echoes Schuyler's tone in his poem for Tom. The wistful, almost schoolboy affection of an older poet for a younger man is reflective of a period before a radical gay identity and life style were fully constructed.

Cavafy's sentiment continues to exert influences on a newer generation. Younger poets are drawn to many aspects of Cavafy's poetic, especially his homoeroticism and sensuality, as represented in a poem like "Days of 1903":

I never found them again--those things so speedily lost . . .
 the poetic eyes, the pallid face . . .
 in the dusk of the road . . .

I never found them again--those quite haphazardly acquired,
 that I gave up so lightly;
 and that later in agony I craved.
 The poetic eyes, the pallid face,
 I never found those lips again. (Collected Poems 77)

Mark Doty writes in his poem "To Cavafy": "We were talking about desire,/how sometimes only an image,/a surface compels us:/that boy, for instance, we watched/from the shore." And later, "and I think, imagining him,/of Cavafy, of encounters in upstairs rooms/recollected in upstairs rooms" (Laurents 107-110).

Maurice Kenny in his poem "After Reading the Greek Poet: for Larry" writes: "Cavafy, your young man/with the quiet eyes and honey skin/walks along the river/wagging a finger at older men" (24).

* * *

Richard Howard's poem "Decades: For Hart Crane" from Fellow Feelings (1976) reflects Bergman's idea of poetic self-construction and the notion of gay literary presence.⁵⁸ Howard also represents some of the inter-generational influences suggested by Bloom.

Howard explores his relationship to Hart Crane's "parent-poem" The Bridge, but diverges radically from the "father and son" conflict described by Bloom (Richter 708).

⁵⁸ Bergman discusses in reference to Richard Howard the way a gay poet constructs "a cultural and historical matrix in which his own depersonalized work may be located and against which it can resonate" (Gaiety Transfigured 59). This construction is not unlike the work of feminist poets. The need to construct

We feel no such struggle in Howard. There is no sense of “hate, envy, or fear” toward Crane’s “preemption” of Howard’s “imaginative space” (Abrams 240).

“Decades” is a skillful poem of self-identity and discovery. Comprised of a series of hexameter lines in three stanzas of nine lines with a couplet at the end, the poem is expertly shaped and crafted into five narrative sections. Howard is a formalist, given to many complex, veiled allusions and a sensitive, bantering tone of voice which holds both refinement and genteel understatement. The poem is not timid, however, nor without its political implications.

In Section 1, Howard as a boy of four hears of Crane’s death (Howard grew up in Cleveland, the city where Crane lived and worked in his early years). Crane, of course, despite a failed marriage, is known to have been a homosexual, and he exerted great influence on a generation of gay poets. Howard says: “Dear Hart,/our mothers ate our fathers, what do we/eat but each other? All the things we take/into our heads to do! And let strange creatures/make our mouths their home” (lines 21-25). Howard toys provocatively with language here. The theories of Freud are subtly suggested in the sexual overtones of the language: the mother “eating” the father and the castration anxiety attendant on this notion. Failure to resolve the oedipal conflict around age four, as we’ve been told, leads to prolonged adolescent homosexuality. Given the unhealthy resolution of Howard’s oedipal conflict and the poor role model of his father and mother, his predicament (a homosexual predicament) seems inevitable: “what do we/eat but each

an “imaginative space” for gay poems can involve a dialogue between the gay poet and his tradition (*Gaiety Transfigured* 59).

other?" Two men, two poets, "eating" each other implies both the gay act of fellatio and the act of creative assimilation and admiration. The double-entendre of "strange creatures/make our mouths their home" is both a reference to Crane's drowned state (presumably dissolving into the sea, in an echo of The Tempest) and the sexual exploits of gay men "giving head" or performing fellatio. The expert and comic line breaks after "All the things we take," suspended for a moment before "into our heads to do!" with its facetious exclamation—pure hyperbole with gay overtones.

The constitution of a gay identity, so problematic for Crane in his life and poetry, is commented upon (often comically) by Howard's own later-day predicament. "Our problem is not/to find who remembers our parents—our problem is/to find who remembers ourselves. I love our problem,/it becomes our solution: unbecoming, it dissolves./I was four, you drowned. Now you remember me" (1). The problem for Howard as it may be for Crane is not to remember parents, perhaps a reference to Freudian analysis and Freudian theories of parental influences on sexual identity, but rather to remember one's self, that is, to constitute a place for the adult homosexual in society, in family, in history. The problem for Crane becomes the cryptic signals and abstract language of his poems, seeking to convey emotions and desires censored and unaccepted. This dissolution of language into enigmatic code becomes the state of Crane's poetry and Crane's life. Drowned in the ocean, he literally dissolved into oblivion, the circumstances of his death "unbecoming" and at the same time literally "un-becoming." But Howard loves the "problem." The problem of constituting an identity which is forbidden, obscured or hidden, can be quite beautiful, playful and complex. Though Crane has drowned, he

“remembers” Howard. This would seem to imply that Crane’s death and the details surrounding his knowledge of it at the age of four marked Howard’s life forever. Crane’s life and death, as well as his homosexuality, retain a strong literary presence in Howard’s consciousness. Howard is linked to Crane by both his homosexuality and his problematic work as poet.

In Section II, Howard finds himself in Laukhuff’s, the bookstore where he first discovered Crane’s work. Laukhuff alludes to the fact that Crane chose not to grow old; he refused. Laukhuff tells the young Howard in regard to The Bridge that there is “a certain value, there is/poetic justice in the sense of having missed/the full meaning of things” (2). Laukhuff seems to make reference to Crane’s tormented alcoholic, homosexual life, and here we recall again the Freudian image of the homosexual as one who prolongs his adolescence, and fails to coalesce into full “paternal” identification.

In Section III, Howard tells us that Crane was part of Paris, Montparnasse and the Twenties: “your Montparnasse is dead, my Saint-Germain/dead-set against the capital of gaiety/you shared in the Twenties. Gay it is, though,/and so am I, to his disparagement/expressed, dear Hart, in terms of our decadence/as the flaming creatures pass” (3). (It is here interesting to note the experimental drag film of the sixties, “Flaming Creatures” by Jack Smith, with which Howard would have been familiar.) The poet or speaker of the poem reveals here his own gay identity and shared decadence with Crane. The spin and play on the word “gaiety” in its older and newer senses is notable. The repetition “dear Hart” mimics the common refrain of heterosexual love poems. Howard, as poet, needs Crane in order to connect his own identity with the past and understand its

formation. "Hart? I need you here, quarrelsome, drunk/on your permanent shore-leave from the opposite sex,/opposing shore, the loss, the losses, the gain" (3).

Section IV begins at the Sand Street Bar & Grille. Howard, older now, remembers Crane and the moment he gave his "hand to Walt, always on edge,/on the beach of embarking, the brink where they fall/into the sea, these castles of our misconduct" (4). He goes on to speak of Crane's ghost: "Your ghost, anonymous, cruises among ghosts,/our neighborly disgrace. Was it from this/you made your Bridge, reaching up to Walt/and down to me—out of this River, this Harbor,/this Island and these, these sexual shadows, made/an enviable failure, your dread success?" (4). Howard himself seems to feel part of a tradition, linked to Whitman and Crane by virtue of his sexual misconduct and his social positioning in the world. Howard is haunted by Crane's memory: "Albatross, siren, you haunt me far from home" (4).

Section V of the poem opens:

Garrettsville. By forty-five I know
your beginning lost at land, your end at sea:
sometimes beginnings can be more desperate
than ends, patrimony more than matrimony,
and middle age the worst despair of all.
I do not find you here, or in the bars,
or Laukhuff's, or that yellow restaurant—
not even on the beach you walked with Walt,
hand in hand, you told him: never to let go.

But that is where you find me. Take my hand
as you gave yours to him. We suffer from
the same fabled disease, and only the hope
of dying of it keeps a man alive. (5)

The "fabled disease" seems more than the plight of the poet who faces mortality and seeks his immortality in his work; it is also the condition of the homosexual, who,

much maligned, faces the task of constructing a positive, visible identity and tradition. The “fabled disease” comes about from the “tragic” predicament of the homosexual, who is “afflicted” by his desires, driven to loneliness, suicide and isolation. Howard seeks a tradition: “Take my hand,” he says, as though reaching out for affirmation. The poem closes with “Hart, the world you drowned for is your wife:/a farewell to mortality, not my life” (5). Through a complex statement, this line would seem to suggest that Howard recognizes that Crane’s death and drowning were fostered by the impossible demand he placed upon himself by choosing heterosexual marriage as an answer to homosexual unhappiness. Crane died by “drowning” more than his physical self, but having “drowned” his homosexual identity through marriage and obeisance to heterosexual codes. Howard leaves us with the ambiguous yet forceful phrase “not my life.” This turn separates Crane’s resolution of his gay identity from Howard’s own, and draws attention to the two poets’ separate fates. By choosing death, Crane ends the struggle of his desires; this solution or direction is one Howard fortunately does not need to make. Howard’s solution to forming a gay identity is found in a sense of connection and tradition across generations.

Howard’s sense of this apotheosis, of this joining of generations and gay identities, is clarified toward the end of the poem:

We join the Fathers after all, Hart, rejoin
 not to repel or repeal or destroy, but to fuse,
 as Walt declared it: wisdom of the shores,

 easy to conceive of, hard to come by, to choose
 our fathers and to make our history.
 What takes us has us, that is what I know.
 We lose, being born, all we lose by dying:
 all. (5)

Almost in direct repudiation of Bloom's poetical, heterosexual, father-son struggle, Howard speaks as though the gay poet would “fuse” with the past, with Whitman, and the tradition. Howard must choose his father, much as Bergman implies. The gay poet must choose his identity and his poetic construction of identity. This is, however no easy task, and it is often haunted by a sense of loss and indeterminacy.

The influence of Crane's oblique, lyrical style has extended to newer poetic works such as Mark Doty's Atlantis (1995) and Carl Phillip's Cortege (1995). In their work, the language becomes impressionistic and disassociative. The tremendous lyrical skill of these poems places them in the tradition of Crane; yet unlike Crane's poems with their sublimated homosexuality, these poems speak directly of homoeroticism, gender ambiguity, and issues of sexual and racial essentialism/constructivism.

Doty's Atlantis (which is also the title of a long poem by Crane) is dedicated to his lover Wally Roberts, who died from AIDS. In some respects it is similar to Crane's “Voyages,” which was unofficially dedicated to Emil Opffer, Crane's seafaring lover. In section 4 of Atlantis, the title poem of Doty's collection, we have the metaphor of the cyclical appearance of a tidal marsh near the sea becomes symbolic of Doty's life, love and relationship with Roberts. Doty writes:

I thought your illness a kind of solvent
dissolving the future a little at a time;

I didn't understand what's to come
was always just a glimmer

up ahead, veiled like the marsh
gone under its tidal sheet

of mildly rippling aluminum. (57)

And later:

... too cold yet for green, too early
for the tumble and wrack of last season

to be anything but promise,
but there in the air was white tulip,

marvel, triumph of all flowering, the soul
lifted up, if we could still believe

in the soul, after so much diminishment...
Breath, from the unpromising waters,

up, across the pond and the two-lane highway,
pure purpose, over the dune,

gone. Tomorrow's unreadable
as this shining acreage;

the future's nothing
but this moment's gleaming rim.

Now the tide's begun
its clockwork turn, pouring,

in the day's hourglass,
toward the other side of the world,

and our dependable marsh reappears
--emptied of that starched and angular grace

that spirited the ether, lessened
but here. And our ongoingness,

what there'll be of us? Look,
love, the lost world

rising from the waters again:
our continent, where it always was,

emerging from the half-light, unforgettable,
drenched, unchanged. (58)

Doty uses a lyrical, metaphorical language of sea and marsh to reconstitute the “lost world” of his love for Roberts. The physicality and passion of that love become apparent in the “unforgettable” and “drenched” vision of the tidal marsh rising from its watery depths. Like Crane, Doty uses a highly lyrical and figurative language of sea and shore to embody physical and spiritual correlatives to his homosexual relationship.

Crane writes in “Voyages” Part III:

Infinite consanguinity it bears—
This tendered theme of you that light
Retrieves from sea plains where the sky
Resigns a breast that every wave enthrones;
While ribboned water lanes I wind
Are laved and scattered with no stroke
Wide from your side, whereto this hour
The sea lifts, also, reliquary hands.

And so, admitted through black swollen gates
That must arrest all distance otherwise,—
Past whirling pillars and lithe pediments,
Light wrestling there incessantly with light,
Star kissing star through wave on wave unto
Your body rocking!

And where death, if shed,
Presumes no carnage, but this single change,—
Upon the steep floor flung from dawn to dawn
The silken skilled transmemberment of song;

Permit me voyage, love, into your hands . . .
(Crane, The Complete Poems 37)

Forced not to speak of homosexual intercourse directly, Crane speaks of it metaphorically. The intimacy of Crane and Opffer is conveyed in a parallel vision of Crane

and the sea. We even have a passing nod toward Whitman in the phrase, “Your body rocking!”

Phillips in the title poem of his work, “Cortege,” also expresses a language of sublime love. Though grief is the underlying theme of this poem and this collection, they recall Crane distantly, in their oblique questioning cadence, working both toward an interiority and a sense of the great emotional instability that comes from grief. “Cortege” is divided into three choral parts and ends with an envoi. The first chorus reads:

I. The Viewing (A Chorus)

O what, then did he look like?

He had a good body.

And how came you to know this?

His body was naked.

Say the sound of his body.

His body was quiet.

Say again—quiet?

He was sleeping.

You are sure of this? Sleeping?

Inside it, yes. Inside it. (Phillips 22)

The questioning of the poem creates an inner tension regarding the “knowledge” or knowing on the part of the speaker. The poet reviews again the details of his passion and his loss. The gay gaze and voyeurism of the past are here hovering in the poem at a great distance. The poem, like grief itself, shows a great movement between interiority and exteriority. The tone is overwhelmingly elegiac.

Crane in “The Tunnel” achieves a similar elegiac, questioning tone of voice which

denotes great personal and internal upheaval:

Whose head is swinging from the swollen strap?
 Whose body smokes along the bitten rails,
 Bursts from a smoldering bundle far behind
 In back forks of the chasms of the brain,--
 Puffs from a riven stump far out behind
 In interborough fissures of the mind . . . ?

And why do I often meet your visage here,
 Your eyes like agate lanterns—on and on
 Below the toothpaste and the dandruff ads? (Crane, The Complete Poems
 110)

And later:

caught like pennies beneath soot and steam
 Kiss of our agony thou gatherest;
 Condensed, thou takest all--shrill ganglia
 Impassioned with some song we fail to keep.
 And yet, like Lazarus, to feel the slope,
 The sod and billow breaking,--lifting ground,
 --A sound of waters bending astride the sky
 Unceasing with some Word that will not die . . . ! (Crane, The Complete Poems 110)

And finally:

A tugboat, wheezing wreaths of steam,
 Lunged past, with one galvanic blare stove up the River.
 I counted the echoes assembling, one after one,
 Searching, thumbing the midnight on the piers.
 Lights, coasting, left the oily tympanum of waters;
 The blackness somewhere gouged glass on a sky.
 And this thy harbor, O my City, I have driven under,
 Tossed from the coil of tickling towers . . .
 Tomorrow,
 And to be . . . Here by the River that is East--
 Here at the waters' edge the hands drop memory;
 Shadowless in that abyss they unaccounting lie.
 How far away the star has pooled the sea--
 Or shall the hands be drawn away, to die?

Kiss of our agony Thou gatherest,
 Hand of Fire
 gatherest-- (Crane, The Complete Poems 111-112)

As with Phillips, Crane's poem is deeply elegiac. Though we cannot know the true circumstances for Crane's apocalyptic vision in "The Tunnel," we are struck by the suggestion of emotional separation and upheaval. Phillip's poem, like Crane's, builds toward its own apocalyptic finale in the "Envoi" section:

And I came to where was nothing but drowning
 and more drowning, and saw to where the sea—
 besides flesh—was, as well, littered with boats,
 how each was blue but trimmed with white, to each
 a name I didn't know and then, recalling,
 did. And ignoring the flesh that, burning, gives
 more stink than heat, I dragged what boats I could
 to the shore and piled them severally in a tree—
 less space, and lit a fire that didn't take
 at first—the wood was wet—and then, helped by
 the wind, became a blaze so high the sea
 itself, along with the bodies in it, seemed
 to burn. I watched as each boat fell to flame:
Vincent and Matthew and, last, what bore your name. (28)

Ultimately Phillips's poem describes the mysteries of death: the soul as moth "maybe beating upon/a strange door now,/somebody knocks/and knocks at a new/country, of which/nothing is understood--no danger occurs/to him . . ." (25). As in Crane, Duncan and Spicer, the mystical and mythic in life are displayed in a language which is romantic, metaphysical and metaphorical. Crane and Phillips are both "impassioned with some song" that is too overwhelming for them to keep. It arrives at a mythical place where the poet burns the memory of his grief: "I watched as each boat fell to flame:*Vincent and Matthew* and, last, what bore your name." But in this landscape the poet witnesses "nothing but

drowning/and more drowning, and saw to where the sea--/besides flesh--was, as well, littered with boats." The endless drowning like the enumeration of the AIDS dead, expresses a multiplicity of grief, experiences, identities and interpretations.

* * *

Langston Hughes continues to exert an influence on younger black gay writers. Carl Phillips in "The Hustler Speaks of Places," printed in David Laurents' The Bad Boy Book of Erotic Poetry (1995), takes on the mythic quality of Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." A definitive statement of the Harlem Renaissance experience, this poem established a mythic connection to a collective black past. Phillips displaces Hughes's poem into the context of a homosexual hustler speaking of his life. The irony of such a move speaks to the disparity between the homosexual's experience of world-weariness and oppression and that of the common black man in Hughes' work. Phillips, a black gay man, voices throughout the poem, as Hughes did for an entire generation of black Americans, the despair yet strength of his collective identity.

* * *

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) and Paul Verlaine's (1844-1896) "Sonnet: To the Asshole" was a radically homoerotic poem. The poem, salacious and graphic, draws upon a genre of homoerotic verse begun with Catullus and other Roman and Greek writers. "Sonnet: To the Asshole" begins:

Dark, puckered hole: a purple carnation
That trembles, nestled among the moss (still wet
With love) covering the gentle curvation
Of the white ass, just to the royal eyelet. (Coote 235)

The poem continues:

Not wishing the prick to have its bent,
 My mouth too has often mated with that vent,
 My sobbing tongue tried to devour the rose
 Flowering in brown moisture. (Coote 235)

The boldness of French gay writers has stemmed from their impulse to shock a more staid bourgeois sensibility and it reflects a homosexuality which was less focused on human rights issues than on class issues. Criminality, marginality and homosexuality all seem to be important in the poetic identity of French gay poets such as Verlaine, Rimbaud and Genet. It also has been embraced by American writers like Ginsberg and the Beats. Rimbaud, Verlaine and Genet gave a bold sense of carnality to gay verse, an eroticism which was less veiled, less controlled and less discrete than the Uranians.

Jean Genet is the true model of the homosexual as criminal and bad boy. Between 1940 and 1948 his novels, Our Lady of the Flowers, The Thief's Journal and Miracle of the Rose, were published, and these influenced a generation of gay writers. Genet's poems, though less well known, were translated by Steven Finch and published by Gay Sunshine Press in 1981 under the title Treasures of the Night.

Genet writes in "Sentenced to Death": "O such sadness in my mouth! Bitterness that's bulging,/Bulging my humble heart! My perfumed loves/Are leaving, farewell! Farewell, beloved balls!/O with my broken voice, farewell, insolent prick!" (15). His poems are populated by sailors, cabinboys, "hoodlum hands" (13): "Let's dream together, Love, of some tough Lover,/Big as the Universe and his body stained with shadows./He'll strip us and lock us up in these gloomy cells,/Between his golden thighs, on his smoking stomach" (13). Genet's poetry carries the feel of the ballad with its short quatrains, its

evident sense of the sailor's song or song of the small cafe. "The song traveling through a gloomy world/Is the cry of a pimp carried away by your music,/The song of a hanged man stiff as a rod./It's the enchanted call of a thief in love" (17).

These poems are homoerotic, graphic and physical. "Worship my tattooed torso like a holy totempole,/Get down on both knees, worship my prick that breaks you/Better than a weapon, to the point of tears,/Worship what's about to penetrate you" (19). Ginsberg has drawn from Genet's lyrics in his use of the archaisms of the ballad stanza (especially in a work like "Come All Ye Brave Boys").

A poem such as Ginsberg's "Sweet Boy, Gimme Yr Ass" seems much indebted to Verlaine, Rimbaud and Genet alike. There is a direct, bold address in the poem, a freeness in language and a clear eroticism:

lemme kiss your face, lick your neck
touch your lips, tongue tickle tongue end
nose to nose, quiet questions
ever slept with a man before?
Hand stroking your back slowly down to the cheek's moist hair soft asshole
eyes to eyes blur, a tear strained from seeing (613)

Homoerotic poetry has drawn heavily from this tradition. Ginsberg, like Genet, uses a language which is coarse and explicit. It is a language which is aggressive and manipulative much as Genet's. It is often pederastic in theme. Ginsberg was a proud member of NAMBLA, the North American Man-Boy Love Association, and Genet was a young male prostitute on the streets of Paris in the thirties (Russell 176, 257). There are elements of the criminal, the forbidden and personal rebellion which seem important to this poetry. Like Verlaine and Rimbaud, Ginsberg and his lover-poet Peter Orlovsky, established themselves as literary renegades of a sort, stripping naked and having sex with

each other at public poetry readings, and pursuing a decades long “marriage” which was tempestuous and collaborative.

Ginsberg continues:

I'll do the same your stiff prick's soft skin, lick your ass—
Come on, Come on, open up, legs apart here this pillow
under your buttock (613)

* * *

Frank O'Hara is a poet who influenced many other gay writers. O'Hara created a poetic identity which embraced popular culture, surrealism, Dadaism, and placed gay men clearly in the role of keepers of the cultural code. O'Hara's digressions and witty banter, his odd and arresting use of the line break to surprise and comically confuse the reader, and his conundrums of language both conventional and non-conventional, covered over his more troubled emotional subtexts. Like other gay writers he extends the dialogue and polemic about heterosexuality/homosexuality into his work. O'Hara uses the free play of Dadaist and Surrealist techniques to achieve, like Wilde, a certain sophisticated humor about life and love and sexual preference. One gay style that draws heavily from the legacy of O'Hara is found in those poems which explore cultural icons and moments in a language that is facetious, playful and sexual.

Walta Borawski in “Role Model,” from his 1984 book of poetry, Sexually Dangerous Poet, writes: “Father says I should try harder to be/more like Rory Calhoun I still intend/to be Elizabeth Taylor. Though Mother has/never fully forgiven her—even after the/near fatal tracheotomy—for stealing/Eddie Fisher from Debbie Reynolds I

imagine/myself in violet dresses with violet contact/lenses & the largest diamonds” (18).

The banter and digressions are reminiscent of O’Hara and even the deletion of punctuation in places creates, as in O’Hara, collisions of words and ideas that are humorous. Borawski ends: “for what is fantasy but the stroke of/fate, of face, that leaves one person taking/orders in a pizza joint--another--a queen” (18). These wonderful surprises of logic which end in surprising or witty turns owe much to a style of voice and form perfected by O’Hara.

David Trinidad in books of poetry such as Hand Over Heart (1991) reinvestigates (like O’Hara) popular culture, camp and the autobiographical. Trinidad presents an easy urbanity and wit. He has always enjoyed the trappings of t.v. and broadly American pop culture, and his poems express a certain fascination with the music and styles of kitsch culture. ‘Movin’ With Nancy” (an homage to Nancy Sinatra and her 1966 song “These Boots are Made for Walkin”), “Twiggy,” “Flower Power,” “The Munsters,” all nostalgically yet wittily comment on the gay personal alongside the “low-cultural.”

Trinidad’s “C’est plus qu’un crime, c’est une faute,” for Amy Gerstler, begins:

In the small hours, several rounds
at Le Cafe, “one of the swankier
spots West L.A.’s nightlife offers”:
pink neon and napkins, essence of
scampi and chateaubriand. Seated at
a table against the wall, listen-
ing to the couples on either side
of us chat *en francais*, I was
able to comment on the “ambiance” (Trinidad, Hand Over Heart 28)

The tone of voice is drawn from a sophisticated banter which O’Hara or Proust would certainly understand. It is a voicing we have also heard in gay plays by Matt Crowley,

Harvey Fierstein and Terence McNally.

Rudy Kikel's Long Division is an autobiographical collection of poems which recount, by way of reminiscence, the making of a gay sociability and sensibility. Kikel's 1980 poem "Everybody's Joe Brainard and Mine" from the section of his book aptly entitled "Backward Glances" (we are reminded of the gay film of the eighties "Parting Glances") is a chatty, literary romp which describes many facets of the gay writer's milieu. Indebted again to O'Hara and the chatty urbanity of Schuyler, Kikel's work is addressed to Joe Brainard and Tim Dlugos and speaks of their place in the New York gay literary scene. The poem documents Kikel's own take on the separate literary and artistic communities and the various generational influences on gay writers: "O'Hara was/the chief influence on your [Brainard's] work in words,/after all--what for me Howard has been." The poem also makes allusions to other gay artists such as Gerard Malenga and Edmund White.

Even a poem such as "The Tomb of Stuart Merrill" from John Ashbery's immensely successful collection, Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1976), shows influence from O'Hara. It begins:

It is the first soir of March
They have taken the plants away.

Martha Hoople wanted a big "gnossienne" hydrangea
Smelling all over of Jicky for her
Card party: the basement couldn't
Hold up all that wildness.

The petits fours have left.

Then up and spake the Major:

The new conservatism is
Sitting down beside you. (37)

We might read it beside a poem such as O'Hara's "Mary Desti's Ass":

In Bayreuth once
we were very good friends of the Wagners
and I stepped in once
for Isadora so perfectly
she would never allow me to dance again
that's the way it was in Bayreuth

the way it was in Hackensack
was different
there one never did anything
and everyone hated you anyway
it was fun, it was clear
you knew where you stood (Lunch Poems, 54)

In both cases we have a poetic voice or identity constructed out of whimsical attention to tricks of language, verbal word play and witty turns. It is a gay voice which through its wit and erudition plays the trickster as much as Oscar Wilde did a century before. There is a strong legacy of Surrealism in Ashbery's work. As we know, early on, O'Hara was also fascinated by this technique. And Ashbery, like O'Hara or Schuyler, is fond of a loquacious, bantering style of verse which takes on many moods, shadings and meanings. It draws on one facet of a gay tradition which sought to amuse by way of camp the dominant traditional forces at work in heterosexual society.

* * *

The gay black poet Adrian Stanford, of the sixties and seventies, drew as much upon the street cadences of Hughes with his sense of local black lore, as he did on Baldwin's conflicting themes of manhood, religion and community. Stanford brought new attention to the marginal lives of gay black men. He identified themes which were to

interest later generations of gay black poets: the use of the drag queen as tribal oracle and shaman for gay black consciousness and empowerment; the strange balancing act of gay black men stuck between a white gay culture and a homophobic black community.

A poem such as Stanford's "Sacrifice," which appeared in his seminal 1977 book of poetry Black & Queer published by Good Gay Poets Press in Boston, incorporates elements of ritual, performance and myth. As in Hughes poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," there is a strong mythic tone to this verse, and a need to cast the gay man as healer, shaman, and seer. Spiritual renewal is found through the personal odyssey of the gay black man. The poem lays out the myth of black masculinity and machismo, which must be reinvestigated by the gay black man and explored for all of its contradictory and conflicting elements.

Had my father known
when he cast forth his offering
to the sea of my mother's womb
what creation their joy would bring
would he have welcomed the man/she child in its birth
heralding my duality as natures zenith (in human form)
and blessed the son he held for all to see
keeping my sister/self obscured, until
I understood my second destiny—
or would he have shuddered at the fate his loins possessed
and retracting from those clashing thighs,
let the seeds that bore such strains
meet their end upon the ground. (Hemphill, Brother to Brother 2)

Essex Hemphill, the powerful, political, gay black poet of the eighties would seize upon this issue of black masculinity and machismo in his work, and the questions inherent in black manhood and sexuality. Poems by Hemphill such as "If His Name Were Mandingo" and "Rights and Permissions" would extend Stanford's themes. In "Rights and

Permissions” Hemphill writes:

Sometimes I hold
my warm seed
up to my mouth
very close
to my parched lips
and whisper
“I’m sorry,”
before I turn my hand
over the toilet
and listen to the seed
splash into the water. (Hemphill, Ceremonies 67)

A poet such as Assotto Saint also echoes some of Stanford’s sense of the dual shaman-like nature of gay black identity—“the man/she child in its birth.” Saint’s poem “Triple Trouble” ends:

Nile smiled. An empowering mystery, the past
passed on from generations, all the joy of life
reflected. So slowly his body bent far forward.
Long supple arms opened low
to pay homage
to surrender in prayer
to offer himself
 a black queen dancing with shadows
 at high noon
triple trouble that’s brutal chasing America’s evil
 spirits away. (Morse and Larkin 353).

In much gay black poetry the drag queen becomes a figure of strength, defiance and leadership. This is the tone, for instance, in Stanford’s sixties’ poem “Remembrance of Rittenhouse Square”:

black sarah ruled
and we of lesser divinity paid homage to her
with our pansy smiles.
We breathed magnolia air, dreaming other visions
through the velvet of our mascara lashes;
and blessed ourselves with water from the shallow pond,

and kissed each handsome boy as he passed by.
 The low-hung moon brought expectation to our hearts.
 We chattered endlessly: mingling within, without,
 seeking happiness, finding nothing
 but the sad green beauty of the trees.
 Our priestess has another temple now,
 and we the keepers of this sacred ground
 have been raped, our harpstrings broken,
 we sing no more—
 ah, good queen sarah, why did you never speak of reality?
 (Hemphill, Brother to Brother 84)

Like the work of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, this poem turns its voice toward the political. With the mournful tone of blues lyrics, it questions the brutal, harsh realities which fringe its surface. Rape, so central to the experience of slavery is woven into this poem, along with images of “harpstrings” and “magnolia air” suggestive of minstrel times, to provide a landscape of black suffering and victimization. However, the drag queen, sarah, “ruled” and we are reminded of the fierceness and yet determined strength of the black “feminine” nature. Smoldering in this poem is the anger and separatist voice of gay black men who are relegated to a narrow green Eden—the cruising park—in the midst of urban despair, in which to find love. Hemphill and Saint will later appropriate this setting and the scene of drag-queen looking for johns as representative of black gay identity and of the experience of exploitation and victimization.

Stanford’s “Psalm for the ghetto” is a prose poem which also included in Black & Queer. In it Stanford strikes a more strident tone of black liberation, arguing the need for an “intellectual, moral and social/revolution out of which a new culture can be formed” where “the black man can walk confidently and unafraid in that/truth and that light which

is freedom” (Hemphill, Brother to Brother 166).

Stanford’s work helped begin the move toward a particularly gay black political stance, one that embraced the marginalized figures of the black community and united them to a sense of ritual and performance. Blues poetry was reinvestigated from the perspective of gay black figures in a Philadelphia park, and then developed into a poetry which was politically confrontative and spiritually transformative. Stanford writes at the end of “Psalm for the ghetto”: “let this be the black man’s offering of love. Let it be proffered in the/glad conviction that the black man will survive, gloriously” (Hemphill, Brother to Brother 166).

Essex Hemphill, as no other gay black poet of his time, consolidated many existing themes in gay black writing. His exhaustive look at the politics and culture of the black community, his essays on the homophobic legacy from black nationalism and black theorists, provided an analysis that enabled much of today’s gay black writing. Along with Assotto Saint, Melvin Dixon and Donald Woods, Hemphill influenced a generation of younger poets who saw in his verse a vernacular and style of imagery for the continued exploration of gay black identity. Hemphill’s critique of straight males and the role of misogyny, violence and homophobia in their definition of masculinity, is strikingly powerful. His look at the abuse of gay black men by white gay men in such poems as “Family Jewels” and his defiant stance against black religious homophobia in “American Wedding” participate in the strong political traditions of gay black writing.

Hemphill’s technique of taking politically and racially charged images or situations and exploring their fuller implications in relation to gender, race and sexual orientation are

powerfully effective. One senses this in the titles he chooses for his prose and poetry, all included in Ceremonies: “Rights and Permissions,” “If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Dr. Frances Cress Welsing,” “Does Your Mama Know About Me?,” “If I Simply Wanted Status I’d Wear Calvin Klein,” “Cordon Negro,” “Black Machismo,” “To Some Supposed Brothers,” “If His Name Were Mandingo,” “Homicide,” and “Between Pathos and Seduction.” His poems often open with an economy of action and description. In “The Tomb of Sorrow” he begins:

Gunshots ring out above our heads
as we sit beneath your favorite tree,
in this park called Meridian Hill,
called Malcolm X, that you call
the “Tomb of Sorrow”
(and claim to be its gatekeeper);
in the cool air lingering after the rain,
the men return to the Wailing Wall
to throw laughter and sad glances
into the fountains below,
or they scream out
for a stud by any name,
their beautiful asses
rimmed by the moon. (Hemphill, Brother to Brother 75)

Here again, as with Stanford, we have an urban setting, a scene of victimization, violence and sadness, where gay black men must live out their marginalized lives. Hemphill contemplates his victimization by a married black man and the more general way black men are victimized by each other. This contemplation brings a new insight which rises to the level of ancestral and ritualistic epiphany. Toward the end of “The Tomb of Sorrow” Hemphill writes:

I rummage through
ancestral memories

in search of the
original tribes
that fathered us.
I want to remember
the exact practices
of civility
we agreed upon.
I want us to remember
the nobility of decency.

The poem finishes:

Oh ancient petals,
Oh recent blooms. (Hemphill, Ceremonies 83)

The myth of the black drag queen and “her” fierceness as mythic transgressor and symbol of dignity and strength exists in many of Hemphill’s poems (for instance “Heavy Breathing,” in Ceremonies). The lyricism and imagery, theatricality and performance, and the rhetorical power of a poem such as “Heavy Breathing” harken back to the Harlem Renaissance. Hemphill’s conscious pirating of the Negritude and Harlem Renaissance movements into his cultural heritage is quite evident: “Heavy Breathing” is dedicated to Aimé Césaire, one of the Negritude poets.⁵⁹ Hemphill also sought to write political essays, poems and prose, much like the Harlem Renaissance writers, to create a diverse and far-reaching exercise of gay black identity. With poets like Hemphill and Saint, in the eighties gay black identity became a movement, a collective front.

* * *

We can see that a gay literary tradition is strongly felt in much contemporary gay or queer writing. In the poets and poems we have reviewed we see how each generation

⁵⁹ Negritude was a poetic movement often associated with Aimé Césaire. He is joined in the movement by other African poets of his generation, J.R. Jolobe, Dennis C. Osadebay, Theko Bereng, Léopold Sédar-

of gay writers has sought to construct poetic identities that do justice to a sense of cultural history. The experience of the closet and its attendant invisibility made particularly useful the development of an intertextuality, in which the mere invocation of names such as Whitman or Cavafy, or terms such as “adhesiveness,” immediately identified the poet as part of the homosexual tradition and signified his sexual preference.

Senghor and Efiua Sutherland, who often wrote poems which expressed protest against colonialism and the disregard of African tradition (Preminger 557).

Chapter 3

Social and Cultural Marginality Versus the Mainstream:

Illness, Normality, Rebellion and the Strategies of Camp

In American culture there has always been the tendency to isolate and marginalize the life of the homosexual. The homosexual world has often been viewed as one of depravity, illness, narcissism, and decadence, a shadowy limbo at the fringes of “real” culture. Homosexuals have been cast in the role of outlaws and sexual deviates. They have been psychoanalyzed and subjected to any number of medical models which have seen their lives as aberrations or monstrosities. Not surprisingly the gay artist has always experienced the tension between a dominant heterosexual world and his gay identity. For the Gay Beats such as Ginsberg, madness and depravity were accepted and embraced as the inevitable signs of the rebellious, visionary moment of the gay individual. Ginsberg and Harold Norse lived in a world of angry young men. The Gay Beats also used the perspective of gay marginality as a way of critiquing and subverting the popular heterosexual culture. O’Hara’s closet became a stage for playful romps. Others used the aesthetic isolation of a marginalized gay world as a vantage point from which to develop their sad and ironic commentaries on the “fabled disease” of homosexuality. Stonewall and liberation politics, however, saw the marginal as a place of empowerment. The birth of a gay subcultural identity fostered a clear gay minority voice in poetry. Finally, AIDS in the

eighties brought homosexuality back to confront the old themes of illness, decadence and solipsism, prominent from the very beginning of an American gay male poetic tradition.

THE OUTCAST REBEL AND THE DEMI-MONDE

In the past, both socially and culturally, the gay writer was seen as outcast, demon, and outlaw. Different from the Victorian Uranian poets with their idyllic aesthetic concerns, the gay French Symbolists or Decadents and, much later, the gay American Beats, founded traditions of raw, charged, erotic verse. As Diana Fuss suggests in her Inside/Out, the binary of heterosexual/homosexual successfully casts the homosexual and lesbian in the position of “outsiderness” (Fuss 2) This “outsiderness” reinforces sexual borders and the rhetoric of “inside/outside,” and reflects broader social constructions of “marginality, subversion, dissidence, and othering” (Fuss 5).⁶⁰ The marginality of the gay French Decadents, Verlaine and Rimbaud, served as a model for the early marginal status of the Gay Beats in the American fifties. Ginsberg and others were cultural outcasts, misfits in contrast to Auden, Howard, Merrill and other gay cosmopolitan poets with their mainstream success. Rimbaud's precocious poetry and short life gave birth to a notion of

60 Fuss's “Introduction” to Inside/Out explores the ways in which “homosexuality is produced inside the dominant discourse of sexual difference as its necessary outside” (Fuss 5). Fuss states that “the fear of the homo, which continually *rubs up against* the hetero (tribadic-style), concentrates and codifies the very real possibility and ever-present threat of a collapse of boundaries, an effacing of limits, and a radical confusing of identities” (Fuss 6). It is my belief that marginality, alienation, othering and dissidence became more intensified in the fifties when the threat of homosexual latency presented by Freud, and later substantiated by Kinsey in his report on male sexuality, made American society ever conscious of this deviant potential from within. The Beat movement represented alienated marginalized individuals and followed the binary mode of thinking in the fifties; the Beats were decadent, sexually indiscriminate and monstrous radicals in contrast to a more law-abiding, conservative, heterosexual, family-oriented society. It is no surprise that science fiction films, which proliferated in the fifties, seemed a manifestation of the

the gay rebel as “enfant terrible” with a prolonged sense of adolescence or latency. Rimbaud’s “The Drunken Boat” is a shocking poem, a visionary poem which looks upon the excesses and depravity of an irrational landscape (Rimbaud 81-87). We hear distant similarities to Ginsberg’s Howl (1956) in “I’ve seen the low sun, stained by mysteries/of horror, lighting with long purple clots/like actors in the ancient tragedies” (Rimbaud 83). This apocalyptic vision of excess, dejection and despair is matched by Verlaine’s “Apathy” in which he declares: “I am the Empire in its decadence/watching the tall blond Norse men march, meanwhile/writing indolently, with a golden style,/acrostics where the sunlight’s languors dance./The lonely soul is heartsick with this dreary/boredom” (Verlaine 33).

The use of the “I” is similar to Ginsberg’s. The French decadents appear to be restless and beset by anxiety and danger. They fear the excess of their lives yet push the limits nonetheless in a struggle for personal freedom from oppressive conventionality. The homosexual must suffer, but also can celebrate his defiance as a true act of liberty. We can only remember that when Jean Genet died in Paris in 1986 (and I associate Genet with the Gay Beats), the man who had been seen as such a sexually sordid and decadent writer was “officially eulogized by no less than the French minister of culture, Jack Lang, who concluded, ‘Jean Genet was liberty itself’” (Russell 178).

The homosexual “I,” so often questioned and censored, was forced to more and more extreme positions of removal and displacement. A gay artist could either accept the persona of marginality and criminality, or choose the amorphous “I” of intellectual abstraction. If sex cannot be spoken, homoeroticism cannot be seen and must drift in the

hysteria about outside enemies and marginalization. Popular culture in the fifties merely reflected the milieu of the Cold War era and the rigid retrenchment into political, sexual and gender borders.

indeterminate cosmos of Crane or be relegated to the ambiguous and divided intellectuality of Auden.

Ginsberg, the Beats and other counter-cultural poets (along with poets much later in the AIDS era) were forced to be confrontative in their language, as though by its rhetoric, an identity, a validity, a reality was being woven and built. At the same time, the Beat focus was on a generation of men, before Stonewall, who acted as rebels, desolate angels, fallen out of the heterosexual Eden and heaven they never could inhabit. Indeed, their poems take place in settings of marginality, desolation, borderlands of the uninhabitable and the abnormal. Loss and its associated madness (so much a part of the Romantic poetry of a previous century) haunt these works and perhaps reflect the homophobia and dejection the Beats saw around them in American culture. Their poems also reflect the psychiatrization of homosexuality and its suppression in the thirties, forties and fifties, as well as the legacy of medical works such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis (1886), Havelock Ellis' Studies in the Psychology of Sex (1897), and Sigmund Freud's collected writings. Fone in his chapter "Sinister Decadence: Homophobia, Patriotism, and American Manhood, 1933-1950" writes in depth about the twentieth century from the perspective of the many homophobic "scientific" treatises that took aim at homosexuality (notably Alfred Adler's homophobic essay of 1917 entitled "The Homosexual Problem") (Fone 237). Adler asserted that homosexuals "show 'an active hostility to society' and are ready to take 'hostile measures' against the 'requirements of social life' as represented by the 'normal sex act'" (Fone 237). In 1913, Dr. Francis Schockley suggested that homosexuality was associated with paranoia (Fone

236). Homosexuality was also linked with drugs, stimulants, madness and criminality. Alfred Kinsey's famous Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (the 'Kinsey Report') of 1948 brought homosexuality into mainstream consciousness as more prevalent than previously suspected. Such a disclosure had both positive and negative effects: it identified homosexuality as a more universal and perhaps natural phenomenon, but also made it seem more of a menace and danger to many child-rearing parents.

In the fifties gay art was largely an art of abjection (which was to continue into the eighties with Cooper and Mapplethorpe, the Gilded Poets and the Fag Rag poets). The themes of abjection and desolation were embraced by the Beat and counter-cultural gay poet as emblematic of their "outsiderness." The myth of their degeneracy invited a fierce individualism which reached back to Thoreau with his emphasis on civil disobedience. This individualism called for a style of raw, immediate language, off-handed, dashed lines, the Beat style of automatic writing. After all, an unreflective language, an immediate thought on paper, precludes the control of a heterosexual filtering consciousness or ego, and invites the unconscious and the irrational. The choice of the "id" (of Freudian theory) against the masculine integration of the "ego" represented, in the Beats, a rejection of the Oedipal conflict and the formation of the heterosexual "superego." For poets like Ginsberg and Norse, the momentary becomes liberating; the spontaneous is escape.

Exile and suffering have been shared themes in gay poetry, reflecting the marginality and "otherness" of gay experience. Oscar Wilde, imprisoned in Reading Gaol and later living out his last days in France, is a perfect example of the exile which has been experienced by the gay artist. The suffering of Wilde in later life reflects the conflict

between the gay individual's pursuit of pleasure, happiness, and love and his relation to "civilization." European and American civilization toward the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth had become more urbanized, commercialized, and more polarized in regard to issues of rationality and irrationality, normality and abnormality.

Freud's Oedipal theory has been much discussed in regard to homosexuality and perversion (Dollimore 195-198). The Oedipal conflict and various psychoanalytic approaches to Freud's idea of arrested development became the most common explanations for aberrant homosexual behavior (Dollimore 196). The anxiety surrounding male passivity and a mother-fixation became extreme. It played itself out in the Beat aesthetic, which was at once aggressive and domineering (almost misogynist), and yet receptive, Zen-like and passive.

Ginsberg's Howl (1956) is a good work in which to explore the various themes of social and cultural marginality as well as illness and normalcy. If the poem was originally about Ginsberg's mother's last year at Pilgrim State Hospital, the poem speaks more universally to the messianic vision of the gay poet (Ginsberg, To Eberhart 11). As with Whitman, there is a broad vista of the political terrain of America. Ginsberg, like the Decadents, courts both the saintly and the profane, the divine beauty of the sailors who populate the poem with their sexual prowess and interest, and the beaten-down Negro who is the inferior for a white society. Drugs and poverty have annihilated a generation of disenfranchised, angry young men, who, like the Decadents, live in a demimonde beneath the exterior of fifties conservatism. Denied moral approval, homosexuals operate outside

society. As fallen angels, homosexuals populate a world slightly east of Eden. Ginsberg gives us a tarnished visionary world. The spectacular homoeroticism of Howl and its depiction of the sexual netherworld of men after World War II in America are quite striking. Its incantatory style--which makes it a chant poem, an ode--strikes with spectacular anger through rhetorical devices such as repetition. Ginsberg in fact spoke of the poem as an experiment in the use of cataloguing, ellipses, the long line, litany, and repetition (Ginsberg, To Eberhart 22). He built the poem like a "brick shithouse" and in it he sought an "affirmation" of "God, sex, drugs, absurdity" (Ginsberg To Eberhart 32). He speaks of society as merciless, countered only by individual acts of mercy (Ginsberg, To Eberhart 32).

Howl opens:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry
fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the
starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the
supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of
cities contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels
staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,
who passed through universities . . . (9)

The tone of anger here anticipates the rage of ACT-UP and Queer Nation, the rhetoric of AIDS and Larry Kramer. The poet is broadly commanding and politically forceful, as in Pindar's classic Greek odes--passionate, visionary, and bold. Ginsberg's ode is serious in subject and treatment, elevated. Encomiastic, Ginsberg's Howl praises and glorifies the men of his generation and their spirited display in the face of conservatism and

decay; as well, the poem is dedicated to Carl Solomon, the “lunatic saint” of Rockland State Hospital.

The gay poet, Ginsberg, becomes a visionary, striking at the moral hypocrisy of a country, wanting both to launch criticism against the existing monolithic order and to “drop out” of its way of life. David Perkins writes of Ginsberg and other supporters of a countercultural ethos:

Their critique of American civilization and consciousness was voluminous, rhetorically forceful, sometimes profound, and documented in powerfully realistic images of American life. Yet both their protest and their positive social vision were sometimes expressed with zaniness and buffoonery, as if in implicit acknowledgment that the United States was unlikely to be revolutionized . . . Confronting this, they protested while feeling that protest would be ineffective, and often they did not even protest but merely sought to “drop out” of the bourgeois order and to live, like Ginsberg, as a “city hermit” or to settle in rural communities (Perkins 542).

The gay poet is an exile as well, exploring the lonely wastelands of human desire. As in Rechy’s City of Night (1963) he is a wandering nomad, an outlaw, who finds pleasure in a world populated by sailors, hustlers, drag queens, and fairies.

Howl then establishes the gay “I,” as subject and speaker. No longer passive symbol of pity and shadowy form, Ginsberg makes claim for a gay experience and identity, reconstituting these rhetorically in the incantatory insistence of the poem:

who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in
wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,
who got busted in their public beards returning through Laredo with a belt
of marijuana for New York (10)

Ginsberg lays hold of the negative; he accepts the depraved, the abject and the scorned, almost in a Buddhist sense as an affirmation of the mortal and transitory in human

experience. In another sense, gay artists have been forced to appropriate the images of negativity, cast-off depravity and decadent symbols of society to make them, for better or for worse, their own and almost to purify them in a spiritual sense. The saint must suffer and experience sin to find salvation. The Romantic poet must suffer as well to gain insight into the realm of nature and human emotions. We know of Ginsberg's fascination with Romantic pathos (in the summer of 1948, Ginsberg, while attending Columbia University, had a vision while reading Blake's "Ah! Sun-Flower") (Perkins 547).

Behind Howl is the vision of Blake. In Section II where "Moloch" is evoked we are reminded of Blake's protean cosmos. Moloch seems to represent not only "the economic system, urban-industrial milieu, government, police, war, atom bomb, everyone's mentality, America, and Time (as opposed to Eternity)," but the very devil himself (Perkins 550). Evil and the sublime hover over this poem in its embrace of madness:

Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream
 Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in
 Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch! (22)

Ginsberg the gay rebel lies tormented by his own loneliness. If Moloch "whose name is the Mind!" is the source of so much discontent, then Ginsberg shares in the gay dilemma of the marginalized figure. Madness become his only choice according to the dictates of a homophobic and paranoid society; suicide may be his only rational decision.

The "who" of Ginsberg's poem includes the friends and minds of his generation, who were not only oppressed as misfits and marginalized non-conformists, but were homosexual as well. The democracy of the Beat passions is revealed in both the whoring

with “a million girls” (14) and the cavorting in the Turkish baths with blond boys:

who hiccuped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob behind
a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blonde & naked angel came to
pierce them with a sword,
who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew
of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the
womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass
and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman’s loom. (14)

The gay poet of the marginal and downbeat lives at odds with his “loveboys” who are lured off to a three-fold fate: the pursuit of money and means, the pursuit of straight marriage or the pursuit of education. By any means these fates seem tied to a corrupting heterosexual (and mainstream, middle-class and morally straight) influence, one that pits the “madness” and anger of this poem against its fifties conformist milieu.

Ginsberg chooses a defiant stance of love and comradeship with Solomon and defends Solomon’s role as madman and Other in the eyes of fifties society: “I’m with you in Rockland” Ginsberg writes. The poem ends with this repeated refrain and then the last stanza:

I’m with you in Rockland
in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway
across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western
night (26)

These closing lines allude to Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Here we have the image of the farm-house/cottage and the night with its “western fallen star” and the lonely figure of the poet, who has witnessed great tragedy and felt great despair. The image of Solomon walking dripping from a sea-journey seems, too, to reverberate distantly with Whitman’s “When I Heard at the Close of the Day,”

perhaps Whitman's most beautiful homoerotic love poem with its recollection of a lover's coming in bed to the sounds of the sea and images of wetness and coolness. Just as Whitman was deeply affected and altered by the Civil War, Ginsberg is altered by the civil and emotional strife he sees around him at work in American society.

Behind Howl stand Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Dadaism, Burroughs, Nietzsche, Crane and Whitman. In its mystical, alienated and Dionysian quality it plays upon the role of homosexual as "other," as alien and exile. Just as Auden and Isherwood were exiles in America, Ginsberg, the hipster, was adrift in the "dereglement" of his senses (Perkins 550).

There is no organized gay community in Howl. There is however a sense of friendship and kinship through adversity. The poem is filled with isolated figures from gay life: "fairies of advertising," "sinister intelligent editors," the "saintly motorcyclists," and the "sailors." It is a solitary gay world, undefined politically, unsupported socially and yet Ginsberg finds comradeship with those of his generation who rebel against a socially conservative and rigid society. There is defiance in this rebellion: "who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight/in policecars for committing no crime but their/own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication" (Howl 13). We see in this isolated act of resistance a foreshadowing of the AIDS activist demonstrations of the eighties where gay protesters often resorted to aggressive physical actions against the authorities.⁶¹ Howl also reflects the way marginalization by society can provoke a sense of collective social outrage and disobedience, a disobedience which anticipates the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969; however,

61 Most notable is the 1989 massive protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral in which a half dozen AIDS protesters chained themselves to pews inside the cathedral and were later arrested (Martinac 414).

Ginsberg in the nineteen-fifties was not championing a purely gay collective identity. Just as Rechy suggests in City of Night, the time belonged to a restless individualism.

The solitary figures and rough, demimonde characters of gay life in Ginsberg's world continue in Harold Norse's poetry. Norse's "Your Crooked Beauty" was written on New Year's Day, 1954, in Rome. The poem, like Ginsberg's, is addressed or dedicated to an individual--Hugo. The poem begins: "Your crooked beauty, Hugo,/maims us. You are all/that hurts. Taking us/off guard with your virile/grace, good looks. But/you're crooked, you're bad news" (Norse 18). Male beauty and its association with evil and pain and criminality, even madness, strikes Norse much as it does Ginsberg. "I saw madness,/Hugo, death in your heroic/stony features, bones more enormous/than clubs, murderous jaws, the unseeing/statue stare of senselessness" (Norse 18). Hugo is a hustler. His image is of the erotic statuesque male, classical almost, chiseled in his virility, heroic even. Norse proclaims much as Ginsberg: "I saw madness" (Norse 18). Male desire is still associated with danger and evil, with "crookedness" rather than "straightness." The word choice is here quite deliberate. The curious use of "us" rather than "me" in the second and third lines of the Norse poem situates the speaker in an intimate crowd and opens the poem up to the setting of a gay bar. The communal "us" moves the poem to a collective sense of identity and readership and invites the gay reader into the poem. There is a difference here from Ginsberg's Howl. Ginsberg does not speak exclusively of the homosexual experience. His poem engages in a broader dialogue about American society and dissidence. Norse focuses on the reader's familiarity with the gay underworld and does not seek to transgress its borders. Norse's poem is more about collective homosexual desire

than Ginsberg's collective sense of comradeship with Solomon and his generation. As I suggested previously in regard to Jauss's theories, such lines invite a gay reception, a shared expectation, as though Norse expects his reader to have had similar experiences. The beauty of Hugo takes the poet and the reader "off guard." Hugo's virile grace is of important value. It draws attention. As in the plays of Tennessee Williams, the virile character is destructive in his masculinity and often performs as the messenger of "death." This death is also associated with the "petite mort" of the French--the slang for sexual orgasm and intercourse, and thereby for eroticism. At the end of the film adaptation of Williams's short novella, "The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone," Mrs. Stone invites the young gigolo who haunts the Spanish steps into her apartment, knowing full well the danger and depravity he symbolizes. Mrs. Stone gives in to her last chance for love, choosing not to resist the attractions of a common hustler.

The hustler Hugo is one of a collection of male fictive stereotypes of the forties and fifties; the sailor and the hustler are the "seraphim" of virility and easy sex. They are the precious idols of a homosexual cosmology, which situates them along with the "stars" (movie stars of glamour and Hollywood sepias) in a velvet-lined sky. They populate and move in a world that is independently male, mobile, nomadic, casual, and restless. The soldiers who have come home from World War II with pent-up sexual energy have only the psychological gridlock of Cold War America to redirect their aggressions. This masculinity, or hypermasculinity, broods beneath the surface of American culture, and finds its force in a generation of men disenfranchised from the domesticity of the post-war period. Norse, the expatriot living in Paris, exemplifies the Gay Beat sense of alienation,

the restless wandering which is constantly on the look-out for new experiences.⁶²

As with Genet, who was writing in France and was much admired by the Beats, the wild and violent energy of male eroticism becomes a source of fascination. The gay man lives in the demimonde of the fifties, a shadow figure, dirty, loveless. To Hugo, the hustler, Norse writes: "So you brought in the new/year that already had no good/in it for me, exiled/from a loveless country, took/what you wanted from its hiding place/among dirty clothing--30,000 liras--then ground your teeth" (Norse 18). If we take Norse to be the exile of a "loveless country" (America), we can see Ginsberg in this light as well. Male sexuality and eroticism have the ability to "maim" and to "destroy." For the Beats, as for Blake and the French decadents, there is a sense of the apocalyptic, the spiritual, in the raw unharnessed force of the human imagination, sex and will; conversely there is a sense of danger in excess, the courting of madness and violence.

The forbiddenness of homosexual desire in the fifties creates an aura of physical violence and self-destructive behavior. We see this in Ginsberg and Norse as well as in Rechy's shadow world of murderous queens and rough trade. The visual gaze of male cruising, is enormously potent. Norse describes Hugo's "unseeing/statue stare of senselessness" (Norse Harold Norse: The Love Poems 18). In gay poetry and indeed gay literature, the male gaze, the "glance," the "stare," signifies sexual interest and registers as the point of ultimate recognition and "reading." For, in glancing and staring, one man sizes

62 Norse traveled across Europe and North Africa from 1954-1967. He lived in Paris for a time (c.1963) at the famous "Beat Hotel" with William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Gregory Corso, et al. (Norse, The Love Poems). It is here interesting to note that other homosexual writers in the forties, fifties and sixties chose to live abroad: James Baldwin retreated to France and Turkey; Paul Bowles settled in Tangiers.

up or “reads” another man’s “story.” Visual cuing and response add to the predatory nature of homosexual cruising. Active, aggressive staring is contrasted to passive, furtive glancing.

Norse is obviously threatened by Hugo, but Norse lifts the poem from its darker and more dejected turn by an attitude of irony and humor: “Now/what’s the use? At that price/your beauty is too expensive, leaving/neither regard for feelings/nor the rent” (Norse 18).

The theme of the misfit, the outsider, the exile, extends throughout gay poetry. Paul Mariah (1937-) published primarily in the seventies. Like Norse and Ralph Pomeroy, he shared an affinity to the Beat sensibility. Mariah writes in “The Gods Favor You in Leather”:

Why dress the stone in leather
unless you are truly Bellerophon
in exile, a pederast journal

without a kingdom, who is King?
Carrying your seed to Poland
or to lands, New York, in between?

(Then, it is true in separate ways
we ride the night: you, your mare,
and I, the empty bed of stars.) (Young, The Male Muse 71)

As in Norse we have the image of an exile who carries his “seed,” his sexual desire to foreign lands and urban haunts. Bellerophon, the beautiful young man from Corinth who refuses sex with the Argive queen and is plotted against in revenge, only to win the favor of Iobates, is mentioned here. With the assistance of the winged horse Pegasus, Bellerophon triumphs over the Chimera. Much later, due to his impudence in trying to fly

to Olympus, he is tossed off the horse and leads a life of solitary wondering ever after as a lame beggar. The speaker of the poem “rides” the night, or, sexually speaking, pursues sex in an atmosphere of danger.

Mariah continues:

Discipline in any form, chains,
blank checks, febrile minds, beggar,
suppliant I have become . . . to leather.

Why leather? why binding? why hiding?
Tanning curing rawhide? cycles?
Leather the strangest way of saying I DO. (Young, The Male Muse 71)

The poet or speaker of the poem in his obsessive nature has been reduced to a beggar, to a suppliant. Like Bellerophon, the impulse to ride high into the night has only heightened his compulsions. Desire becomes narcotic and a source of madness—“febrile minds,” “chains”—a blank check on desperation. We will see this later, too, with the hypermasculine obsessions of Dennis Cooper and Thom Gunn. The last “I DO,” suggestive of the vow in heterosexual marriage but here linked to the rites of leather sex, expresses the rebellious impulse of Beat subversion and will surface again in Essex Hemphill’s fiery poem “American Wedding.”

MARGINALITY, AESTHETICISM AND THE STRATEGIES OF CAMP:

THE DANDY AND THE QUEEN

The language of gay poetry has reflected the uneasy tension between the marginal and the mainstream, the rebellious and exiled and the conforming. Marginality provoked the creation of a gay sensibility, a sensibility which we have seen for much of the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries has shaped gay literature.⁶³ Gay sensibility incorporates elements of aestheticism, irony, theatricality and humor, which when expressed in a person, situation, or activity is called “camp” (Bergman, Camp Grounds 20).⁶⁴ Using language appropriated from the dominant, heterosexual world, homosexual writers have deployed camp strategically to subvert and invert meanings in order to win sympathy from the dominant society, or to assert their self-integrity as well as protest their marginality and discrimination.⁶⁵ Oscar Wilde loved malapropisms, and the strange inversions of identity in his theater called attention to the deceptive surfaces of morals and society. Camp is a strong defense for tackling the social and cultural disparity between homosexuals and heterosexuals, and for reversing marginality with a sense of normality. Camp succeeds in challenging the idea of the “authentic,” reclaiming things judged of little value to a dominant culture.

63 See Michael Bronski's Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility, 1984.

64 Aestheticism as an element of gay culture, sensibility and camp is a broad topic. Gay aestheticism grew out of nineteenth century concepts developed by Walter Pater. Pater (1839-1894), a gay British Victorian, wrote essays on art which supported the idea that art stood autonomous from morality and that “the universe's flux of life, death, and constant change made the passionate enjoyment of each moment the greatest human good” (McLemee 540). Pater hedonistically concluded that “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (McLemee 540) or more specifically that culture is both a means and an end to life and that art is for sensuous enjoyment and receptiveness to beauty, the artist acting as a saint (McLemee 541). Wilde took license from Pater's theories to embrace “Art as a shield” from “actual existence” (32). The idea of an art divorced from its moral and purely representational purposes appealed to gay artists who were seeking a morality of sympathy in a society of “hard and inflexible moral rules” (Bergman, Camp Grounds 21). Since gayness is incongruous with society's traditional ideas of the “normal,” and the “natural,” an art which looks into the realm of the exotic, the fantastic, the exaggerated, where impersonation and incongruous juxtapositions hold forth, is to be desired. Bergman sees camp as a “relationship between activities, individuals, situations, and gayness” (Camp Grounds 20). In regard to aestheticism and camp, Bergman suggests that camp and aestheticism coincide: “in three interrelated ways: as a view of art; as a view of life; and as a practical tendency in things or persons: ‘It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence’ (Wilde, The Decay of Lying [London: Osgood, McIlvane & Co., 1891])” (Bergman, Camp Grounds 21).

65 “Camp is an assertion of one's self-integrity—a temporary means of accommodation with society in which art becomes, at one and the same time, an intense mode of individualism and a form of spirited protest” (Bergman, Camp Grounds 21).

Born out of a gay sensibility and the relationship of camp were the personas of the “dandy” and the “queen”:

The dandy catered to the autocratic sensibility: all style and no content. Dandyism was an exercise in perfecting the externals and giving the impression that anything beneath the surface was incidental. Taste was life’s most important attainment: any politics, emotions or ethics that conflicted with this goal were to be discarded. (Bronski 57)

The dandy represented a “triumph of style and imagination over class structure and social restrictions” (Bronski 57). The queen represented the triumph of feminine illusion and stylization over natural birth sex. The queen was artifice for artifice’s sake. Both gay identities reveled in camp and dissemblance. Arbiters of taste both high and low, the “voice” of the dandy and the gay queen became a means for gay writers to discover in marginality not an abject criminality, but a mirthful rebelliousness, a triumphant superiority of intellect or wit. If Auden, Howard Moss, William Meredith, James Merrill and Richard Howard were gay arbiters of high taste, all dabbled in camp and reflected a gay sensibility (most prominently the emphasis on aestheticism and irony). Williams and Ginsberg also employed a gay sensibility (respectively through theatricality and humor).

Marginality in the fifties and early sixties fostered divergent roles. Not quite the criminal or deviant outcast, the homosexual artist was the amusing aesthete, who adapted the voice of dandy and queen or the role of high literary Brahman. In the fifties homosexuals felt increasingly isolated and exiled from the McCarthyite apparatus. As we have seen on the West Coast with Harry Hay’s Mattachine Society and in the enclaves of San Francisco’s North Beach with Jack Spicer and the “San Francisco Renaissance,” a gay counterculture took hold. It was in this gay counterculture of the fifties and sixties that

the desolate angels became tricksters of the gods, purveyors of fashion and art. Desolation turned to blithe spirits and dandyism especially in the work of Frank O'Hara. If Ginsberg saw in the dejection of fifties America a new visionary transcendentalism, a return to Whitman's romantic vision of the country and the individual, O'Hara, like Wilde, discovered in the urban and its artifice a highly creative ground for Wildean camp, travesty and drag. If Ginsberg embraced the marginal in his politics and poetry, O'Hara reveled in mainstream pop culture but, through camp, turned the mainstream against itself. Camp became O'Hara's skillful tool for taking on the American establishment.

Since the plays of Oscar Wilde, camp, as we have already discussed, had been one major mode that gay writers have employed to subvert the dominant culture. A pure poetry of camp, however, had not been tried until O'Hara. Whitman, Wilde, Proust, Ronald Firbank, Mae West, Tennessee Williams, Warhol, all have been discussed from the vantage point of a camp aesthetic (Bergman, Camp Grounds). The lyrics of Noel Coward and the blues singers of Harlem paved the way for an urban homosexual discourse that was fast, witty, and urbane and helped bring gay men from the marginalized world of victims to the mainstream world of taste and fashion.

David Bergman has written about strategic camp and the art of gay rhetoric in his incisive essay from the book Camp Grounds:

Camp is the extreme expression of what Thomas E. Yingling has described as the general problem of homosexual style. According to Yingling, merely because they were male, "gay men have historically had access" to the system of "culturally determined codes" and the means of literary production, but because these authors were gay, the codes "denied validity to their

existence.” Consequently, “gay writers . . . have found literature less a matter of self-expression and more a matter of coding . . .” Camp is the mode in which coding is most self-consciously played with and where the apparent emptying of “self-expression” is most conspicuous. Of course, by making these “culturally determined codes” self-conscious and conspicuous, gay writers destabilize them and open them to analysis and criticism. Thus the avoidance of “self-expression” becomes paradoxically a powerful expression of gay selfhood. (94)

Susan Sontag has said that camp “is the answer to the problem, how to be a dandy in an age of mass culture” (Bergman, Camp Grounds 62). Bergman suggests in regard to Sontag that “what is under attack in an age of mass culture is precisely the power of taste-making intellectuals to patrol the higher canons of taste and that the significance of the new sensibility of camp in the sixties is that it presents a means of salvaging that privilege” (62).

After graduating in 1951 with an M.A. in English from the University of Michigan, O’Hara arrived in New York to assume a position at the Museum of Modern Art at the height of the American art scene (Bredbeck 527-528). O’Hara, like Warhol later, found himself at the center of American popular culture rather than at its marginal fringe. As in the experience of Wilde a century before, who through his great wit and talent gained entrance to English high cultural society, the gay artist once again prevailed, but, as always, at a price.

Gay camp became a means to balance the difficult tensions between personal desire and public persona. O’Hara the gay man, and O’Hara the skilled wordsmith, golden

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boy of the jet set, was at odds with himself. O'Hara was a terrible alcoholic, legendary for his promiscuity. If his role as poet was secure by virtue of his insightful and playful appraisals of American art and culture (his study of Jackson Pollock is considered the definitive statement on the artist), his personal life was one of insecurity.

O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto," included in the 1974 The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara, can be seen as the ultimate act of a gay camp sensibility. O'Hara's "literary movement" was founded

after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born . . . The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages (xiv).

But O'Hara has opened his manifesto by stating that Personism "does not have to do with personality or intimacy," and evokes "overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings toward the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person" (xiv). The seeming paradox of O'Hara's reasoning draws rather humorous attention to what O'Hara understood as his own paradoxical relation to his homosexuality and his writing. His movement is about the personal engagement of the poet and yet O'Hara is unable fully to disclose the personal in his work; instead, he cagily obscures and plays up to the reader through camp innuendo: "Not Roi, a blond," he tosses off, subverting the heterosexual reader's own misinformation and misexpectations. The "blond" plays upon the stereotypical expectations of the reader who can read "blond" as either man or woman (but more

traditionally as a woman). The manifesto teases the reader by promising intimacy and disclosure, yet leaving these purposely obscured and out of reach.

Personism as a movement is a sham. It is an act of whimsy and plays upon the idea of dandyism. O'Hara sees his work in contrast to the "abstract removal" of the period. The fact that O'Hara is in love with "someone" and a "person" and that he visualizes the poem "squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified" calls attention to O'Hara's own coy evasion of naming the object of his affection (though we have enough clues to assume that it is a man). "Personism" thus calls further attention to the plight of the homosexual poet, who must claim that his poem is about a "person" as opposed to a "man," a "woman," a "he," or a "she," and yet still claims it as poetry of a personal nature.

Alice C. Parker in her excellent book The Exploration of the Secret Smile: The Language and Art and Homosexuality in Frank O'Hara's Poetry performs close readings of O'Hara's verse to decode its camp innuendo and its homosexual references. She looks specifically at poems like "Music," "Having a Coke with You," and "Homosexuality." She also makes reference to Edmund White's comment in his essay "The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality" about how "a private language was important to homosexuals at the time" and how homosexuality "was an illegitimate existence that took refuge in language" (78).

Parker speaks of how in the fifties and sixties the "overtly sexual aspects of gay life were often sedimented, and thereby distanced" (77). Marginality forced unacceptable subject matter to be discussed by way of hidden discourse with layerings of meaning (77).

Only now and then did O'Hara's true voice vent its anger and scorn (77). Parker finds in much of O'Hara's work an underlying gay thematology and the use of the poem as performance (85).

O'Hara's poem "Cornkind," of 1960 is an odd little poem which does an extraordinary amount of work to dispel O'Hara's dilemma: "do I really want a son/to carry on my idiocy past the Horned Gates/poor kid a staggering load" (The Selected Poems 182).

The bravado of this poem, like all of O'Hara's, rests on its facetiousness and its highly encoded social double entendres. From its title, we have a poem which alludes to an imaginary child, offspring of O'Hara's imagination, the German "Kind" or "child." "Corn" implies "corny" or something equally absurd and far-fetched. We have from the start O'Hara implying the far-fetched fantasy of this work and of O'Hara's own imagination. The child will never be a physical manifestation of the homosexual poet. The absurdity of the poem underscores the humor of its opening which gives a simplistic view of how babies are made. The opening reads: "So the rain falls/it drops all over the place/and where it finds a little rock pool/it fills it up with dirt/and the corn grows/a green Bette Davis sits under it/reading a volume of William Morris/oh fertility!" (181-182). "Rain" and "rock pools" suggest sperm and womb in the strange sexual and fertile landscape of this poem. O'Hara's view of heterosexual fertility is as childish and corny as the image of a stork dropping the infant down a chimney. The poem also makes allusions to Bette Davis and William Morris--two gay icons: Davis for her queen-like vamping and exaggeration as all-time "bitch" in the film All About Eve, and Morris for his Victorian

decorative patterns, stereotypical of the gay effeminate interior decorator who loves chintz and silk.

The poem makes all sorts of sexual suggestions, from “the rain falls” (181). “Oh fertility! Beloved of the Western world/you aren’t so popular in China/though they fuck too” (182). It plays on many levels and teases in many ways: “what of Hart Crane/what of phonograph records and gin/what of ‘what of/ you are of me, that’s what/and that’s the meaning of fertility/hard and moist and moaning” (182). By introducing Hart Crane, the tormented homosexual poet of his age, O’Hara suggests the homosexual. The repetition of the questioning phrase “what of” rhetorically develops and revels in the conundrums and entanglements of logic the poem seems to want to question and subvert. “What of” also suggests “what matter”: what matter if Crane were gay or not. In the end it is only the male phallus that the poet lays claim to, the poet’s narcissistic claiming of his (homo)sexuality for himself and not as procreative agent. “You are of me, that’s what” (182). In a sense this poem supports David Bergman’s statement: “the hyperbolic, parodic, anarchic, redundant style of camp is the very way to bring heterosexist attitudes of originality, naturalism, and normalcy to their knees” (Camp Grounds 11).

The high flippancy and surprise of “Poem,” which begins with the familiar “Lana Turner has collapsed!” and ends with the famous line “oh Lana Turner we love you get up,” display other ways in which O’Hara links the personal to the grossly exaggerated context of a larger cultural sphere. The poem once again plays with a facetious tone of voice: “there is no snow in Hollywood/there is no rain in California/I have been to lots of parties/and acted perfectly disgraceful/but I never actually collapsed” (Lunch Poems 70).

The mediocre, disingenuous tone of voice in these poems captures the vulgarizing forces of mass culture.

Even in Ginsberg we can see camp at work as a response to marginality. Bergman draws attention to Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California" (1955) as a poem "wistful and joyous, comic and sad by turns" in which "the powers of camp to bind wounds and unsettle expectation, to destabilize even as it seems most accommodating are clearly in evidence" (107). Ginsberg turns to camp, like many other gay poets, as a way to subvert dominant cultural referents and reappropriate them into a homosexual context:

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked
down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking
at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon
fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at
night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!
--and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking
among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys . . . (Ginsberg,
Collected Poems 136)

We see immediately in the opening of Ginsberg's poem a camp tone. Ginsberg is "shopping for images" in a heterosexual world populated by husbands and wives and babies. The reference to "fruit" can imply gay men, who are inclined to be found at night "shopping" for "trade" or "meat." This contrasts with the typical heterosexual image of the family at home asleep in bed; thus, the exclamation of "whole families shopping at/night!" "Peaches," "avocados," "tomatoes" all participate in a figurative sexual language associated with heterosexuality and women. The presence of the Spanish homosexual poet, Garcia Lorca, and the homosexual American poet, Whitman, is indeed

telling. Whitman, re-envisioned as a lonely old man, pokes among the “meats.” The setting comically subverts our traditional stuffy vision of the stately poet. Ginsberg seizes upon Whitman’s eccentricity as a pederast and shows the older Whitman eyeing the grocery boys with lascivious intent. It is in the incongruities of the poem and its pretended innocence that Ginsberg achieves a level of camp. “I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you,/and followed in my imagination by the store detective./We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy/tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier” (Collected Poems 136). The dream of Ginsberg the poet is to possess like Whitman the multiple fancies of homoerotic desire without the censorship of the “cashier” (in a society which extracts a high price for such homoerotic desire). Ginsberg asks: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman?” and in this question reflects the pathos of the homosexual condition. Ginsberg decides, “we’ll both be lonely” (Collected Poems 136). In this concluding statement he reflects the more painful aspect of the gay experience, again adhering to the theme of marginality already discussed. The homosexual shops for his desire amid the sometimes garish and obscene displays of pre-packaged heterosexual love and conformity—American style. The poem displays a key characteristic of the humor of gay camp:

[Camp humor] results from an identification of a strong incongruity between an object, person or situation and its context. The comic element is inherent in the formal properties of irony. There is a basic contradiction or incongruity, coupled with a real or pretended innocence. But in order for an incongruous contrast to be ironic it must, in addition to being comic, affect one as “painful”—though not so painful as to neutralize the humor. It is sufficient that sympathy is aroused for the person, thing, or idea that constitutes the target of an incongruous contrast. (Bergman, Camp Grounds 26-27)

The rhetoric in this poem, if not carefully read for its gay referents, could point the poem solely toward countercultural protest and themes of alienation in 1950's America. To do so misses the more emotional resonances encoded beneath. Such resonances reveal a certain pathos and sadness inherent in the gay identity and its isolation in regard to society.

* * *

The "queen" in the forties and fifties was often represented as a sad, tragic, older gay man, who resorted to camp, barbed innuendo and irony (and sometimes drag) to draw attention to himself and his isolated vision of the world. The "queen" was a well-known figure of the shadowy bar-scene. These supposedly unhappy men dished out their bitter-sweet sermons about youth, sex, and the unaccommodating world. Unattainable male beauty and youth in contrast to age and loss of physical appeal (as with Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's memorable novella A Death in Venice and Cavafy's poetry) was one aspect of this gay figure. The gay "queen" voice was also linked to the legacy of the black blues singers of the Harlem Renaissance, many of whom were lesbian, and to the torch song singers of the forties, fifties and sixties, as well as to the opera divas of high culture such as Tiebaldi and Callas. The blues and the torch song sang of lonely tragedies of the heart and down-trodden lives. Melancholy, disappointment and suffering were made into lyrical song. This aestheticizing of suffering appealed to gay men in particular who could find no other integration into the dominant society.

Loneliness and alienation appeared the bedfellows of gay existence for men of

intellect, talent and culture in the fifties and sixties. As we have seen, the psychological tensions and marginalization of such existence can lead to either extreme positions of rebellion, alienation and exile, to camp wit, or to a sort of feigned effetism, a “queenly” voice as distancing as Proust’s. Tennessee Williams in his 1976 poem, “Androgyne, Mon Amour,” from the book of the same title, affects the voice of an older more sophisticated gay man:

Androgyne, mon amour,
brochette de coeur was plat du jour,
 (heart lifted on a metal skewer,
 encore saignante et palpitante)
where I dined au solitaire,
table intime, one rose vase,
 lighted dimly, wildly gay (16)

The heart he speaks of is still bleeding and still beating as it is lifted on cupid’s arrow. The image is one of dejected romantic sorrow and despondency, however wittily offset by its skillful use of French, its self-deprecatory humor and its note of facetiousness with the phrase “wildly gay.”

Williams’ voice speaks with the ennui of Proust: “Well, that’s it, the evening scene,/mon amour, Androgyne,” he pronounces in a punctuating couplet. The evening holds little delight and little sexual promise. The speaker of the poem, older and cultured, must watch the erotic world at play:

Noontime youths,
thighs and groins tight-jean-displayed,
 loiter onto Union Square,
junkies flower-scattered there
 lost in dream, torso-bare,
young as you, old as I, voicing soundlessly
a cry,

oh, yes, among them
 revolution bites its tongue beneath its fiery
 waiting stare,
 indifferent to siren's wail,
 ravishment endured in jail. (16)

There is an ironic distance in this poem between the speaker and Williams himself, reminiscent of what Proust achieves with his narrator Marcel. Age becomes the horrible plight of the gay speaker.

Androgyne, mon amour,
 shadows of you name a price
 exorbitant for short lease.
 What would you suggest I do,
 wryly smile and turn away,
 fox-teeth gnawing chest-bones through?

Even less would that be true
 than, carnally, I was to you
 many, many lives ago,
 requiems of fallen snow.

And, frankly, well they'd laugh at me,
 thick of belly, thin of shank,
 spectacle of long neglect,
 tragedians to public mirth. (17)

The speaker of the poem is at odds with aging and the loss of desirability. The aging gay man finds double marginality in his loss of youth and homoerotic appeal and his solitary stature in straight society.

"Life!" the gob exclaimed to Crane,
 "Oh, life's a geyser!"
 Oui, d'accord—
 from the rectum of the earth.

Bitter, that, never mind.
 Time's only challenger is time. (17-18)

Life's sole purpose is in sexual prowess, the bitter focus of the speaker's attentions. Gay sex is maintaining an erection and achieving an orgasm. It's all about the "gob" and the "geyser," two sexual images which in this case taunt the deeply troubled and sexually oppressed Hart Crane.

Androgyne in some ways becomes representative of Williams's own youth, his gay youth spent on the fine line between straight and gay, between marginal and accepted, between the male writer and his female characters. As for many members of his generation, his youth could not be spent in gay revolt with "revolution . . . indifferent to siren's wail," instead, Williams was forced to pose and pretend, indeed as his "female"/gay male heroines did before the mirror of their own vanities and illusions:

Ever treacherous, ever fair,
 at a table small and square,
 not first light but last light shows
 (meaning of the single rose
 where I dined au solitaire,
 sous l'ombre d'une jeunesse perdue?) (18)

"Under the shadow of a lost youth?" we hear Williams query. There can be no mistaking the sadness in this question as well as its distant connection to Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu. There is a sense of coming death in this poem and deep loneliness. It is not surprising that the next poem in the collection is "Speech from the Stairs" which begins with the line: "O lonely man."

Williams assumes many roles in his quest for identity; both female and male voices blend to describe their desperate attempts at love and the unflattering approach of age. Williams approaches homosexuality as though it were a curse of loneliness. Like the dandy

or the queen, Williams presents a bitterly ironic poem, a strange mixture of comedy and drama. Bergman's comments about camp's relation to the serious in the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder,⁶⁶ might also be applied to William's poetry:

The camp aspect of the work emerges in the use of calculated melodrama and flamboyant visual surfaces to accentuate the . . . complex of interrelated themes: the interdependence of sex and power, love and suffering, pleasure and pain; the lover's demand for exclusive possession, which springs from vanity; the basic instability of love in the absence of a lover's sense of positive self-identity; the value of pose as an escape and protective shield; the inevitability of inequities within relationships so long as love, ego, or insights are distributed in unequal proportions. Such themes as these carry a special resonance for the gay sensibility. As outsiders, we are forced to create our own norms; to impose our *selves* upon a world which refuses to confront the arbitrariness of cultural conventions that insist on sexual loyalty, permanence, and exclusive possession. (Camp Grounds 30)

Richard Howard, like Williams, in some ways turns to the role of queen as a way of solving the "curse" of the "fabled disease" of homosexuality. Howard establishes a homosexual identity through presenting an extended sense of history, culture, art, reaching back to gay precursors such as Cavafy, Proust, and Whitman. Through impersonation and assuming various cultural roles, Howard reinvents the dramatic monologue. The "queens" of the forties and fifties often assumed the persona of feminine stars, whose dramatic and tragic lives suited their own troubled identities. Through a mix of ventriloquy, drag, and camp they achieved an artistry all their own. This aesthetic of mimicry foreshadowed the "voguing" of the eighties in which young black gay men in Harlem, through elaborate costumes and controlled movement, copied the "realness" of men of means in their day-to-day downtown lives. By use of vocal caricature and campy banter, the "queen" moves from the realm of the marginal into the mythic. The "queen" aspires to the stature of grand

⁶⁶ Gay German film director of the seventies who died in the eighties of a drug overdose.

opera in which real life emotions are exaggerated and homosexual love, rather than being trivialized, is raised to the level of drama. In essence, the devalued becomes valued if not valorized.

It is with this in mind that we read Howard's sometimes arch and overly dramatic poetry, which calls attention to its own, and others', deceptions. In "Howard's Way: A Letter to 102 Boulevard Haussmann," Howard obviously addresses Proust. The poem's title plays rather humorously with the title of Proust's second volume of his A la recherche du temps perdu, "Swann's Way." Howard has appropriated Proust's title for his own ends.

Howard addresses Proust in French with an intimate, chatty tone of voice:

Mon cher maitre, could even you have mastered
such dissemblance?
Given your gift for luring
the accidental and the inevitable
to lie down together, what would you have done
with these disparities—could you have parsed them
into a semblance of sense? (28)

Proust is said to lure "the accidental" and "the inevitable" "to lie down together." Here Howard is playfully using sexual language to describe Proust's great literary skill at weaving a broad complex social world in which events or characters appear, as in life, accidental, yet eventually seem fated and inevitable. Howard also possibly alludes to Proust's ironic sense of the tragedy of human desires and free will, which in the nineteenth century, if spontaneously expressed in a mannered and rigid society, inevitably brought a

fate of social ruin, death or disaster.⁶⁷ Dissemblance is very much a part of Howard's language as it is of Proust's. It is the dissemblance of the "queen" who embellishes and prolongs "her" story to heighten its dramatic and romantic appeal, and disguise its more tawdry and harsh side.

Howard coaxes Proust to follow the events of an evening in which Howard is summoned to the Dakota apartments in New York City for a party. The Dakota has been "sufficiently grand to be used for shooting/horror-movies" (28). The movie of course is "Rosemary's Baby," which appeared in the late sixties. Howard, the speaker of the poem, exclaims to Proust:

Horror-movies then, and there—could you believe?
In the redoubt Dakota, so huge our word
apartment takes on a meaning all its own,
the converse of togetherness (now that word
you never heard of, thank God. We mean well, but
the ease with which we say what we mean—horrors!
Sounds like the most affable of lies) (29)

The rhetorical inflection of Howard's voice accentuates its dissemblance. Howard points out the vulgarity of American English and its emphasis on honesty and "straight"-forwardness, as opposed to the French arts of conversation and diplomacy.

Howard tells us:

the man who called us, whom we are calling on!

He famous as well: the poet-pornographer
freshly returned—restored—a pilgrim from Nepal
and beautiful, still beautiful, or worse still
you could see that he had been beautiful once.
He admits us, the old beau, with a hard look,
as though wondering how much we cost. (He cost

67 We have merely to read a work such as Flaubert's Madame Bovary or Hardy's Tess of the Ubervilles to sense this nineteenth century tenet of realism.

a lot, and can afford to be entertaining
 only to strangers: entertainment at best
 is merely lust compassionately disguised
 as the will to please.

Master, you *are* helping!) (29-30)

The old poet-pornographer is shown as an aging “queen” who has tried at great expense to hang on to his youth, thus the biting line, “He cost a lot.” This echoes the previous comment about Howard’s own entrance in which he is perceived by the “old beau” as perhaps a hired hustler for the evening. The emphasis on monetary value and “cost” brings out the bitter sense of a devalued life and identity. The old “queen” tries to entertain, a disguise for his actual lust and lasciviousness. There is deception here at all levels.

Howard enters to find the old beau’s dog “Principe” peeing on the apartment floor. The name of the pet is a farcical gesture. Principe, the French for “Principal,” has nothing to do with the true meaning of the term: one who has controlling authority or general control. The deceptive host has disguised mere lust with a will to please and entertain. The apartment is filled with “little male presences” who are viewing a porn film in which an Oriental child is debased and raped. The film suddenly breaks and the screen goes blank and

here we are
 sitting with a dozen men in a room so
 nondescript no reasonable person could
 possibly make love here, or commit suicide:
 keeping up appearances is not difficult
 once you have seen through them—you told us, master,
 merely hold them from behind, the way you hold
 a shield, and appearances protect you quite well. (31)

The struggle with appearance has a great deal to do with this poem. Howard in the course of the evening realizes that the boy in the porn film actually belongs to the party's host. The young Nepalese boy from Katmandu is present at the evening party. The older man who was raping him on camera is none other than the host who greeted Howard at the door. Howard realizes, as Proust does, that decorum and social civility are often games of illusion and appearance. Howard's revulsion at the obscenity leaves him hurrying away at the end with the lines:

I move
by darkness as they moved by light: Howard's way.
Crossing the city to send you this, I am
awed as the meanings converge, syllables
I cannot dispel, alien oracles
I cannot receive: Dakota. Katmandu.

Richard (32)

The epistolary form of this poem ends with this sad address to Proust. Howard's world is bounded in a moral darkness, modern and disturbing. It sees both inside and outside the closeted private world of homosexuality. Both Proust and Howard are caught in the dissemblance of these worlds. Both try to make sense of appearances and often enough find disturbing human realities beneath.

Howard shares this closeted world of appearances and dissemblance not only with Proust but with Auden as well. In section X of his poem "Compulsive Qualifications," Howard makes a reverential gesture to Auden and the audacious "queen" that he could be. The section is entitled "Richard, May I Ask You Something? Is Auden Senile?" Howard writes:

minority. The American civil rights movement and the women's movement of the sixties offered gay men and lesbians models for activism, community and organization.⁶⁹ In gay literature, years of dissemblance and a desperate sense of marginalization gave way to a decade where writers embraced idealism and celebrated their sexuality. The "fabled disease" of marginality was joined by a more radical notion of "fabled" desire and empowerment.

Revisionist gay and lesbian writers are beginning to investigate the legacy of Stonewall from a psychohistorical perspective.⁷⁰ The lesbian activist, Urvashi Vaid, speaks of the immediate post-Stonewall years as a time when "lesbian and gay subculture grew exponentially" and when "gay and lesbian ghettos sprang up as tens of thousands of gay and lesbian people migrated from the heartland" to the cities (63). In regard to gay men, Vaid says:

this was time to discover and celebrate sexual freedom. From the disco to the bathhouse to the private sex clubs, from early gay porn to the founding of VD clinics in the gay community, gay men established a new, defiant, and public community. . . because the fact of government repression arguably makes every act of gay male sex a condemnation of government and religion, most men did (and still do) see their sexual and emotional freedom in stark political terms: moralism versus libertarianism. A commitment to this notion of individual sexual freedom underlies why gay men are so adamantly opposed to closing bathhouses, sex clubs, or other sites organized to deliver sex. This idea of sexual politics differs (although it is not incompatible with) the kind of sexual politics that lesbian feminism developed. (63-64)

69 Urvashi Vaid comments on the Black Panther Party, the SNCC, SDS, and the founding of NOW and their influences on gay liberation in her book Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay & Lesbian Liberation.

70 Ian Young's book, The Stonewall Experiment, reviews the cultural phenomena of gay liberation and Stonewall to analyze their myths and assumptions. Gabriel Rotello's book, Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men also reevaluates the sexual legacy of the post-Stonewall years from the perspective of sexual promiscuity on the part of gay men. Also see Vaid's Virtual Equality.

Vaid further notes that “sexual freedom both was and was not a dividing line between men and women . . . male sexuality constructed many of the places gay men frequented to create community and identity . . . the baths, the bars, the backrooms, the bushes” (64).

Ian Young tells us:

The Stonewall riots were a watershed for gay people, and when the dam broke, a lot of idealism, anger and longing burst out of their social restraints, carrying with them the debris of deep repression, confusion, and self-hatred. What Ginsberg called ‘the wounded look’ had been momentarily startled into awareness, but the wounds were too deep to be easily healed, the methods of healing were little known . . . (The Stonewall Experiment 56)

In Young’s opinion the exponential ghettoization of gay life after Stonewall and the entrenchment of a gay male sexual politic had negative consequences. Rather than “gay institutions: communes, newspapers, food co-ops, schools, after hours places, rural retreats,” as idealistically suggested by Carl Wittman in his “Gay Manifesto” (Wittman 330-342), according to Young, mob-controlled gay magazines and porn turned the gay liberation movement toward the commercialization of gay sex and a hedonistic culture (The Stonewall Experiment 64-69). Young goes on to comment that “social institutions from psychiatry to pornography instilled into gay men the idea of sex without affection or commitment as the essence of homosexuality” and that it was “hardly surprising that many gays came to see any more intimate approach as a ‘sell-out to the straight establishment . . . embarrassingly unliberated’” (70).

Gay sexual liberation of the post-Stonewall years created a fascination with the flourishing gay sexual underworld, a fascination which bordered on the mythic. Young speaks of Michael Rumaker’s book A Day and a Night at the Baths (1979) and utilizes its

haunting images and allusions to the Minoan myth of the Minotaur, to provide commentary on the post-Stonewall years (The Stonewall Experiment 78). Gay men entered the labyrinth of their own sexual unconscious where they were to encounter “ferocious versions of the self, which the Minotaur represents . . . donning its flayed skin” (78). Gay men became sealed in their own devouring world of sexuality, where “as in a carnival house of mirrors, or in the baths with their pulsing disco music and pervasive poppers odour, the only way out may be to retrace one’s steps—not always easy, without the thread” (78).

Promiscuous gay men, the “rough trade,” the hustlers, the furtive cruisers, became endowed with “an elevated status as sexual rebels, political outlaws, and ideological heroes” (Young, The Stonewall Experiment 138). ⁷¹ An exclusively gay male subculture expressed itself in the hypermasculine “clone” look of the seventies which showed defiance and disdain, a meanness and coarseness, and found expression in such films as “Cruising” (The Stonewall Experiment 96; 138).

It can be argued that the surfaces of a hedonistic gay male subculture in the seventies and its nihilistic glare hid growing moral dilemmas underneath. Faggots (1978) by Larry Kramer began to warn gay men of the dangers in fucking themselves to death (Young, The Stonewall Experiment 140). ⁷² Of the novel, Young comments: “below the surface satire, there is a moral dimension, an angry plea for dignity and love” (140).

71 Young discusses books by John Rechy such as his 1967 novel Numbers, The Sexual Outlaw (1977), and Rushes (1979), which extend the myths of liberation and promiscuity (The Stonewall Experiment 136-143).

72 Nihilism, by its definition, can stem from “a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless”; it is also a doctrine which “denies any objective ground of truth and especially of moral truth” or believes that “conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake” (Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary 769). In

The Gilded Poets reflect many of the contradictions of this new gay subculture.

These were poets who lived in its labyrinthine sexual world, partook of its self-destructive behaviors (drugs and alcohol), its sexual promiscuity, and its hypermasculine preoccupation. Picano's "The Gilded Boys" is a poem which glows with a certain panache and élan reminiscent of O'Hara with its references to gay, urban pop culture: "The gilded boys are gathered/in a chic Morocco nightclub/from notime in the 30's/from noone's Garbo'd dream" (24). By using the negations "notime" and "noone" Picano intensifies the nihilism of the setting, implying a surface without inherent value beneath, style and glamour without substance. This poetry, like Proust's vision, deals with spectacle, glamour, and abjection at the same time. But unlike Proust, it is celebratory, hedonistic and hopeful. Like O'Hara a decade before, Picano makes easy reference to the popular American culture around him which had been greatly influenced by gay men, especially in the disco music industry. The "spectacle of the closet" became a commodity for consumerism.⁷³ Gay male culture immediately after 1969 had emerged as a thing of showy, fabulous performance.

Early on, the world of the gay subculture with its bars and dance clubs emerged from the countercultural movement of the late sixties into a distinctive world of its own. The raw, lonely, underground downbeat style of the Gay Beats merged with liberationist fury after Stonewall. In the wake of Stonewall a "Gay Arts Movement" began. Similar to the Black Arts Movement of the sixties with its separatist identity politics, this

some regards, according to Young, the betrayal of ideals for gay community and committed love-- fostered in the seventies this destructive belief.

“movement” in the early seventies took its creativity from emerging gay artists. Mart Crowley, Charles Ludlam, Ethyl Eichelberger, Harvey Fierstein, Terrence McNally began a golden age for gay theater. Gay artists like Andy Warhol continued to be in the limelight. Gay culture with its camp and sophistication, with its irony and flamboyance, came into popular vogue. With greater liberties, explorations in sex and homoeroticism made their way into the fields of advertising and fashion. Perry Ellis, Willi Smith, Halston and Calvin Klein become some of the keepers of the new style, although as gay men they were both in and out of the closet. Gay men seized upon disco, drugs, opera, popular culture, the club scene and camp. Earlier poets such as Tennessee Williams, Paul Mariah, and Ralph Pomeroy had begun describing the romantic sheen of this new “theatrical” culture in their highly lyrical and dramatic poetry. A sense of a collective gay voice, identity and perspective was already apparent in this work.

Ralph Pomeroy in a poem such as “Gay Love and the Movies” (1969) opens with:

Watching love stories on TV,
 watching a movie,
 I wonder where we are.
 I've wondered for a long time. (Young, The Male Muse 90)

The use of “we” is a telling reminder of Pomeroy’s sense of a collective political sensibility, a sensibility which is looking outward and appraising the dominant culture. It is the start of a new social critique which focuses gay men upon the image-makers in society.

Pomeroy draws comparisons between gay oppression and white racism:

I've wondered sometimes if that's what
 it feels like to be black--
 looking on all the time at exquisite or
 banal white rituals-- (91)

73 The “spectacle of the closet” is discussed by Eve Sedgwick in her book Epistemology of the Closet.

In Pomeroy's seventies' poem, "The Leather Bar," there is an easy familiarity with the rituals and "customs" of gay culture:

Tonight, at the bar,
in the Members Only room,
the usual collection of aging "cyclists"
lounge
wearing painfully tight jeans
elaborately arranged to show
maximum amount of cock and balls. (Coote 344)

Pomeroy vividly paints the scene of the poem and its atmosphere. He also captures a sensibility of a gay male culture in the seventies: the emphasis upon sexual prowess and display and the concern with "attitude." Though similar to Norse's poetry in its use of eroticism and the demi-monde, Pomeroy depicts a gay world which is fully self-conscious and commercialized, a flashy culture vividly aware of itself:

Amid the greetings and badinage
a pool game goes: focus point--
because of the brilliant light bouncing
off its green field--
for involved nonchalance, exhibition of
strained, tattooed muscles, "baskets,"
arching asses. (Coote 344)

The attention to style and the constant observation and commentary of the poet move beyond the mere furtive glance to the powerful look of desire. This is a new poetry which expresses a provocative and seductive watchfulness:

Sizing up. Sizing up. A puzzle pieced
together: "If A's been to bed with C and
seems to like him, and I've been to bed
with C and we got on fine, then maybe A
would work out for me . . .
And he knows G whom I've always wanted

to make-out with . . . He could tell me
 what G digs . . . Guess I better move
 over to a better spot so I'll be more
 directly in his line of vision . . . (Coote 345)

This sizing up and obsession with sex was one characteristic of gay male white culture in the seventies. The early liberation years were paid for in an emotional abandon that did not seek either a past or a future. It moved solely in the celebratory present. No longer rooted in Picano's "Garbo'd dream" of the 30's, a time of great stylization and signification, of sublimity and camp performance, this new gay time is spent in a suspended present. Picano tells us, again in his poem "The Gilded Boys": "Those golden lads are having one fine time" (24). The "gilded boys" perform for each other, demanding "instant emulation/of their brother's lover's brother" (24). The contortion of the last phrase shows the self-reflectivity and self-involvement of the very gay male culture it describes. Ironically, the phrase also alludes to shared family bonds and a sense of tribe, paralleling and echoing the sentiments of early feminist rhetoric which demanded sisterhood for all women.

This is not a poetry which tries to accommodate heterosexual culture; instead it takes its vantage from the gay subcultural viewpoint. Its sensibility of language and imagery is totally "gay" and masculine. This is a language which revels in the theatricality of gay male rituals with their codes and signals—"cruising," "tricking," and "showing attitude." Unlike more formal gay poetry, it does not seek validation in high aestheticism, classicism nor the search for an extended gay past, nor does it sublimate the homoerotic.

This gay subcultural viewpoint of gay white men, however, was not wholly shared by gay black men. As previously discussed, the formation of a gay subculture easily

recognizable in advertising, popular culture, and the mainstream media often excluded the lives of gay black men. Gay black men found themselves doubly marginalized by both a white racist gay subculture and a dominant homophobic culture. They were also at odds with their own homophobic black communities. To address their growing invisibility in relation to such issues as sexual stereotyping, exclusion from a white gay literary establishment and AIDS, they formed their own collective groups of empowerment, seeking publishing venues to put forth their ideas. Joseph Beam writes:

Black gay invisibility can be problematic. Because so little is pitched our way, concerns of critical importance, like AIDS, seem directed only at white gays. Similarly, Black gay history, not recounted by white gay media, compounds and extends our invisibility. Transmitting our stories by word of mouth does not possess archival permanence. Survival is visibility. (15)

Essex Hemphill in his powerful introduction to Brother to Brother tells us:

When black gay men approached the gay community to participate in the struggle for acceptance and to forge bonds of brotherhood, bonds so loftily proclaimed as *the vision* of the best gay minds of my generation, we discovered that the beautiful rhetoric was empty. The disparity between words and actions was as wide as the Atlantic Ocean and deeper than Dante's hell. There was no gay community for black men to come home to in the 1980's. The community we found was as mythical and distant from the realities of black men as was Oz from Kansas. (xix)

The shiny gilded surfaces of such a popular "white" confection as The Wizard of Oz, an early classic among white gay men who saw in the pathos of Judy Garland's innocent portrayal of Dorothy their own descent into the fabulous glitter and make-believe of gay ghetto culture and its attendant ride into the maelstrom of disillusionment, drugs, and self-destruction, became emblematic of the gilded illusion and myth of the post-Stonewall liberation years. Hemphill, as other gay black men, saw in the movie's beautiful

images and its reference to the nurture and power of home and heritage, a narrative exclusive of his own harsher realities and displacements. In his poem, "Heavy Breathing," Hemphill writes:

We were promised
 this would be a nigga fantasy
 on the scale of Oz.
 Instead we're humiliated,
 disenchanted, suspicious.
 I ask the scandal-infested leadership
 "What is your malfunction?" (Ceremonies 15).

And later he repeats:

You promised
 this would be a nigga fantasy
 on the scale of Oz.
 Instead, it's "Birth of a Nation" (Ceremonies 16).

MARGINALITY, UNDESIRABILITY AND ILLNESS: RETURN OF THE GAY SEXUAL OUTLAW

If marginality, with its attendant illness, alienation, rebellion and/or empowerment, has been associated with homosexuality for quite some time, it was even more strongly linked to the AIDS crisis of the eighties. The gay culture, which Young and others claim had abandoned the ideals of the gay liberation movement, suddenly found itself faced with a major medical crisis. Normality, the normality of a "general population," was perceived by the heterosexual world to be seriously jeopardized by the extreme "risky" behaviors of a class of "degenerate and depraved" homosexual men. Seen as victims of their own behavior, as guilty of their own excess and lack of Christian morality, gay men found themselves once again pushed to the extremes of American society and culture as

untouchables. Gay artists had no choice but to assume radical positions as the “other,” and to find a language which was desperate, confrontative and direct to express their outrage and anger. An extremely political rhetoric entered gay poetry with the advent of AIDS verse. AIDS poetry, in essence, reinvestigated the theme of marginality from the newer perspective of the culture of illness and medicine. AIDS poetry gained particular forcefulness in the gay, black community where poets were faced with enormous issues surrounding AIDS invisibility and anonymity.

Assotto Saint, the Haitian-American poet (1957-1995), in his poem “Writing About AIDS: to Akhenaton” says: “acts of despair can't be calmed by pretense of circumstance/at the mercy of an age where horrific images hang/in an oblivious silence that draws poetry/which must be written/with blood” (Wishing for Wings, 1). Much of Saint’s later work is confrontative AIDS poetry with a strong political dimension. “Devils in America” takes the tone of bitch drag-queen to rage against religious pretense:

I was born on all angels day
but throughout my life
i've been a bitch out of hell/
don't nobody show up at my funeral
to call me nice or some shit like that/ . . .

though christianity befuddles me
i'm amazed at how it enslaves
the gay african-american community/ (Wishing for Wings, 35)

In “Leave or Die” Saint writes of an HIV-positive person who is harassed on the street. The poet says: “unclasp a safety pin/prick your finger quick/blood spurts/queerly ask ‘lookin’ for aids’/dare stand brave/remember this land is home/aim free” (Wishing for Wings, 46)

The focus on death as a process and an art in itself became the challenge for many gay poets. Gay writers understood that a denial of gay death in the heterosexual community (and especially the artistic, literary and political communities) was making the AIDS epidemic a more silent and thus more “unimaginable” and “inconceivable” event. Recognizing that the Holocaust remained largely ignored and unknown during the course of World War II, gay artists felt the need to call attention in graphic detail to their suffering, but in a context that would not sentimentalize the experience. Unlike Michael Klein and Michael Lassell, whom we will discuss later, AIDS activist poets seldom sought to gain empathy or sympathy; they wished to incite outrage and resist assimilationist or revisionist tendencies which might suggest last minute repentance and moral guilt. In this approach they were joined by gay fiction and non-fiction writers such as David B. Feinberg and David Wojnarowicz.

In his poem “Going Home Celebration: for Donald Woods,” Saint explores the hypocrisy of religion and attitudes toward AIDS in the black community:

Donald
the spectacle of your funeral
was a wake-up call from the dead
but history religiously repeats its travesty
in lunatic denial of an epidemic that decimates us
gay black men . . .

two ladies share some rubbish about heaven & hell/
the eulogy recalls achievements & civil rights struggles
except for Other Countries cofounded closest to your heart/
this hour when our collective strength is tested
not one of your poems is read aloud to sustain us/ (Wishing for Wings, 32)

The last stanza invokes a variety of voices which the poet felt compelled to

answer and confront:

to stand up together to little old ladies in white dresses
 fanning lies with cries of "save them, jesus"/
 to stand up together to a pompous minister who under his breath
 damned us for mass-invading his holy territory/
 to stand up together to many dressed-to-kill family members
 ready but unable to break our balls with their bibles./ (33)

Saint points toward the "polemics of rage." He writes: "nowadays in a world asunder/we often gather for farewells to beloved brothers like you/tongues heavy with laments & polemics of rage" (32). The polemics of rage found in gay poetry of this period drew heavily from the politics of ACT-UP and the activism of Larry Kramer. Both poet and activist were united in a rhetoric which was immediate, desperate and uncompromising.

David Warren Frechette's "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" conveys much of this defiance against marginalization and sentimental posturings:

Let the congregation work overtime
 For my eleventh-hour conversion.
 Their futile efforts fortify
 My unrepentant resolve.

. . . I don't regret late-night and early a.m.
 Encounters with world-class insatiates.

My only regrets are being ill . . .

Engrave on my tombstone:
 "Here sleeps a *happy* Black faggot
 Who lived to love and died
 With no guilt." (Saint, Here to Dare 127-128)

The title of Frechette's poem became a rallying cry for many poets. Black film maker, Marlon Riggs, used it as the title of his film dealing with HIV-positive artists. The

title as well is drawn from an Edith Piaf song, a lyric which became associated with the singer's enduring tenacity despite a tragic life of adversity. It also can be seen as a camp gesture on Frechette's part toward the sentimentalizing impulse of popular culture. Here, Frechette claims Piaf's defiance for his own, a move similar to gay men of the past who have identified with female singers and their oppressed social position as women.⁷⁴

INSIDE/OUT: THE MARGINAL AS THE AMERICAN MULTICULTURAL

In the early nineties the queer movement and the ascendancy of gay and lesbian studies at universities across the country have called attention to issues of marginality in relation to sexuality. Multicultural anthologies, academic literary journals, and university presses have all begun to publish and support gay and lesbian writers. "Niche" marketing of gay and lesbian books is beginning to shift toward a broader multicultural and pansexual (including gay, lesbian, bi- and transgendered) perspective. Popular American culture has assimilated gay and lesbian characters. Gay and lesbian writers have now begun to explore with renewed interest the arbitrary limits of their own sexuality. Homosexuality has joined the list of other minority cultures in the new postmodern world.

Perhaps it is a revealing development that The Best American Poetry 1995, edited interestingly enough by Richard Howard, should include, in the spectrum of American poetry, gay voices that speak in direct and provocative ways. This follows a trend in other poetry anthologies of the nineties, namely Maria and Jennifer Gillan's Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry (1994), which routinely include gay

⁷⁴ A poem such as Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died" (about the death of Billy Holiday) from The Selected Poems might also be seen in this vein.

and lesbian writers for a more diverse and inclusive perspective on ethnicity, culture and the American experience.⁷⁵

David Lehman, the series editor for The Best American Poetry 1995, alludes in his introduction to the “depth of American poetry”:

There are poems here about Bosnia, urban violence, political injustice, French collaborationism, and gays in the military. Other poems treat the hard-boiled romance of *film noir*, the landscape of New Mexico or that of a scruffy suburban hill, fairy tales and Zen Buddhist koans, Frank O’Hara and Miles Davis, Tarzan and *Citizen Kane*, but also language and its properties, birth, childhood, brotherhood, masturbation, sex, friendship, marriage, children, childlessness, and death. (13)

“Language and its properties” and popular culture become topics of inquiry for this poetry, but as we have seen from before, these elements have always been critical areas of irony, aestheticism and humor in a gay sensibility. Queer theory, post-structuralism, postmodernism, and multiculturalism have merely enlarged the “spectacle of the closet” to broader and more far-reaching discussion.

Howard includes in the collection gay poets such as Carl Phillips, J.D. McClatchy, Wayne Koestenbaum, Allen Ginsberg, Reginald Shepherd and Rafael Campo along with more established straight poets such as Anthony Hecht, Margaret Atwood, Barbara Guest, Molly Peacock and Grace Schulman.

Rafael Campo’s eloquent “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” from the anthology, tends to embrace a broader queer perspective in American society. Campo, an Hispanic

⁷⁵ In the table of contents for Unsettling America we have lesbian writers such as Cheryl Clark, Chrystos, Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa included with other writers of diverse cultural backgrounds. We must remember that the lesbian writers mentioned above also consider themselves part of individual minority cultural groups; e.g., Cheryl Clark is African-American, Cherrié Moraga is Chicana.

gay writer, opens the poem:

Defending you, my country, hurts
My eyes. I see the drums, the glory,
The marching through the gory,
Unthinkable mud of soldiers' guts

And opened hearts: I want to serve.
I join the military,
Somehow knowing that I'll never marry.
The barracks' silence as I shave

Is secretive and full of cocks.
I think to myself, *What if I'm a queer,*
What if too many years
Go by and then my brain unlocks . . .

. . . I see the oil burning in the Gulf

Which hurts my eyes. My sergeant cries
Now he's a real man—
I sucked his cock behind a van
In the Presidio, beneath a sky

So full of orange clouds
I thought I was in love.
I think to myself. *What have*
I become? I lose myself in the crowds

Of the Castro . . . (34)

In choosing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as his title, Campo appropriates and subverts a dominant and familiar cultural referent and in a camp manner points out its incongruous contrast to the gay experience. The familiarity of the patriotic song is subverted, its lyrics disjointed and interrupted. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of . . ." becomes "My eyes. I see the drums, the glory,/The marching through the gory" (33). The directness of "I want to serve," in the beginning of the poem is later mirrored in:

. . . the months go by
 And suddenly they want to lift the ban.
 I don't think they can.
 I still want to die

My death of honor, I want to die
 Defending values I don't understand;
 The men I see walking hand in hand
 Bring this love song to my mind. (34)

The surprise of this poem unfolds with Campo's decisive move to link the gay men of the Castro who walk hand in hand to the beliefs and ideals of a free democracy. The perspective of this poem frames gay rights and queer rights in the ongoing discourse on American truth and justice. It does not speak from the marginalized perspective of outsider, from the role of criminal, deviant or outlaw (in fact the decisive homosexual moment of the poem occurs in consorting with a sergeant who appears as a willing participant), but rather from the viewpoint of the "inside." The soldier-speaker of the poem is already serving his country, already willing to die. He exhibits those values which are deemed important to be integrated into society. He invites the reader to share in his dilemma: defending a freedom he cannot fully understand by its contradictory legal requirements, but can intuit on a personal level in his deep need to serve and to love.

Chapter 4

The Phallic Signifier and the Sublimated Anus

In the history of homosexuality the male body has become territory for skirmishes political, theoretical, and moral. In the early part of the century, the gay male body was a furtive image taken at a glance or admired from the appreciative distance of the aesthete. The gay male body was cloaked in the invisibility of the closet. In the forties and fifties it became the beefcake image of masculine prowess. After Stonewall, it became a symbol of sexual freedom, an erotic commodity for advertising. Patriarchy and gender roles began to be questioned. In the nineties, with AIDS, the gay male body has become a subject of discourse on culture, race, gender, eroticism and multiculturalism. It is no wonder that the nineties have been marked by the publication of numerous gay erotic and love poetry anthologies.

But the history of the gay male body has also been played out in a careful dichotomy between the role of the phallic and the anal. For the purposes of our discussion in this chapter, we will look at the work of Guy Hocquenghem. The primary phallic role of the male has traditionally been threatened by the passivity of homosexual intercourse and the eroticism of the anus. Men after all are the “phallus bearers” of society (Hocquenghem 89).

The psychosexual as well as political implications of homosexuality have been played out in gay verse which has investigated homoeroticism from many perspectives,

often crossing the lines of persistent and internalized cultural and psychosexual assumptions. Guy Hocquenghem has spoken of the “phallic signifier” and the “sublimated anus” as a way of understanding the psychodynamics of homosexuality. “Homosexual desire challenges anality-sublimation because it restores the desiring use of the anus” (Hocquenghem 84). “Only the phallus dispenses identity; any social use of the anus, apart from its sublimated use, creates the risk of a loss of identity” (Hocquenghem 87). Homosexuality has long been connected with sodomy and anal eroticism. Libidinal interest in the anus weakens the “great phallic signifier,” so much a part of our patriarchal world, and threatens the competitive, social unity of a phallocentric society. Early Freudian psychology held that identity formation was related to the repression and control of the anus (Hocquenghem 85). To live in one's own waste is “the ultimate outrage to the human person”; it is to risk the non-differentiation of desire, to “forget oneself” (Hocquenghem 85). The conscious choice of wallowing in one's own waste is to proclaim acceptance of homosexuality, to support the “re-territorialization” of the male body, shifting it from the phallocentric to the analcentric, with the associated traits of receptivity of the anus. It is the ultimate act of defiance.

The rules of phallic patriarchy have been questioned by gay men. To experience pleasure, autoeroticism, and be the receiver of sexual aggressiveness had been seen in Western culture as purely feminine and inferior. To identify with the receiver or the female is, for the male, to fail fully to resolve the Oedipal conflict of Freudian theory. Hocquenghem in summarizing Freud says that disturbances of libidinal development caused the homosexual to fixate on the mother, to share castration anxiety and to indulge

in narcissism in which the homosexual takes his own self as a model (65-66). Society supports the competition between “phallus bearers” (89). Hocquenghem tells us that “the phallic stage is the identity stage” and that homosexuality is always connected with the anus” (88-89). The sublimation of the libido in the homosexual can be seen as a “public utility,” leading to devotion to the interests of the community, altruistic behavior which counters the jealousy-competition of phallogocentric society (91).

All of these ideas reflect the psychiatration of homosexuality and the various constructions of masculinity and the Oedipal function in society. Hocquenghem argues that “to assume perversity is to accept, in the case of homosexuals, the notion of an opposition between two clearly defined sexes” (130). He also distinguishes between “homosexuality,” which can always find acceptance in society as something discretely “perverse” (128), and “homosexual desire” (128), which is daring, transgressive, unstable and suggestive of the true polymorphous spectrum of desire. Hocquenghem, like Foucault, calls for a perpetual state of rebellion against all codification of desire.⁷⁶ But Hocquenghem shows us how society has constructed a system of restraints in order to preserve the “Law of the Father,” if you will, and to sublimate analcentric desire and its subsequent signification. The gay poet has needed to work with or against these various conventions of thought.

The jealousy-competition of the phallus-bearers in society was challenged by Whitman who saw the male body as receptive, sensitive, and oriented toward adhesive bonding rather than territorial struggle. By re-territorializing the male body and its

⁷⁶ Both men were influenced by Marxist thought.

erogenous potential, patriarchy and violence are diffused, the adhesiveness and athletic love between men inform a new democratic vista, a new comradeship and brotherly affection. Homosexual desire is sublimated into an adhesive social cohesion. Whitman in "Not Heaving from my Ribb'd Breast Only" writes: "Nor in the limbs and senses of my body that take you and/dismiss you continually—not there,/Not in any or all of them O adhesiveness pulse of my life!/Need I that you exist and show yourself any more than in/these songs" (152-153). This dissolution of identity into the passionate moment of what we might assume is homosexual intercourse represents the domain of the anal. In being taken by his lover, Whitman is carried into the pulse of life. The sublimity of homosexuality is praised.

Verlaine and Rimbaud focused on anal eroticism in "Sonnet: To the Asshole." The anus is the place of "milk and honey," "the Promised Land" (Coote 235). In their eroticization of the anus, Verlaine and Rimbaud worship the non-progenitive (anus) over the progenitive (phallus), flaunting the non-procreative condition of homosexuality, anathema to a dominant society which sees male-female procreation as natural and wholesome. The anus and the vagina become receptive qualifiers for the female, opposites to masculine identity. Subverting this "debased," "hidden" and "shameful" aspect of the body, and revering it as both beautiful and primary, is an act of defiant reversal. It reflects the homophobic constructs of homosexuality as "debased," "inverted," "bestial" and "hidden," but in reclaiming that which is "bestial," "vegetative," "receptive" and "carnal" and associating it with the sublime and the beatific—note the biblical references in Verlaine and Rimbaud's language—the homoerotic is released from its secondary,

oppressed position, to one of bold ecstasis. The anal receptive nature of homosexuality invites ecstasy, sublimity, loss of identity, and Dionysian pleasure, foreign to the patriarchal world.

As Hocquenghem suggests, the sublimated anus risks the loss of identity. The sublime in Hart Crane's work, with its frequent imagery of the sea, of water and its fluid nature, evokes a femininity and receptivity which is contrary to the more phallogentric poetry of Pound or Eliot. As in Whitman, the male body for Crane becomes receptive and sensitive. As earlier quoted from Crane's 1926 "Voyages":

And so, admitted through black swollen gates
That must arrest all distance otherwise,--
Past whirling pillars and lithe pediments,
Light wrestling there incessantly with light,
Star kissing star through wave on wave unto
Your body rocking! (*The Complete Poems*, 37).

This poetry ran counter to prevailing "masculine" writing of the time. Compare Crane to Allen Tate's 1928 poem "Ode to the Confederate Dead" which invokes an historic vision of male military past and returns to the domain of Greek myth:

You know who have waited by the wall
The twilight certainty of an animal
Those midnight restitutions of the blood
You know--the immitigable pines, the smoky frieze
Of the sky, the sudden call: you know the rage,
The cold pool left by the mounting flood,
Of muted Zeno and Parmenides,
You who have waited for the angry resolution
of those desires that should be yours tomorrow,
You know the unimportant shrift of death
And praise the vision
And praise the arrogant circumstance
Of those who fall
Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision--
Here by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall.

Seeing, seeing only the leaves
Flying, plunge and expire

Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,
Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising
Demons out of the earth--they will not last.
Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,
Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.
Lost in that orient of the thick and fast
You will curse the setting sun.

Cursing only the leaves crying
Like an old man in a storm. (Ferguson, et al. 1310-1311)

By way of steady cadence and formal meter and an obvious alignment with the "New Critical" ideals of organic unity in terms of theme, tension, irony and paradox, Tate creates a strongly cohesive and classical ode.⁷⁷ The old man in the storm, like Lear, rails against the "setting sun" of mortality. Utilizing momentary gestures to classical meter such as the paeon⁷⁸ in his short refrains, Tate moves his poem toward familiar themes of valor, patriarchy and the phallic's decisive resistance against the "shut gate and decomposing wall" of death:

Leave now
The shut gate and the decomposing wall:
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,
Riots with his tongue through the hush--
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all! (1311)

77 New Criticism was a term made current with the publication of John Crowe Ransom's book The New Criticism in 1941 and was applied to a theory and practice of literary criticism that dominated until the 1960s (Abrams 246). The New Critics often identified as Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur, and William K. Wimsatt, believed that: 1. the poem should be treated as a verbal object; 2. explication or close reading of texts is the true procedure to detail a poem's inner linguistic workings; 3. literature is a special kind of language which employs interactions of figures of speech and symbols and an emphasis on 'organic unity'; 4. the essential components of works of literature and poetry are words, images, and symbols that are organized around human themes and employ tension, irony and paradox at achieving an 'equilibrium of opposed forces' (Abrams 246-247).

78 A paeon was a metrical foot of four syllables with one long and three short syllables or with one stressed and three unstressed syllables used in classical prosody and English prosody respectively (Websters 816).

Death and the grave are controlled by the Miltonic image of the serpent. It is interesting to note Tate's use of the images of "shut gate," "tongue," and, a few lines above, "ravenous," in conjunction with the theme of death. It is almost a phallogentric gesture to see death as a devouring force. This eulogized wasteland of chivalric male mortality is invaded by only one female presence. Early in the poem we have: "The hound bitch/Toothless and dying, in a musty cellar/Hears the wind only" (1311). The female has exhausted its use as supplier of male arrogance and retires to die in its dotage. Tate sides with the dead confederate soldiers of the poem that molder in his masculine consciousness.

Now that the salt of their blood
Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea,
Seals the malignant purity of the flood,
What shall we who count our days and bow
Our heads with a commemorial woe
In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,
What shall we say of the bones, unclean,
Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?

The ragged arms, the ragged heads and eyes
Lost in these acres of the insane green?
The gray lean spiders come, they come and go;
In a tangle of willows without light
The singular screech-owl's tight
Invisible lyric seeds the mind
With the furious murmur of their chivalry. (1311)

There is a strong sense here of an aggressive, violent legacy rising from masculine destruction and unbridled fury. Tate meditates upon the dissolution of male power and shares a certain resistant anxiety toward the image of vegetative "verdurous anonymity" which covers the poem's "insane green" landscape (1311). We have the image of "seeds" and "chivalry" linked by the screech-owl's lyrics; these two images suggestive of the

phallic and the masculine.

Tate was tied to the era of World War I and II and subscribed to this world of harshness and brutal realism. It is no surprise that Tate, a heterosexual and one of Crane's literary advisers, would ultimately attack Crane.⁷⁹ Crane's sublimated and receptive Romanticism could only register in a more phallocentric sense as "intellectual deterioration" to Tate (Yingling 61).

In the wake, however, of the disruptive force of a masculine will to power, Ginsberg put forward a rebellious and disruptive vision of masculinity which was analcentric. A poem such as Howl in 1956 reads: "who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and/screamed with joy" (Collected Poems 128). To scream with joy contradicts the expectation of pain and reinforces the erotic pleasure of the homosexual act. Howl is followed by other poems of anal pleasure such as "Please Master" (1968), in which Ginsberg writes:

till I loosen my asshole a dog on the table yelping with terror delight to be loved
Please master call me a dog, an ass beast, a wet asshole,
& fuck me more violent, my eyes hid with your palms round my skull
& plunge down in a brutal hard lash thru soft drip-flesh
& throb thru five seconds to spurt out your semen heat
over & over, bamming it in while I cry out your name I do love you
please Master (Collected Poems 494-495)

And, finally, Ginsberg's "Sweet Boy, Gimme Yr Ass" (1974) discloses:

Come on Come on, open up, legs apart here this pillow
under your buttock

⁷⁹ Tate wrote in an article ("The Man of Letters in the Modern World") printed twenty years after Crane's death a long commentary on his views of Crane's homosexuality (Yingling 61). Tate saw Crane as "an extreme example of the unwilling homosexual," and "all homosexuals as victims, men 'convinced that they cannot be loved' and therefore 'incapable of loving'" (Yingling 61).

homosexual desire is an arbitrarily frozen frame in an unbroken and polyvocal flux. (35-36)

Chuck Ortleb's "Militerotics," published in Andrew Bifrost's Mouth of the Dragon (1975) and republished in Morse and Larkin's Gay & Lesbian Poetry in Our Time, is a poem of defiance and political rage suffused with a language that seeks to shock and reverse traditional constructions of masculinity as well as resist the jealousy-competition of a phallogentric society. Drawing on Verlaine and Rimbaud, the work strongly presents the desire to subvert the middle class, the status quo. The poem essentially takes on the entitlement of the phallogentric society. Its opening dedication is: "Sexuality grows out of the barrel of a gun.--Homage to Jancso" (Morse and Larkin 296). The sexual association of the gun with the male phallus in the dedication, and thereby its joining to images of power, authority and potency, is here telling. Such a quotation suggests the "loaded" nature of sexuality, its complicated and duplicitous force. We are reminded that social forces often manipulate and prescribe our biological imperatives. We are reminded as well of the violent and aggressive nature of the phallic.

The first lines of the poem begin: "In Vietnam/eels live in the water/until they are stuffed/into the vaginas of the opposition./Do not think of the women./Think of the eel" (Morse and Larkin 296). The imperative to not think about the women but consider the "eel" re-emphasizes the devastating phallo-centricity the poem calls attention to. "Pearl Harbor was erotic./Hiroshima was erotic,/but too quick, like/premature ejaculation" (296). The eroticism of violence and its equating with heterosexual virility and masculinity are the outrage of this poem. In section III the poem begins "Orders:/Order a wife to go down/on

her son in front of her son's teachers./Order a mother" (299). The repetition of the command "Order" sets up an authoritative discourse that permeates the work. The speaker in the poem says at one point: "I must find a way/to fuck you that/begins and ends/with the words/yes, sir."

Radical feminists in the seventies found in the works of Kate Millet, Gloria Steinem, Olga Broumas and Muriel Rukeyser strategies to reterritorialize the female body, to reclaim erogenous zones without obeisance to male patriarchy. Gay men as well as straight were enjoined to rediscover their bodies and reclaim themselves not as perpetrators in a prescribed male-female dyad, but as objects of desire themselves. As women and lesbians reclaimed their bodies from male desire and control, men were also freed from their dominant role as phallus bearers. Men explored new sexual roles and re-erogenized their bodies in traditionally "feminine" terms. This re-erogenization of the male body (without the fifties stigma of femininity, passivity, and receptiveness or maternal fixation) enabled gay poets to seek a new language of the masculine and the homoerotic.

Of all lesbian poets, Judy Grahn is perhaps most frequently cited for her insightful political poetry. In a poem such as "A History of Lesbianism," Grahn writes: "The subject of lesbianism/is very ordinary; it's the question/of male domination that makes everybody/angry" (Morse and Larkin 140-141). Grahn's poems are rhetorically strong, with a tone of political authority. They speak from a new-found sense of unity, center, and identification, often augmented by rhetorical repetition: "How they came into the world,/the women-loving-women/came in three by three/and four by four/the women loving-women" (Morse and Larkin 140-141). Lesbian writers of the late sixties and early

seventies like Grahn gave gay men an example of a language which spoke from an enlarged political perspective. The plight of women and the force of misogyny and patriarchy were impressed upon gay men and made them question in a more radical fashion their role as phallus-bearers in society. Gay poets found themselves in dialogue with their heterosexual colleagues, questioning and re-evaluating their critical relationship to the American poetic tradition and the predominantly straight publishing industry.

In 1972, Clayton Eshelman, the publisher of Caterpillar and a straight poet, wrote a note in response to a poem submitted by Charles Shively, "License to Innocence": "it reads like dribble. Not bad, as such, but not poetry--doesn't seem to me man as maker gets any minuses or pluses for putting his prick in ass or cunt--I mean, its what you MAKE out of the transmission of energy regardless"⁸¹ (Shively, Letter from Clayton Eshelman).

Shively wrote a lengthy response. In it he outlines various beliefs and the "fear-guilt" which a radical gay poetry must reject (1) "how ugly & dirty we've been taught genitalia are; cocksucking & cunt-licking; ass rimming & tonguing each body orifice, bend, turn, expanse or fold are our domain, our joy"; (2) "hang-ups on penises, cocks, etc." Shively goes on to challenge Eshelman's view of women. He also speaks of the way gays are taught "primarily that our body is sinful, dirty, rotting--and the sexual parts, worst of all." He concludes with a deep vision: "we are RE-WRITING THE STORY--a new scenario, new script--that's what gay liberation, black liberation, women's liberation are all about." In regard to poetry Shively writes: "the old male-female stereotypes are

⁸¹ I am indebted to Shively for providing me with personal copies of these 1972 unpublished correspondences.

conventions--they are not 'Nature' but sterile social conventions; 'motherhood' 'cunt' 'sweetheart' 'girl.'" He says of Eschelman's "TALK . . . about moving into new, fresh living, forms, freeing yourself from past conventions: 'physical love-making means you can give your whole life every day!--part of the great great meaning of that phrase of Rimbaud's--that one can give one's life every day--is sexually letting go" (Shively, Letter to Clayton Eschelman).

Shively's letter ends with: "I cannot accept, nor will other poets of my generation in liberation accept the notion that no faggot (ass lesbian, 'cunt,' etc.) can create poems unless we abandon a very basic, very sexual, very sensual part of our being, pretending we are just 'folks.'"

Regarding the issue of "dribble," Shively, again in response to Eschelman, writes in regard to his own work: "it's really an accurate phrase to describe what & how my poetry does work . . . it has that sexual quality I like; like vast cisterns, wells, springs. Or a penis, rectum, vagina or other body part--dripping, dribbling, bearing, peeing on or letting out a part of oneself." He goes on to say "forget completely about straight lines--these masculine lines work (if at all) in such things as railroad time tables, baseball & other sports." "But I see straight-ness as a perversion; the universe is mostly circles, spirals, movements in cycles, turns, etc." Shively believes one cannot know anything outside oneself. Shively identifies with women poets and writers who see themselves as growing soft and wet, oceanic versus the hard, stiff quality of men's work. This "infantile" quest can lead to a "license to innocence."

These ideas are helpful in understanding one direction in gay sensibilities and

poetics. The draw of the “Fag Rag Poets” (of which Shively and his “Boston School” were a part) was toward these “dribbles” of form, less oriented and rigid than the traditional verse line. Wildly ecstatic and Dionysian in their approach, infantile and pleasure-seeking, this work rejected a highly structured and patriarchal decorum. The language is very physical and draws from Duncan and perhaps Spicer’s sense of the mythic and mystical. It also harkens to the Beat aesthetic of things primitive, mystical, Eastern, things that escape logic and moralism. Homosexuality has long been associated with debauchery and the derangement of the senses, passivity, narcissism, anal eroticism and, as we have discussed, a loss of identity. It is no accident that alcohol and drugs have been frequently used by the heterosexual media as explanation for homosexual acts; for, it was thought, only through the outside inhibition of mature moral and civic strictures could “debased” and “bestial” homoerotic desires emerge. Through a derangement of the senses the masculine was made corruptible, vulnerable and “receptive.” The heterosexual associated the male body with addiction and reckless freedom and the anarchy of the anal.

David Bergman also speaks of the image of cannibalism, and how, in Tennessee Williams and other gay writers, cannibalism symbolically represented the consummation of the homosexual act. In anal intercourse, the male body is consumed and possessed rather than perpetrating its forceful control. Tight form and decorum in the phallogentric are given up. The masculine reaches rare states of ecstasis and trance, where its spiritual and altruistic powers are heightened. As with Christ, the male body as vision of salvation, desirability, suffering and beauty, is made into wafer and consumed by all admirers in ritualized communion.

Aaron Shurin's "Exorcism of the Straight/Man/Demon" from Carl Morse and Joan Larkin's Gay & Lesbian Poetry in Our Time is a poem with broken line spaces that form openings or interruptions in the verse stanzas (364-365). Indeed these openings or gaps are like the "softness" and "openings" in masculinity, which Shurin alludes to in his work. As with Shively's poetic, Shurin's work shuns the hard, straight, angularity of heterosexual male vision.

Shurin addresses the "you" of the poem to the "straight/man":

You stuff me With your need
and say it is my need. You stick
 your hardness in my face
 and say it is my softness.
It IS my softness. Go away.
I have no more openings
for hardness.

Straight man in me Who I never wanted (364)

And later Shurin says: "Look out! I expel you" (364). The poem is written from a place of receptivity and in its form it opens up to express that receptiveness, but at the same time it seeks to expel that which oppresses it. Like Shively, Shurin accepts his softness, his femininity, yet defends the fierceness of his passion, his love and his anger at being victimized by straight men: "See how hard your cock is?/That's how strong my jaw is./ That's how fierce my heart is and my love" (365). Shurin arrives at a point of exorcism in the last stanza of the poem. He announces: "My hate is not/from angry love but from anger./Not for who you are but how you treat me./Filling my need to be loved/with your own need to conquer love" (365).

The straight man is separated from Shurin's own upbringing and nature. Shurin not

only alludes to the sex act but figuratively to his own conditioning: "Straight man in me
Who I never wanted./Power spoon-fed me that I despise./ to lord over/ to judge and
not listen/to thrust, not pull/ to be hard and never yield./Look out! I expel you" (364).
The conditioning of masculinity (tradition-bound to power and blind control) is expelled
from the poet's spirit. "Straightness" becomes a demon and a quality of spirit, a sensibility,
which can be either accepted or cast off. The gay man is "wedded" to the conventional
receptive role of "bride," but hardly submissive; the gay man embraces the dual strengths
and natures of masculinity and femininity.

Heterosexual marriage is often evoked in homoerotic poetry as a means of
appropriating the phallocentric ideals of society and reconstituting a sometimes more
altruistic and binding sense of community in which traditional masculine and feminine roles
have been subverted. In Essex Hemphill's poem, "In the Life," addressed to his mother,
Hemphill weds himself and lays claim to the forbidden, holding it up to the prism of
homophobia:

Mother, do you know
I roam alone at night?
I wear colognes,
tight pants, and
chains of gold,
as I search
for men willing
to come back
to candlelight. (Ceremonies 172)

The poem ends: "And you will never notice/the absence of rice/and bridesmaids" (173).
The "rice" is the fallen white of semen clustered on the ground among the chosen
novitiates ("bridesmaids") of sex. The ritual of gay male cruising has just as much

authority and authenticity as the coupling of heterosexual man and woman in the union of marriage. Hemphill places emphasis on the absence of the trappings of heterosexuality in his defiant “marriage” to his own kind.

Hemphill’s defiance is realized even more powerfully in the poem, “American Wedding,” which opens:

In america
 I place my ring
 on your cock
 where it belongs.
 No horsemen
 bearing terror,
 no soldiers of doom
 will sweep in
 and sweep us apart.
 They're too busy
 looting the land
 to watch us. (*Ceremonies*, 170)

The symbolism of the ring so binding in heterosexual union is usurped into a radical homosexual context. The soldiers of the heterosexual world are “busy/looting the land.” As in Shively’s poetry, a more radical homosexuality is brought forth to replace the corrupt and oppressive heterosexual system.

But if the anal and the receptive challenge conventional masculinity and emphasize the Dionysian sublimity of homosexual experience with its concurrent loss of identity, it is not the complete story. Hocquenghem points out that “ours is a competitive society: competition between males, between phallus bearers. The anus is excluded from the social field, and the individuals created by the rule of the bourgeoisie believe that everything revolves around the possession of the phallus, the seizure of other people’s phalluses or the fear of losing one’s own” (89). Hocquenghem tells us that homosexual love is not free

from this competition and that “the competition-jealousy system dresses up as homosexual love” (92). Homosexuality can thus become a “relation between phalluses, a comparative and hierarchical relation” which represses the anus and thus enables the triumph of the phallus (92).

Homosexual desire can be born of phallic competition, jealousy, narcissism and phallic worship. Phallocentrism and patriarchy have held sway in art history and high culture for quite some time. Phallocentric misogyny, authority, criminality, masochism and fascism have been themes for investigation in the work of many gay artists such as the writer Jean Genet in France, and the filmmaker Rainer Maria Fassbinder in Germany and Pier Paolo Pasolini in Italy. Richard Meyer in “Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography” writes about the fetishizing and voyeuristic gaze of Robert Mapplethorpe in relation to gay visual arts and how his work acts as critique and commentary on familiar constructions of masculinity (Abelove, et al. 360). From Saint Sebastien on his cross, a gay icon pierced by phallic arrows to Childe Harold with his tower and his sword to Wagner with his bombastic male chivalry, an all-male patriarchal culture comes to worship the very qualities and symbols of masculinity—aggression, emotional reserve, sexual prowess, idealized power, narcissism and a high regard for control, form and structure. These stand in contrast to more feminine analcentric qualities already identified, such as sublimity, altruism, and loss of identity.

Homosexuality reflects a persistent narcissism. Male beauty and the body become things of surface and image. Youth is to be worshipped and held on to. Thus, for instance, in the Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde captures the obsessive compulsions of a gay

man for the single image of his youth, and shows how this fosters a libertinism which ultimately leads to his corruption, death and sacrifice.

In the seventies with the sexual revolution and the gay liberation movement, symbols of the masculine and the narcissistic--leather, chains, bondage, clips, tattoos, scars, mirrors and the "clone" look--prevailed. Felice Picano in "The Gilded Boys" writes: "The gilded boys go on all night/sometimes till after sunrise./They're always checking mirrors/ and bitching at the DJ,/their Cardin shirts get sweaty/and their pills get ineffective/and the man they think they love/is sometimes leaving with another" (24). The reference to the mirror gives a sense of the narcissism and auto-eroticism that pervade the scene.

The three stanzas of this poem progress in length from ten lines to eleven to twelve each increase mirroring the growing "excess" of the lives of these men who move in their "dance of mechanized trance." The repetition of the phrase "of their brother's lover's brother" and its restatement as "their lover's lover's lover," captures in sound and phrasing some of the excess in these rituals of pleasure as well as the intensity of male narcissism.

Picano's poem is highly-evocative of the club and disco era and its severe separation of gay men from lesbians into a polarized masculine subculture. The speed and abandon of Picano's new poetic voice, its expressions of auto-eroticism and a sense of indiscriminate desire are also found in younger gay poets of the period such as Dennis Cooper.

To a large degree the seventies gay poetry of Picano, Cooper and Gunn expressed the

radical liberation of male promiscuity and homosexual desire. Homosexuality was freed of its guilt and psychiatrization.⁸² Many American men in urban areas began to “experiment” with homosexuality. Homosexuality became a model for revolutionary potential, overturning heterosexist norms and suggesting polymorphous desire. The homosexual, to use Hocquenghem’s terminology, became a “pick-up machine” that scattered and plugged in everywhere (Hocquenghem 117).⁸³

In Dennis Cooper’s *Idols* (1979), the phallic totem of the male becomes the pagan idol of worship. What is striking with Cooper is the raw surprise of his language, its aggressiveness, prowess and bravado. In “Good Advice” Cooper has posed himself half-clothed in front of a mirror in a room lit from below. He tells us: “I look good/in this light. Someone seeing/me would desire me. I wouldn’t/mind his hand being a mouth . . .” (*Idols* 19). And also he relates:

It could be me down there
and my mouth. I wouldn’t mind.
I can see part of me in a mirror
and I look sexy for me, all skin

82 In 1973 The American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality should no longer be classified as a mental disorder (Martinac 21).

83 Jeffrey Weeks in his preface to Hocquenghem’s theories summarizes Hocquenghem’s ultimate vision: “. . .when the anus recovers its desiring function (i.e. when the Phallus loses its centrality), when laws and rules disappear, group pleasures will appear without the sacred difference between public and private, social and individual. And Hocquenghem sees signs of this sexual communism in institutions of the gay subculture, where scattering or promiscuity, representing polymorphous sexuality in action, reigns . . . Hocquenghem suggests that a promiscuity freed from guilt is the very mode of desire itself. Homosexuals, therefore, breaking free of their guilt, are like the schizophrenics in Deleuze and Guattari’s work, the models of revolutionary potential” (Hocquenghem 26). By looking at the phallic and the sublimated anus and studying the way civilized society has classified and artificially divided desire into the homosexual and the heterosexual, Hocquenghem radically seeks the rejection of the “normal” as natural (26-27). Hocquenghem extols the virtues of the “homosexual pick-up machine” as “infinitely more direct and less guilt-induced than the complex system of ‘civilised loves’” (118) and suggests that if the promiscuous homosexual took “off the Oedipal cloak of morality under which it is forced to hide, we would see that its mechanical scattering corresponds to the mode of existence of desire itself” (118).

and bones most of the time. But
 not now. I'm more like a god
 when I do this, someone I'd try
 to meet if I saw him alone in a bar,
 or on a street corner for money. (Cooper 19)

As in Picano, this is a world of mirrored reflections, of god-like male beauty and narcissism. Cooper's world is promiscuous and masochistic. In his poem "Being Aware" he writes:

Men smudge me onto a bed,
 drug me stupid, gossip and
 photograph me till I'm famous
 in alleys, like on of those
 jerk offs who stare from
 the porno I sort of admire.

I'm fifteen. Screwing means
 more to the men than to me.
 I daydream right through it
 while money puts chills on
 my arms, from this to that
 grip. I was meant to be naked. (Morse and Larkin 83-84)

In "First Sex," Cooper gives us the account of the first time he makes love with a man and tells us that "sex will slip into my room/like a white tiger" (Dream Police 20-21). Sex, homosexual sex, is a creature of prey. The two become aligned in this image of the predatory and the captive. Male to male sex then finds a parallel in the natural world but in the context of predatory instinct, savagery, aggression and competition.

The language of Cooper's verse reflects some of the promiscuity of 1970's sexual liberation. If Cavafy's homosexuality was sublimated and sentimental, and Howard's was artful and literary, the radical polymorphous desire of Hocquenghem characterizes Cooper. Cooper propels us with great speed and energy into the homoerotic moment. The

poems never let us escape their physicality, their ardor or their entanglements. In a work such as "My Past: for Jim Stegmiller," Cooper writes that the past "is a short string of beautiful/boys" (Morse and Larkin 84). "Is," in contrast to "was," signals the immediacy of Cooper's poetic. Cooper is liberated by the declarative moment. He continues: "beautiful/boys or young men I admired,/dragged to bed, left in ruins/on corners with taxi fare home" (84)

And he goes on to say:

... We were
partners for sweeps of wild
parties, took dope till they felt
like museums which we
could pick-over for bodies
to idealize with caresses. (Morse and Larkin 84-85)

This restless and fragmented sexual drive suggests Deleuze and Guattari's "voyaging schizophrenic," and a form of liberation from the socially created forms of desire (Hocquenghem 16, 117).⁸⁴

Another poet of this sensibility and period is Thom Gunn. Gunn's "Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt" draws attention to the ritual of tattooing but from the perspective of male ritual. "The hand/is steady and accurate;/but the boy does not see it/for his eyes follow the point/that touches (quick, dark movement!)/a virginal arm beneath/his rolled sleeve" (Young, The Male Muse 48). The hand and the point are phallic symbols which

84 In Jeffrey Weeks' preface to Hocquenghem's work he reports: "Deleuze and Guattari see man as constituted by 'desiring machines.' Infinite types and varieties of relationships are possible; each person's machine parts can plug into and unplug from machine parts of another. There is, in other words, no given 'self', only the cacophony of desiring machines. Fragmentation is universal, and is not the peculiar fate of what society defines as the schizophrenic. But the crucial point is that capitalist society cannot live with

literally mark the young boy. The young boy receiving the tattoo from Blackie leaves “with a bandage on/his arm, under which gleam ten/stars, hanging in a blue thick/cluster. Now he is starlike” (48). The masculine can mark or maim. The scar on the virgin body, like the dueling scar of old, is a mark of virility, the adhesive clusters of a milky way. Blackie’s design exalts the young boy to mythic connection, to brotherhood. This “Blutbruderschaft” fantasy, like that which D.H.Lawrence speaks of in Women in Love (Craft 164-167), resembles the sacred bond of drinking each other’s blood in Wagner’s “Siegfried” from The Ring, a sign of male bonding and fidelity. Such displays act as rituals to reaffirm the strong ties between men and the dominion of the phallogentric world order.

In “The Feel of Hands,” Gunn explores the image of male hands groping in the dark to find sexual pleasure and gratification. The anonymity of gay sex, the polymorphous pleasure of a plurality of phalli, intensifies the masculine setting of the poem and achieves Hocquenghem’s vision of the homosexual as pick-up machine, or, in the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, a “voyaging schizophrenic” who rebels against the constraints of civilized desire and plugs in everywhere (Hocquenghem 117). “There is a sudden transition:/they [the hands] plunge together in a full/formed single fury: they are grown/to cats, hunting without scruple;/they are expert but desperate./I am in the dark. I wonder/when they grew up. It strikes me that/ I do not know whose hands they are” (Young, The Male Muse, 47). The hands act as animals. As in Cooper’s depiction of sex (“like a white tiger”), homosexual sex can be predatory, bestial and savage.

Hocquenghem’s vision of the homosexual “scattering” his “love-energy” is

the infinite variety of potential interconnections and relationships, and imposes constraints regulating which ones are to be allowed” (17)

illustration of polymorphous desire “plugged in on a non-exclusive basis” (117). The cruising male is representative to Hocquenghem of an “infinitely more direct and less guilt-induced” form of love (117-118).

The gay black poet, Essex Hemphill, frequently evokes the rituals of gay cruising. In “Where Seed Falls,” Hemphill writes: “Stalking./The neighborhood is dangerous/but we go there./ We walk the long way./Our jangling keys/mute the sound of our stalking./To be under the sky, above/or below a man./This is our heat” (*Ceremonies*, 153). Hemphill continues with: “Our seed falls/without the sound or grace of stars” (153). Semen or seed falls and marks the hands of the participants in this nightly ritual: “Our hands blister with semen” (153). This reminds us distantly of Gunn's poem with its “clusters of stars” marking the boy's skin.

With the queer movement of the nineties, there has been a greater emphasis on Lacan's and Deleuze and Guattari's theories, which see desire not as set in nature but as socially created and based in the open field of the unconscious (Hocquenghem 17). Deleuze and Guattari's viewpoint suggests, according to Jeffrey Weeks in his preface to Hocquenghem's work: “Infinite types and varieties of relationships are possible . . . there is, in other words, no given ‘self,’ only the cacophony of desiring machines” (17). In such theories the gay male body and issues of sex, gender and affection become complex and sensitive topics. No longer solely idealized, psychiatrised, demonized, or politicized, the homosexual becomes, like the post-modern world, far more complex.

Chapter 5

AIDS Poetry: The Collision of Discourses, Ideologies and Motives

Mikhail Bakhtin has written in his treatise on "Discourse in the Novel": "... ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values" (Richter 785). "Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other" (Richter 790). In Bakhtin's essay on "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," he writes of Dostoevsky:

In everything he senses above all *someone else's will* predetermining him. It is within the framework of this alien will that he perceives the world order, nature with its mechanical necessity, the social order. His own thought is developed and structured as *the thought of someone personally insulted by the world order, personally humiliated by its blind necessity*. (Richter 798)

Gay poetry in the time of AIDS has been forced to confront a variety of verbal and ideological points of view within dominant, straight American culture in relation to sexuality, the body, morality, desire and human rights. Early on, AIDS fostered a strong struggle between the dominant heterosexual discourses of science, medicine and religion and the gay community. AIDS in the gay community has elicited very different kinds of poetic reactions from accusation and anger to attempts to accommodate to the "straight world," attempts often emphasizing mutual experiences of grief and mourning. AIDS

fosters a collectivization of the gay “voice,” just as the Holocaust did for the Jewish “voice.” In a way the AIDS crisis accelerated the political work of the Stonewall Rebellion which galvanized gay and lesbians around a single collective liberation movement.

Both moral extremes of indifference and involved condemnation provoked diverse strategies to persuade all segments of American society of the scope and severity of the crisis. Gay poetic language during the time of AIDS is asked to grapple with the rhetoric of sex, politics, homophobia, activism, medicine, science, and religion in new and immediate ways. It is expected to eulogize, celebrate, accuse, commemorate, persuade, confront and empower, all at once. It is also called upon to place a “face” on the gay “victim,” to identify and define “gay life” in a way that was never before fully considered possible.

In looking for rhetorical strategies and devices, gay poets have been forced to confront the existing mainstream cultural rhetoric of desire, love, grief, sex, religion, death, politics, advertising and disease, languages laden with homophobia, and for the most part hostile to their poetic needs. Early on, the AIDS pandemic forced gay poets (many of whom were activists in their own right) to reevaluate the dominant culture’s discourse on sexuality. Terms such as “anal intercourse,” “fellatio,” “rimming,” “condom,” had never been mentioned in the mainstream media. In the eighties, the term “AIDS” was not even spoken by Ronald Reagan until late in his presidency. Homophobia and a sublimated American Puritanism, despite the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies, enforced an anxious silence on the subject of homosexuality in the media. Radical gay groups such as ACT-UP saw the need to break the silence and give same-sex eroticism a

“reality” and a “truth” in the face of much denial. AIDS activists needed to attack a language of complacency and medicine as usual.

The discourse on AIDS forced a reevaluation of the American discourse on sexuality as a whole, its history and its biases. The movement or evolution of discourse on sexuality throughout the twentieth century has been an interesting one. Recently, capitalism and advertising have employed sexuality as the ultimate selling tool. The proliferation of books and magazines, videos and films, that deal with sexual topics reflects society’s obsession with the topic. Michel Foucault suggests in his History of Sexuality that: “At issue is not a movement bent on pushing rude sex back into some obscure and inaccessible region, but on the contrary, a process that spreads it over the surface of things and bodies, arouses it, draws it out and bids it speak, implants it in reality and enjoins it to tell the truth: an entire glittering sexual array, reflected in a myriad of discourses, the obstinateness of powers, and the interplay of knowledge and pleasure” (Foucault 72). In his History, Foucault studied the history of discourses on sex from the Christian idea of the flesh to the psychiatrization of sex in the twentieth century--hystericizing women, sexualizing children and specifying the “perverted” (114). In his introduction Foucault writes: “The central issue, then (at least in the first instance), is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said” (11). To Foucault (as to Lacan)

discourse and the place of the speaker are equated with power and are always suspect.

In the gay movement and to a generation of radical ACT-UP members, the usurping of rhetorical and discursive power from the heterosexual majority became a necessary strategy. Gay poets needed to question who was controlling the dialogue taking place about AIDS, sexuality, and their bodies in American society and culture. They needed to lay claim to the "I" in AIDS discourse, acting not as mere passive witnesses to their "demonization" and "victimization," but as active and "authentic" speakers of the horrors and injustices of the AIDS crisis.

At the start of the crisis, AIDS often served as metaphor for a variety of religious agendas. The disease was appropriated by all sorts of homophobic rightist groups. An AIDS iconography developed which depended upon years of homophobia. The language surrounding AIDS still bears the impact of these influences. The homosexual, of course, has long been symbolic of conflicting moral images, his body a battleground for social, scientific and political skirmishes and debate. Richard Meyer has examined "Rock Hudson's Body" and its various meanings (Fuss 259). Cindy Patton has pointed out the skirmish over the representation of AIDS and the homosexual in advertising (Fuss 373). AIDS language and iconography have often followed prescribed homophobic patterns. At various times gay men have been seen as depraved, freaks of nature and harbingers of disease.

AIDS intensifies the "debate" and forces the gay HIV-positive poet to look inward at his body with a renewed sense of inquiry. The gay AIDS-body was often seen as hyper-sexed, a creature that ate "shit" and, like a vampire, drank blood and passed on its tainted

infection. In the face of such a representation, self-inquiry becomes a political act, for by reclaiming his body and truthfully trying to speak its physical experience, gay AIDS poets re-construct identities against a rhetoric of moralization and victimization. By describing first-hand the body's disintegration and the seemingly invisible, silent, response to this fact by the culture, early gay AIDS poets further underscored their failed integration into straight society; they also were emphasizing the great discrepancy between the internal human experience of the disease and the external images of demonization and stereotypical distortion.

James Turcotte in "Devise Your Own Form and Stick to It" writes: "The challenge is space,/I suppose, inner space./You get smaller,/devise your own form/and stick to it" (Hadas 87). Gregory Wood's "He's melting. . ." conveys some of the rawness and grimness of this poetic style:

He's melting into his
bed, piss and more sweat
than you'd think a body

could contain pooling
on the rubber sheet.
His skeleton can't

carry its own weight.
Those perfect pecs and
abs have gone, leaving

the intercostals
stuck like gunk in a
grid in the gutter. (Daniels and Anthony 63)

The poem alludes to the famous line from The Wizard of Oz when the wicked witch is doused with water. The "friend of Dorothy" or gay man in the poem is literally

disintegrating before the reader. The innocence of the movie is overlaid with the physical horror of the wasting experience of the disease.

Roy Gonsalves in Perversion (1990) writes in "Disappearing Act":

Once a hunky brother with long dreadlocks
 Who used to be a basketball star
 You are shrinking into a midget
 from the Wizard of Oz
 All I hear is squeaking
 Words that don't mean anything
 A big glass dick
 With a fly sucking it
 A mosquito buzzing around my head
 A period at the end of my sentence
 Dust I blow away
 An AIDS virus
 I'm about to catch
 Air waiting to be exhaled. (56)

Again, as in "The Wizard of Oz," the corporeal world is shrinking; even language is diminished and without meaning. Death, as in Emily Dickinson's famous pronouncement, buzzes around the speaker's head. The world is transient, ready to "blow away."

Woods writes in "The drip-feed. . .":

The drip-feed takes the
 place not only of
 the feasts he used to

 share with pretty boys
 in trendy haunts and
 fancy outfits but

 even the steady
 flow of sentences
 he couldn't do without,

sustained by every
 hint of rumor
 and straining from more (Daniels and Anthony 62)

The nourishment of language is diminished as well. Language can no longer vitalize or succor. Language is inadequate and without meaning, unable to sustain. The great crisis in AIDS poetics becomes this sense that the language has failed. Medical language, pop cultural language, religious and sacred language are foreign and incapable of speaking the gay body and its desires as well as its fears.

The experience of AIDS can only be spoken from the ever smaller, thinner, immediate space of the poet. The gay poet found with AIDS an even greater sense than before of his isolation from society and the "general population," his lack of representation in the common community of poetic experience.

Tony J. Giordano writes at the end of his poem "Isolation":

night sweats...the sweat and
 chill mixed. The arrival of nurse and
 then into warm things, into warm dry things.
 and sleep.
 The nightmare journey continues
 alone. (Hadas 24-25)

The journey is continued alone. The gay poet and AIDS patient have been cordoned off from society, distanced both by a physical and an emotional isolation.

Charles Barber's "Thirteen Things About A Catheter," like the Wallace Stevens poem, is a meditation on a single image and its many associations. The language of the physical and the scientific are closely aligned: "White tube/In cephalic vein;/To the right atrium/Of the heart (see Illustration): /Access." (Hadas 22-23). The catheter bag attached to its pole and hung from above is constituted as "A fish,/Hung from the pole,/Striped

with words of caution:/ ‘To expire in ninety-one’/(Like me?)” (Hadas 22-23). The poem ends with: “Grotesque,/Life-supporting,/Deforming and healing;/Not a cure; insistent I be/*Life-like*” (Hadas 22-23).

The reversal involved in having something inanimate insist that the speaker of the poem be *life-like* underscores the major truth about the catheter: that it is ultimately a thing without consciousness of life or death and that it can only reveal the flow of mortality and death into the poet's body and the failure of modern medical technology to cure the disease.

Assotto Saint's poem “Shuffle Along” from his 1994 book Wishing for Wings describes a similar relationship between the poet and the scientific accouterments of modern day illness:

hooked up
to the same pole
i.v. garlands
of cytovene & pentamidine
unravel queer patterns
of a survival ritual
that strings us
thread-thin yet tight
as life-partners
trapped in this marathon

of disintegration (4)

This disintegration continues even as the virus continues to mutate “while time ticks.” Saint feels compelled to write about AIDS as a matter of record and as a matter of survival. In his poem “Writing About AIDS” he speaks of “an oblivious silence that draws poetry/which must be written/with blood” (Wishing for Wings 1). Dan Conner in “AIDS

and the Art of Living,” begins: “All this breaks down to a mental/state. For the record. I’m afraid/sometimes to leave this studio./Everything’s art, everything is/if you see it that way. Dying’s/no different” (Hadas 21).

It was inevitable as well that AIDS writing would create a new and more diverse language for sex and intimacy. Recent feminist theory and queer theory have shifted poets toward a broader questioning of constructs of masculinity and femininity, homosexuality and heterosexuality. The male body becomes a site of polymorphous desire.

Cindy Patton writes in her essay “Visualizing Safe Sex” :

In short, the reality-decentering effect of the proliferation of texts characteristic of postmodernity --especially text-commodities--finally broke a basic “Statement” of the modern sexual episteme. The barrage of texts, from porn to science to how-to books and magazine columns, which made truth claims about sex evacuated any lingering pretense that there was a fixed essence in sexuality. Sex lost its reality (that is, its ability to reference a hegemonic form of practice or a transcendent subjectivity) and gender came tumbling after. (Fuss 375)

As I have suggested, gay poets needed to find their own discourse of sex beyond the pseudo-scientific, the religious and pseudo-psychiatric jargon of the previous eras of the forties, fifties and sixties. In the poetic reaction of AIDS anger and activism, the re-appropriation of language that is medical and scientific, morally-biased and doctrinaire is a defensive posture on the part of radical homosexuals both to subvert the dominant language and to inhabit it. Much of this poetry relies on travesty, travesty in relation to the moral codes of the dominant culture. Reinvestigating a language of supposed scientific objectivity from the perspective of homosexual experience somehow grounds it in

homosexual desire and helps to counter its extreme oppressive force. Patton has suggested in her essay "Tremble, Hetero Swine!," that rhetorical reversal has been a crucial strategy of the rebel against the opponent's discourse:

Rhetorical reversal is one of the fundamental principles of the identity discourses of the post-World War II movements. Black, women's, and gay liberation typically "reclaimed" derogatory terms that were considered part of the hegemonic vocabulary and symptomatic of pervasive, stereotypical, negative societal attitudes. (Warner 146)

The very use of the pejoratives "queer" and "fairy" as rallying words for the gay cause reclaims these negative terms as signals of empowerment.

Melvin Dixon's "The 80's Miracle Diet" is an extraordinary poem for its ironic reversals of American popular language. It is a poem which relies on rhetorical reversals and reclaimed vocabulary to achieve political and personal empowerment as well as a deep irony. It is a poem of travesty, in whose collisions of discourses AIDS is treated in a jocular, grotesque and mockingly undignified manner, a manner which is meant to shock the complacency of a nation and community in denial. It also embraces the "bitch-queen blues" style of black drag queens who "throw shade" by attacking each other verbally, "dissing" each other until one succumbs in humiliation. The black drag queen is discredited on two counts, "her" skin color and "her" gender transgression. "She" is the double-negative, both black and "female," the two lowest denominators in a white supremacist patriarchal world.

Dixon's poem is a powerful tour de force, making strong use of camp to subvert

and question the prevailing common language. Evoking the language of camp from drag queen culture draws on a tradition of “gender-fuck” and ferocious gallows humor, which becomes the perfect medium for AIDS horror and travesty.

The poem opens with the lines: “Yours free without the asking/Quick delivery via overnight male,/ Special handling, or ten-year incubation/*How I lost 40 Pounds in Two Weeks*” (Klein, Poets for Life 64). The tone of this poem is cynical, ironic and satiric. It begins at a place of immediate outrage and stridency. It challenges and subverts, assaults, parodies, and savages the reader with its bitter humor. If camp is a means to fool and make fun of the dominant heterosexual culture, it is also a means of tragic and ironic defiance. Dixon takes on the small-town complacency of the *National Inquirer* crowd and Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority.”

The language Dixon corrupts or manipulates is in part the language of the media, the same media which during the early years of AIDS kept silent and suppressed valuable information about the plague and the plight of gay men. By linking the most droll, authoritative and commonplace rhetoric from the media--both print and television--with the horror of the gay experience of AIDS, Dixon underscores the banality of the media and its lack of response to the needs of the AIDS community.

Many discourses collide in Dixon’s poem: one “authoritative” (the American media) and “scientific” (AZT, Bactrim, egg lipid), and one internally and persuasively “gay” (making a direct link to Ginsberg’s Howl, Dixon writes in the poem: “Our tongues/ablaze on toast points in a soundless howl./The most talented minds, the best bodies/of my generation going up in smoke”). The allusion to Ginsberg’s Howl is the true

generative gay voice erupting through the poem “ablaze” in its authenticity. The poem pivots upon the central image of “our tongues/ablaze.” The “our” evokes unity and community and the “tongues” situated here in the poem call attention to the oracular experience. Whose tongues are speaking? As so emphasized in much of gay black writing, the “untying of tongues,” the freeing of the oracular (and I would suggest the African oracular tradition) becomes of key concern. It is here only that real primacy, anger and dignity can be obtained. The significance and persuasiveness of the poem rest in this internal discourse with Ginsberg and with an African past.

As in Ginsberg’s Howl, the poem lays claim to the loss and indignity it describes. Dixon is incensed by the rhetoric of AIDS in the dominant heterosexual culture. It is only by invoking Ginsberg, a prefigurative and seminal gay voice, that Dixon sounds his true anguish. As in so much of AIDS literature, gay writers have been faced with an intense dilemma: virtually condemned to silence at the beginning, faced with an Orwellian language in the media (homophobic and self-serving), and a scientific rhetoric which was impotent and patriarchal, gay poets and writers had to contend with the confrontation and collision of many discourses in their search for survival. This struggle of rhetoric dominates AIDS writing as well as the guerrilla warfare of ACT-UP and Larry Kramer, who sought to confront heterosexual discourse by an equally loud and boisterous homosexual rhetoric. “Silence=Death” implied that giving voice or bearing testament and naming were acts equal to “Life.”

In a sense Dixon’s poetry reflects what Northrop Frye would call an ironic mode of narrative, one that reflects a very limited degree of freedom of action for the

protagonists, in this case both the gay poet and the AIDS patient (Richter 644). The desperation and extreme pressures upon these artists left them no choice but to resort to a narrative of irony, rather than one of myth, legend, or the other higher modes on Frye's chain of literary being (Richter 644). Irony in AIDS poetry also reflects what Kenneth Burke has suggested about the tone of twentieth century literature in general: "the reason that it is so ironic is because we live in an age of " 'relativistic sciences,' like psychology and anthropology, which have tended to undermine once stable values" (Preminger 408). The skeptical and ironic mind is less needed in periods where social and religious opinions are relatively homogeneous (Preminger 408). When AIDS hit in the early eighties it struck at a time of great social and economic volatility in America. The initial panic over the disease created instability, a great social instability which, in part, found expression in extreme irony. This irony was manifested by AIDS writing in a variety of ways: sarcasm, understatement, overstatement, contrast, joking, mockery, paradox, pun, conscious naiveté, parody and ridicule (Preminger 407). It was an irony that was no stranger to gay writers; camp literature had employed it for years. With AIDS the anger surfaced from beneath the ironical tone. The campy tone of voice became corrosive.

David Bergman has shown how gay camp relates to Bakhtin's theories of "the carnivalesque" (Camp Grounds 95-96; 99). We can see this connection in camp's desire to reverse all hierarchies, to turn them on their heads. Raman Selden in his A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (1989) writes of Bakhtin's theory of 'Carnival' that: "everything authoritative, rigid or serious is subverted, loosened and mocked . . . the sacred is profaned" (18)..

Another poet, similar to Dixon, who represents the collision of discourses in AIDS poetry as well as extremes of irony is Paul Monette whose Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog was published in 1988 to critical acclaim. In poems such as “The Worrying,” and “Black Xmas,” we have elements of the carnivalesque which raise the language of these poems to a tone of great manic anxiety and sarcastic burlesque.

Monette reflects the extreme instability which AIDS exerts on gay culture.

The Worrying

ate me alive day and night these land mines
all over like the toy bombs dropped on the
Afghans little Bozo jack-in-the-boxes
that blow your hands off 3 A.M. I'd go
around the house with a rag of ammonia
wiping wiping crazed as a housewife on *Let's*
Make a Deal the deal being PLEASE DON'T MAKE
HIM SICK AGAIN. (10)

We see again a collision of popular cultural referents both high and low, the internationally political with the domestic, all human events juxtaposed in a strange disjointed relationship. The unusual metaphor of “land mines” for things that might make Rog sick again mixed with the image of the crazed housewife, reflects this pastiche of voices. As in Burroughs, Monette’s excursions into black humor capture the irrationality of the AIDS experience. As the homosexual experience for the Beats was situated in the landscape of madness and desolation, the early gay experience of AIDS is located in a landscape of high anxiety, political invisibility and inaction. A poetry of crisis is born, presented in language highly pressured, almost shrill.

Monette is “huddled” by Rog’s “bed like an old crone empty-/eyed in a Greek

square black on black the waiting/for tests the chamber of horrors in my head/my rags and vitamins dumb as leeches how did/meningitis get in where did I slip up” (11). Both images of a cultural past, of Greek drama and a medical present (ineffectual in the face of the disease), can not alter the many modes and styles of Monette’s horror. The high and low burlesque of Monette’s style is O’Hara’s camp, only powered full force by the fury of rage, anger and helplessness.

In “Black Xmas” this burlesque aspect reaches a point of parody and travesty when it imitates Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol. The poem begins:

Scrooge bolts upright from the dream runs to the ice-
 skinned casement flings it wide and bellows at
 a boy below WHAT DAY IS IT Why Christmas
 sir of course and the miser gasps stares up
 the snowdust street the bells are pealing and
 he chokes out “There’s still time” and goes about
 his delirious redeeming no shortages
 when there’s still time a toyshop hums on every
 corner flocks of geese in the poulterer’s blood-
 yard the lame are hoisted on their fathers
 shoulders and have their pick of the fattest we
 had three like that ‘83 Cesar with his first
 scatterburst of lesions ‘84 prone on
 the sofa with his leg blimped twice its size
 how we showered him with Armani shirts
 and leather like beaten cream by next November
 he was gone and ‘85 was yours Rog still . . . (18)

The innocence of Dicken’s story, which offers a second chance for the character of Scrooge, is not to be found in the AIDS experience of the eighties. The failure of high culture and history to provide comfort is everywhere evident in Monette’s work. It is as though the gay reliance on one sort of cultural knowledge for strength and protection has finally proved ineffectual in the face of the plague.

Again, in the poem "The Worrying" :

. . . I couldn't keep track of
 what was medicine what old wife's but see
THERE WAS NO MEDICINE only me and to
 circle the wagons and island the last of our
 magic spoon by spoon nap by nap till we
 healed you as April heals drinking the sun
 I was Prospero of the spell of day-by-day
 and all of this just the house worry peanuts
 to what's out there and you with the dagger at
 your jugular struggling back to work jotting
 your calendar. (10-11)

Prospero's magic cannot be worked. April and its Chaucerian calm cannot relieve. Ultimately, we have in Monette's elegies the desperate failure of culture, its failure to protect and comfort. "Your Sightless Days" is a poem which is filled with images of high and low culture: Seurat, Bette Davis, "Star Wars," Byzantine saints, Oedipus, Jack Benny, the Warsaw ghetto, all reflecting the poet's own immersion into a darkness where the world and its referents have somehow been severed and disturbed. The poet taps his "thin white cane of outrage" (7) and wanders forth.

The dialogic in AIDS writing not only suggested conflict and confrontation but also permitted the slow subversion of authoritative heterosexual AIDS discourse. A slow internal awakening began in AIDS works and poetry. As the straight media and literature began to accept and publish gay writings about AIDS and the gay experience, and as AIDS activists spotlighted the gay community in the minds of the public, the "authoritative" discourse on the disease, as, indeed, on gay life, culture, and sex, changed. Straight readers of gay works found themselves confronted with a variety of persuasive personal accounts and stories that touched them and showed them a shared humanity. In

the wake of such mutual identification, rhetorical and discursive barriers began to show their inadequacy and faulty construction.

Again, Bakhtin writes in his "Discourse in the Novel":

When someone else's ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us, entirely different possibilities open up. Such discourse is of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness: consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one's own and another's discourse, between one's own and another's thought, is activated rather late in development. (Richter 785)

The separation between internally persuasive discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse leads to "a rejection of those congeries of discourse that do not matter to us, that do not touch us." (Richter 785)

In the late eighties, the American straight public began to accept homosexuals on a more compassionate basis. Barraged by various discourses on the subject, confronted by the death of loved ones and friends, they began to question the psycho-scientific and moralistic discourses that had surrounded homosexuality.

Michael Klein's "Naming the Elements" and Michael Lassell's "How to Watch Your Brother Die" are two poems that establish a common ground for a persuasive assimilation of the gay experience into the dominant heterosexual one. We recall that Burke in his A Rhetoric of Motives speaks to human ways of persuasion and identification, both by means of rhetorical device and dialectic (18-23; 50-53).⁸⁵ As Burke

⁸⁵ Persuasion becomes linked to various rhetorical devices which seek to "have a formative effect upon *attitude*," and "move" or "bend" the reader, as well as by Platonic dialogue or the Socratic method to ask questions (to one's self or to others) in a dialectical fashion in order to discover truth (Burke 50-53). In regard to identification, Burke develops the idea of "consubstantiality" (20-21). Burke writes: "two

tells us in regard to identification:

Then we come upon a more complicated kind of identification: here the poet presents a motive in an essentially magnified or perfected form, in some way tragically purified or transcended; the imagery of death reduces the motive to *ultimate* terms, dramatic equivalent for an "entelechia" pattern of thought whereby a thing's nature would be classed according to the fruition, maturing, or ideal fulfillment, proper to its kind. (19)

In "Naming the Elements" (included in Klein's anthology Poets for Life) Klein calls attention to the theme of what is elemental, the basic part or truth of all human death and loss. In Vietnam and Vietnam's war dead, Klein finds a symbolic emotional link between gay deaths and straight culture. It is here that the common elements are named. Out of the "silence" of censorship and authoritative discourse, the gay voice is compelled to name itself, to proclaim its existence. The love that "dare not speak its name" must be named again and again to find place in the world.

In a generous and calculated political move, Klein shifts the arena of the poem from the personal polemic on gay men dying to the legacy of a collective American consciousness:

The names of the dead
are messages on black marble
and plunge into the earth.

They are the notes
of a war
we imagined forgetting.

What remains is how

persons may be identified in terms of some principle they share in common, an 'identification' that does not deny their distinctness. . . To identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B" (21) and later: "in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*" (21). The poet performs a process of transformation to find images that will symbolically create this identification (Burke 12).

things began: the naming--a linear
code narrowing—"Vietnam Veteran."

Names find light to later
circle the grass.
It is 1:00 a.m. in Washington

a cursory wind version of October
keeps finding
Kennedy's flame

enlarging and reducing
as if his part of the world
were trying to rise . . . (129)

The linearity of pieces of cloth from the AIDS quilt is linked with the scrawl of names from the Vietnam Memorial and further connected to the memory of a beloved president who died. The tension between the image of Kennedy's flame, and symbolically, his memory, "enlarging" and "reducing," reflects the bipolarity of the gay AIDS crisis. How might gay grief be enlarged to encompass the greater world of Washington and the national scene, when the media persists in reducing it to the narrow isolation of the personal? How is AIDS, the personally witnessed experience, forced into the political? And how can memory contain so much loss, so much grief? Can the enormity of such loss be comprehended and can the AIDS dead, so surrounded by secrecy and isolation, enter the national consciousness? What is the commonality inherent in all of these national tragedies? Earth, fire, water, air, as much as death, become the unshakable universals of this poem.

The sun in this poem rises "behind a sobering capitol/unshakable as any other building/that forms the hinge/of this country dying" (130). The capitol and by extension, the government and lawmakers, are unmovable and unshakable in the face of the poet's

mounting gay personal loss and mourning. But what strategy will enlarge the circle of grief and death and fix it firmly in the American public eye, drive it as deeply and symbolically as the black marble of the Vietnam monument into the consciousness and memory of the country?

The names on the quilt are unfurled "like men unfurling the/video flag on the moon./I am thinking of the names for earth" (130). The quilt and its record of personal tragedy are associated with the American flag and its entry into national consciousness, hung as it was with pride on a momentous occasion. How does one August political moment become linked with another, equally as momentous and historical? The discourse of the poem is here "interrupted" by the repeated refrain, "I am thinking of the names for . . ." The rhetorical need to name and define each element captures the necessity of universalizing the experience of the poem, the need to dignify and purify the experience of AIDS.

"I know what you mean/when you say a name/signals a whole neighborhood,/a family, a system of stars./What gets left to us/this morning/is the serial enunciation/of names, wanting to stay,/of wanting to name something" (130). The pathos of names that have lost their meaning, the names of the dead which are affixed to nothing, having no tangible human meaning anymore, return them to the weightlessness of air. "I am thinking of names/for the air" closes the poem (131).

In this poem, loss, collective loss, is connected with a national consciousness. This link is not to be taken lightly. AIDS, through its commonality of compassion and the acts of great heroism which it inspires, connects gay men to the straight world in a unique and

binding way. Images of valor and righteousness became associated with gay death. Gay masculinity is not only sacrificial but brave.

Michael Lassell's "How to Watch a Brother Die" links a gay man's experience of his lover's death with the experience of the lover's straight brother. Gay man and brother are connected in their bereavement. The poem finds in the commonality and rhetoric of grief and mourning a shared and complicated relationship.

Lassell, the gay poet, in this poem takes the position or viewpoint of the straight brother, imagining and reconstituting his experience and narrating it step by step. "When the call comes, be calm./Say to your wife, 'My brother is dying. I have to fly/to California'" (Klein, Poets for Life 141). In these remarkable opening lines the gay poet inverts his perspective and role. The affinities and similarities of lover and brother are stressed, and the straight reader is invited into the poem.

The curious narratology of this work, its perfunctory didacticism, the use of a flat imperative tone—"Listen to the doctor with a steel face on./Sign the necessary forms" (141)-- harbors what I think is a strong critique or reversal of the authoritative language of church, state and the scientific establishment which initially controlled (or ignored) gay lives. The authoritative heterosexual discourses, which for years dictated the behavioral norms for gay men, was questioned in the AIDS era by the gay community. Gay men no longer wanted to keep up appearances and protect the straight world from "shocking" visible representations of their sexuality, emotions and desires. The paternalistic dictates of church and state, moral and penal codes, run deep in the consciousness of the gay community. Lassell's employment in this poem of the imperative voice mimics the moral

decorum and control which are forced on gay men. Grief, however, breaks through such an imperative to remain calm, to put up a front. In the end, for this poem at least, it becomes the basis for a new rapprochement between gay and straight voices.

The decorum of this poem is sustained even through its closing epiphanies: "Hold him like a brother while he/kisses you on the cheek. Think that/you haven't been kissed by a man since/your father died. Think" (143). And later, "think/how your children will feel in your arms,/warm and friendly and without challenge" (144). This imperative to think directs the reader toward a deeper contemplation of what unites brother with brother, brother with father, and male lover with male lover. The challenge lies in male love and friendship. The straight brother will return to give his children love unquestioningly; the homosexual must struggle against a society that will question him at every turn.

Both these poems move the gay experience into a more universalizing arena. They attempt to persuade us that the commonality of grief reduces our differences. They do not forget the differences, but they find an emotional meeting ground.

* * *

In the eighties religion and the Bible were used by homophobes to attack the gay AIDS community. It is not surprising that gay poets would attempt to mediate between homophobic religious rhetoric of their adversaries and a newer sense of spiritual renewal in the face of AIDS. While some gay AIDS poets took an adamantly hostile view and distrust of organized religion, others explored their homophobic religious upbringings and

religious persecution with great openness and sensitivity.⁸⁶ As religious homophobia widened, many gay poets felt compelled to redirect the religious discourse toward questions of individual faith and positive gay self-affirmation. Political rhetoric, satire and irony alone, as well as the invective of activism, could not fully encompass that which, for many, had become a broader AIDS perspective--universal, mysterious, and filled with an abiding sense of altruism.

As Frye tells us in Anatomy of Criticism "poets are happier as servants of religion than of politics, because the transcendental and apocalyptic perspective of religion comes as a tremendous emancipation of the imaginative mind" (125). And Frye goes on to say in regard to the poet: "Between religion's 'this is' and 'poetry's 'but suppose *this* is,' there must always be some kind of tension, until the possible and the actual meet at infinity. Nobody wants a poet in the perfect human state, and, as even the poet tells us, nobody but God himself can tolerate a poltergeist in the City of God" (127-128).

Roy Gonsalves in his book Perversion (1990) writes in the poem "How Do I Get to Heaven From Here?": "Am I to live off rubber dildos/Fantasies/And love from God?" (13). Gonsalves says in "Rain Dance: Dedicated to Yves Lubin":

From the edge of the world
All I want to do is scream at God
Secretly I do rain dances for love
Hoping the spirits are listening to my prayers. (61)

Gonsalves died of AIDS, but his work brings out the particular spiritual crisis gay poets found themselves in when confronted with the disease.

⁸⁶ James Baldwin, for one, as a gay black novelist, has touched upon this theme in works such as Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) and his short story "Outing," published in 1951.

David Craig Austin in his poem “The Gifts” (Klein, Poets for Life 19-20) raises the intimacy and personal world of two gay lovers to the level of prayer. In the dark of winter with bare December trees, the poet breaks bread and finds “a landscape of fervent air” (20). Over the “steaming bowls of late abundance” the two lovers “whisper our separate graces for the living, the dead” (20). The striking skill of this poem is in its understatement, its humility of discourse, and its poignant resistance to sentimentality. It also, like every poem of prayer, is an act of faith which stands at odds with and in the face of harsh realities, realities heard in the poet's pronouncement that he wishes “prayer were more than a collection/of beautiful words: I am poured out/like water” (20). As with Herbert or Hopkins, the struggle of gay men of faith, poets of faith, to recontextualize the religious poem in the face of extreme resistance and intolerance must come from a place of lonely anguish. But with the emergence of gay congregations and sects and the explicit entry of gay men into the fold of the church (where they always have been), Austin finds in his own gay experience a language that breaks free of the struggle. Mary looks up to Jesus on the outside wall of the cinder block chapel in Pittsburgh with more than pity written on her face. What is written there we can only construe as horror and human agony. The announcement of this poem is the author's need to tell his lover and his friend that he is dying of AIDS. “Out of grief comes rage” (20). This line cites biblical scripture and like Herbert's “The Collar”—“I struck the board and cried no more. . .”—the poem wrestles with dangers already imagined, remembered and codified in biblical texts. The poet's imagination plays over the entire legacy of his system of faith and belief, and yet he achieves in the end his own cathartic answer: “blessed, the gifts we receive” (20).

In the end, it is the poem which achieves through the beauty of its language and imagery--the vegetables in the pot with their fervent air and steam; the living branches of the trees bending (like the tree of the cross); the bowing heads and abundance--its own intention as prayer; not a prayer born out of biblical scripture alone, but the prayer of human experience.

The lyricism and intensity of such a poem transcend the political. Self-debasement and suffering come of the homosexual's experience of oppression and direct him toward a new intimacy of prayer and a relationship with God. Like the saints of old, the outcast is often the anointed one whose faith is born of suffering. As with the sinner turned saint and apostle, the cathartic religious experience is reached through denial, doubt and hardship.

William Bory's "Post-Modern Devotions" from his book Orpheus in His Underwear (1993) is divided into fifteen sections. The iconography of Christianity becomes a template or grain to be read against in the presentation of the homosexual dilemma: how to invoke the spiritual when one is excommunicated, ostracized and condemned. Poets have found irony in presenting homosexual experience using liturgical language. Bory (like Walter Holland in his "Stations of the Cross"--A Journal of the Plague Years [1992]), moves us through a series of poetical reliefs which are lifted from Christian mythology. Section I of his poem "Post-Modern Devotions" begins with "The Annunciation": "Angels, when they get down to earth,/take the form of beautiful young men./ I know, I've seen it myself" (57). Bory moves through "The Visitation," "The Nativity," "The Circumcision," "The Disputation," drawing upon his own personal history and childhood Jewish experiences, reappraising them in relation to the life of Christ. "The

"Agony in the Garden" alludes to Bory's HIV experience (Bory died of AIDS in the early nineties). Christ's despair in the Garden of Gethsemane is similar to Bory's. Christ says: "This is the worst part,/the waiting . . . The blow is not so bad,/it's the moment you see it coming,/the flinch" (63) and "Why me?/I am not the first to say it,/or the last" (63).

"The Crucifixion" section perhaps most strongly deals with the Jewish Holocaust: "This took place in Germany, more than once./You can read about it in books" (70). The final two sections end on a note of apprehension and yet desired transformation, again, almost on a note of prayer. "There are things, of course,/we do not want to face,/things we would rather assume/just won't happen," Bory writes in "The Assumption" (74). Later he says in "The Coronation of the Virgin":

You know, I trust, well
of the horns of my dilemma,
and a little something of the hooks
on which I hang these,
my conceptions.
Any help you can give
is an unlooked-for boon, . . . (75)

Michael Niemoeller had trained to be a priest, studying at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California (Niemoeller 100). When he realized he was gay he gave up the dream to be a priest and pursued a life as a poet (100). His posthumous book of poetry Stones Made Flesh is a remarkable collection of work.

Niemoeller writes:

I am a priest
trained to consecrate everything,
save the world:
snapping wafers,
stirring the crumbs with my fingers

in the water and the wine.
 I have washed my hands,
 but never learned forgiveness (65)

The “forgiveness never learned” in the poem refers to self-forgiveness and the abiding sense of unfinished and deferred longing that can haunt gay religious life.

In “A Prayer By Your Side” Niemoeller speaks of a friend’s cancer diagnosis. He stands by hopeless and conflicted:

I mouth silences,
 priest in a ruined church.
 A portrait of the Madonna
 still hangs by one bolt in the bricks.

In the rubble of belief
 I am a liar.
 Halfway between heaven and hell,
 I have no incense,
 no brocade to cushion stone.
 My faith wipes up dust
 with my knees. (64)

Belief is in rubble and the gay poet finds himself halfway between heaven and hell, suspended in a limbo in which his existence is shadowed in the dark recesses of the church. In Niemoeller’s “Fire Season,” perhaps his most vivid and disturbing work, he speaks of a bishop who has molested him when he was a boy:

The bishop lifts the eucharist,
 looks up in wonder
 and some disbelief,
 the way I pull a lover
 to lay on top of me.
 Each Sunday I come forward
 to receive the fleshy bread,
 consume the body,
 an incendiary shell.
 Burning fragments
 burst through skin,

phosphorous lights up my veins.
 Remnants of a war
 I lost in adolescence.

Still standing before the bishop
 I raise my eyes,
 searchlights on his face.
 His lids slam closed
 like sliding fire doors,
 conceal the hint of recognition
 from that long ago confessional
 where he set ablaze
 this altar boy in trusting shoes.
 Rubber melting,
 sticking to my flesh.
 I knelt in that dark cubicle,
 soldered to the wall.
 Penance was his wet mouth
 with out eyes closed.
 I did not move away. (40)

The consummation of the Eucharist as the consummation of the boy's body in the act of sex is alluded to at the beginning of this section. Images of fire and burning fragments which may be associated with Lucifer, sin, passion, incense and purification fill Niemoeller's imagery. The altar boy was "set ablaze" many years ago by the bishop's passion which now the bishop must struggle not to acknowledge. The final line, "I did not move away," seems subtly to allude to both Niemoeller's passionate duplicity with the bishop and to a key element in catholic confirmation in which the bishop enjoins the newly converted youth to act as a soldier of Christ and not to turn his or her cheek when assaulted by the devil; here, Niemoeller, who has "knelt in that dark cubicle,/soldered to the wall" (40) while assaulted by the bishop, does not move.

"Passiontide Canticles" continues a theme woven through Niemoeller's book

which seeks parallels between the Eucharist and the consummation of the body in AIDS.

In the first section of this poem, "I. Agnes Dei," Niemoeller begins:

"This is my body. . ."

I finger
what is left of my broad chest,
ribs mark the skin,
thin lined music paper,
purpled with notes.
My lungs, wheezing bellows,
produce breaths shallower by the hour.
The hymn barely stirs bedsheets.

I am hollowed out.
A disease that scrapes
inside calves and thighs,
school children kneeling
at each station of the cross.
I am hollowed out.
My concave belly,
shiny and white
as a first communion wafer.
My wooden eyelids, half-open casks,
ferment a bloody wine
that blurs vision.
I am hollowed out,
A disease,
a sponge full of vinegar,
lips that parch and crack
my goodbye,
the last drops of this Lenten fast. (79)

Here we have all the elements of the Last Supper. The "blood" of the eyelids, the "shiny white" "communion wafer" belly, are all elements of sacrifice and refer to both the Passover and the Eucharist. AIDS, the disease, will crucify its victim, hollowing out all of his corporeal being. The repetition of the refrain "I am hollowed out" echoes the repetition of the phrase "Agnes Dei," or "Lamb of God," used during the catholic mass, and again

returns the poem to the idea of sacrifice. The body is given up.

The second section of the poem moves Niemoeller to the third person voice. We learn that he is speaking to another (perhaps the "Kevin"--a lover-- mentioned in earlier poems [70-78]). Niemoeller writes:

I turn you on your side,
baptize bedsores in the name of the Father
trickling Jordan's water
squeezed from a washrag;
anoint with olive oil and rosemary
the flaking skin of your twisted feet;
... blindly search the room
for the shadow of a savior.

Lying beside you,
I cradle your fevered body
placed so trustingly in my arms.
You melt into me
wafer on the tongue. (80)

Niemoeller creates a language which is biblical in its allusions and highly lyrical in the way of the psalms. Again, we see how the idea of the wafer and the Eucharist is melded with an idea of passion and directly tied to the concept of homosexual union with Christ.⁸⁷

Christ's body becomes a focus for gay AIDS poets. The iconography of Christ's male body through the ages, as symbolic of suffering, beauty and transcendence, and the need to find communion in this image, have challenged the imagination of the gay poet. Richard McCann in "Nights of 1990" from *Ghost Letters* writes :

⁸⁷ Niemoeller in an earlier poem, "Jesus, you must be homosexual. So often I have wanted you like I want men" (Niemoeller 33), says: "One day you [Jesus] came to me on a mountain/while I stood shirtless and proud, /jeans shoved down around my boots." (33).

And you, God, if you were to speak to me now
 through his body—his reckless body; his tender, feathered
 body; his fragile body that even in its dying sometimes
 seemed newborn, so compassionate and astonishing . . .

Or through that other body, the body I saw in the street,
 trousers down around its shit-smeared ass, flies
 swarming over; bleeding, half-conscious body; Christ's body
 --if Christ were old, and despicable . . .

Here, let me hold your body against this clean white linen;

here, let me hold your body against myself, a stranger's body
 I might one night have drunkenly borne
 --your come on my chest, my mouth. Dear God,

in your dearness, what were you but each night's longing
 shaped by a stranger's touch? And what was I
 but the agent of that longing cast to earth
 to fend for us both? Was it your sin if you felt unloved?

Here, let me comb your hair before you die . . .

Here, press your body to this white sheet, the miraculous imprint . . .

What was it men used to tell me?

Sure, I'll call you. Leave your number on the dresser. (7)

The dying lover or friend's body becomes, like Christ's, an image of miraculous transformation, "newborn" and "astonishing." The lover is cast down to earth as a vehicle for that "longing" which is God's, manifested in the form of Christ. The poet suffers the mortality of his lover as that of Christ and experiences that loss without hope of return (here it is connected to a one-night stand in which there is no hope of a return phone call). Ultimately, the poet prays for some form of stigmata, some connection or memory with his lover. McCann frames this in a religious way: "*I read somewhere, a friend said, that in the old days/the saints actually prayed for wounds. Can you imagine/actually praying to*

have wounds?/ Yes, I imagined myself saying. I can imagine praying for wounds" (7).

The gay AIDS poet has found in the Christian myth and the focus on Christ the association of many themes at once—homoeroticism, male bonding and friendship (as seen with the apostles), the foreknowledge of being chosen to suffer and sacrifice (paralleling the AIDS diagnosis), ostracism from society and religious persecution (Christ taunted before the elders and priests of the temple), the consummation and transubstantiation of the male body into something more universally lasting and symbolic of love and community (as with the AIDS quilt).

The determination to see the spiritual and the sublime in a homosexual context is echoed in Mark Doty's "Tiara" from Klein's anthology Poets for Life. Peter, who has died of AIDS, is accused of having asked for his fate. The poet responds:

*Asked for it--when all he did
was go down into the salt tide*

*of wanting as much as he wanted
giving himself over so drunk
or stoned it almost didn't matter who,*

*though they were beautiful
stampeding into him in the simple
ravishing music of their hurry.*

*I think heaven is perfect stasis
poised over the realms of desire,
where dreaming and waking men lie*

*on the grass while we blue horses
roam among them, huge fragments
of the music we die into*

in the body's paradise . . . (66-67)

In this very generous language we have echoes of Rilke (who purportedly had homosexual tendencies), who saw the religious in deep personal experience and drew upon the images of the animal to expose that which is most basic and primal. But beyond this, the discovery of the divine in acts of the flesh has been with us since Donne and the metaphysical poets and before.

Gustavo Motta, a participant in Rachel Hadas' AIDS poetry workshop in New York City, writes in his poem "City/Country" of the almost biblical, apocalyptic experience he has had of his disease, comparing his visionary experience in the hospital to that of Moses on the mount:

I stayed upon the Mount for thirty days
with thunderings and lightnings,
And the mountain smoking.

And when I came down unto my people
I saw them not . . . neither do they see me. (Hadas 86)

The intense, internally isolating experience of the disease leads to a more solitary spiritual outlook. Like Austin, Motta bravely speaks the "gay plague" and "God's curse" from the vantage point of hope:

I tidy up my life: a continual
Spring cleaning . . . no matter what the time of year
And when I venture forth
I cruise for hope and medical salvation. (Hadas 84)

Gay poets have had to speak defiantly on issues of religion. Essex Hemphill writes in "Heavy Breathing": "Dearly Beloved,/my flesh like all flesh/will be served/at the feast of worms./I am looking/for signs of God/as I sodomize my prayers" (*Ceremonies* 11) and later, "My grieving is too common/to arouse the glance of angels" (*Ceremonies* 16). The

plight of the homosexual is to stand unrecognized and condemned in the face of organized religion. As with Hemphill, the black church and black community have often presented considerable obstacles for gay black men. James Baldwin has written of this conflict. Many gay black writers have confronted the church and church-goers (see, for instance, my earlier discussion of Saint's "Going Home Ceremony: for Donald Woods").

* * *

A language of memory and bearing witness also informs AIDS poetry. The gay poet must persuade himself of the reality of AIDS and its attendant absences. The narrative trope of "I remember," becomes a correlative of "I witnessed," I will make visible. In 1970, the gay artist and writer, Joe Brainard published I Remember. It was followed by More I Remember and More I Remember More. Brainard, through a series of repetitive lists, all prefaced by the phrase "I remember. . ." chronicled his own daunting autobiography. This "biomythography" in verse recalls Audre Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of My Name. Such a chronicle joined a gay impulse to tell and reclaim adolescence, to bear witness to the past and describe the truth of what has been so often systematically obscured and covered up. This impulse to speak what has been ignored, discredited and censored and lay claim to the declarative "I" in "I remember..." has found its way into AIDS writing. Paul Monette's moving chronicle of Roger Hurwitz, Love Alone, integrates personal memories and details into the format of elegy. Like diaries of an inner life, these works seek to chronicle what often has been witnessed by solitary individuals under great isolation and distress. Assotto Saint's "A Lover's Diary" gives a blow by blow account of the last year of his life, opening with the funeral of his lover

(Wishing for Wings 16-22). Walter Holland in A Journal of the Plague Years compresses into a few short lines of verse the recollection of many deaths, one building upon the other. Kenny Fries in The Healing Notebooks chronicles with the intensity and intimacy of a diary the events surrounding a lover's illness. The ever growing theme in gay AIDS poetry of bearing witness and recording a silent, invisible, marginalized history (of making what is "unknown" manifest, as though "Silence=Death" truly were the poetic modus operandi) harkens back to the dominant heterosexual culture's uses of censorship and subordination, and is related to the gay experience of marginality considered above in chapter 3.

Collective AIDS loss has demanded a verse that can bring collective recollection. Many gay poets have envisioned their own deaths and their own memorialization and have seen themselves as part of a unified experience. Memory has afforded a collective gay political identity. As Roy Gonsalves writes in his poem "Remembrance":

When my voice does not speak
 And the tears no longer fall
 Sew my spirit into a quilt
 Add silks for the woman
 I used to be
 Rhinestones for my arrogance
 But whatever you do
 Sew one of my poems
 With red thread
 And remember me. (77)

Chapter 6

Tongues Untied: African-Caribbean-American Gay Poetry

African-American gay poets have needed to look to their own roots and traditions. They have tapped into the legacy of early blues poetry and song and reinstated the vigor and creativity of the Harlem Renaissance. To be “in the life” in black culture of the period was to be homosexual. Eric Garber’s excellent essay “T’Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness” in Black Men/White Men (1983) goes far to document the gay experience during the Renaissance years. Hughes (gay himself) wrote in his poem “Cafe: 3 A.M.”:

Detectives from the vice squad
with weary sadistic eyes
spotting fairies.

Degenerates.
some folks say.

But God, Nature,
or somebody
made them that way.

Police lady or Lesbian
over there?

Where? (Morse and Larkin 205)

The gay black poet, Melvin Dixon, in his Change of Territory (1983) creates a volume of work which is filled with references to Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Zora Neal

Hurston and others of the Harlem Renaissance period. Dixon, both an academic scholar and a writer, reached back to an earlier black literary consciousness to inform his gay identity. These poems reflect especially the blues lyricism of Hughes and Hurston. Thus, for instance, in “Zora Neale Hurston: ‘I’ll See You When Your Trouble Gets Like Mine,’” Dixon writes:

I cross over from the other shore
sit among you on the rock of song:
Gambling Song, Geechee Song, Wake-up Chant
from the sawmill camp, Railroad Lining Song:

*Line down that bar - Hah -
Line down that bar! (37)*

The jazz and blues idioms of the street were important to shaping the marginal identities of African-American men and women and the resilient siren-like call of the early blues singers, many of whom were lesbian or bisexual: Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, “Moms” Mabley, Mabel Hampton, Alberta Hunter, and Gladys Bentley (Reimonenq 359). From gospel and old spirituals, the African-American sensibility drew on a belief in salvation and transfiguration through adversity. The oracular tradition, the story-teller, and the trickster signifying for the crowd find scope in the vivid slang and performativeness of black poetry and song.

In his essay “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol” Nathaniel Mackey writes about Jean Toomer’s Cane: “Cane is fueled by an oppositional nostalgia. A precarious vessel possessed of an eloquence coincident with loss, it wants to reach or to keep touch with an alternate reality as that reality fades” (94). This “eloquence coincident with loss” is found in much of African-American poetry. It is reflected in the blues idiom which sings of

loss—loss of love, loss of money—in the face of an eternal sense of eloquent faith and courage.

Mackey also draws attention to the Fon-Yoruba orisha of the crossroads, “the lame dancer Legba. Legba walks with a limp because his legs are of unequal lengths, one of them anchored in the world of humans and the other in that of the gods. His roles are numerous, the common denominator being that he acts as an intermediary, a mediator” (100). “Legba presides over gateways, intersections, thresholds, whatever different realms or regions come into contact. His limp a play of difference, he’s the master linguist and has much to do with signification, divination, and translation” (100). As Mackey points out, Legba was the most “tenaciously retained” of all the orishas among New World Africans, “the first to be invoked in vodoun ceremonies.” Mackey calls attention to the “African genius for enigmatic melding or mending, a mystery of resilient survival no image puts more succinctly than that of Legba’s limping dance” (100).

This resilient survival is won out of the constant struggle for a black cultural identity and historical legacy. The search for history has long been the dilemma for New World Blacks faced with the Atlantic-Rim Diaspora. The gay, bi or straight men and women of the Harlem Renaissance in the twenties had tried to lay the foundations for a collective African-American arts tradition as well as a newly empowered, post-colonial, post-slavery, social identity—the New Negro. Black gays and lesbians in the decade of the eighties had a double task: how to build upon the Renaissance legacy and also find a black literary identity that had been carefully concealed and made invisible. The “invisibility blues” discussed in Michele Wallace’s book by the same title was not just a condition of

black women and feminists, but of gay black men and lesbians as well. Caught in the cross-currents of identity politics in the early eighties, gay black writers, following the lead of the Black Feminist movement, which was rediscovering the strength of writers such as Fauset, Larsen, Hurston, Grimke, Dunbar-Nelson, and Douglas-Johnson, began to explore the idea of a gay, black literary tradition: from Richard Bruce Nugent, through Baldwin and Delany, to the present. They also admired greatly the political work of Baldwin and Bayard Rustin--gay black men who worked inside and outside the black community as openly gay individuals.

Just as in the Harlem Renaissance, younger gay black poets of the eighties benefited from strong leaders and collective associations. As mentioned above, during the Renaissance years, Alain Locke, a professor at Howard University, had a strong influence on the careers of gay poets such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes (Reimonenq 359-340). Locke urged Cullen to read Edward Carpenter's anthology of male-male friendship Iolaus and helped Cullen in realizing his gay self (Reimonenq 359). Locke pursued Hughes although they never had sexual relations (Reimonenq 359). Such a tradition of collective gay black support and community would be reborn in the eighties with the founding in 1987 of the gay black writer's group Other Countries in New York, and the strong influence of gay black writers, publishers and poets such as Joseph Beam, Daniel Garrett, Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill and Assotto Saint.

The collective movement of the eighties to establish a gay, black artistic identity had to confront many theoretical issues about gender, sexuality and race, as well as issues related to African-American myth and spirituality. Some writers looked to older myths to

uncover a spiritual legacy for the new gay, black movement. Guillermo Gonzalez in his introduction to the first publication of Yemonja, the journal of the black, gay writer's collective, Blackheart, speaks of the Yoruban myth of the primeval mother goddess, Yemonja, who becomes the protectress of all the adodi or "homosexuals" who lived in the kingdom of Lado (Gonzalez 1-2). Yemonja, "Queen Mother," with her cowry shells and peacock feathers, becomes an important and lasting image in many early gay black poems. Gay, black men of the eighties were drawn to Yoruban myth as a means toward spiritual enlightenment, ritual and a shared sense of community. They saw in this mythology an imaginative way to link themselves to African tradition and establish an identity as part of African-American culture.

Stereotypes of gender and race in dominant American culture had to be confronted by gay, black writers just as they were by black feminists. Irony and satire were frequent devices used by gay poets to confront stereotypes. As the white media had categorized black "mammies," "bucks," and "coons" in American culture, the gay white world and black community had created images of gay, black men as oversexed, "boy-toy" objects, "mandingos," or strident, flaming queens. A poem such as Essex Hemphill's "If His Name Were Mandingo," deals with such issues. "He doesn't speak/that 'dis' and 'dat' bull/I've seen quoted." And later: "His name isn't important./It would be coincidence/if he had a name,/a face, a mind./If he's not hard-on/then he's hard up/and either way/you watch him" (Ceremonies, 141).

Roy Gonsalves writes in "Caricature": "I am a happy nigger/Eating watermelon/On a full moon/Can you see my teeth?/They are knives/To eat you with" and later, "They

have helped/To make me/A minstrel film negative/Of a toilet trained animal” (23).

But perhaps the most pivotal figure in gay black culture and the black community was the black drag queen, who, for her strength and fierceness, was appropriated by emerging gay black writers as symbolic of their spirited independence. The transgressive nature of the drag queen and her oracular skill gave her notoriety in the face of everything that was intolerant, homophobic and hypocritical in the black and white American communities. Drag was an important part of the Harlem Renaissance scene (Chauncey 227-228). Drag balls, such as the famous Hamilton Lodge Ball, were commonplace and attended by all the Harlem bohemians (Chauncey 227-228). The flamboyance and defiant ebullience of black drag added to the exotic interest of the Jazz Age. This same flamboyance became an important aspect of the gay black poetic imagination.

“Remembrance of Rittenhouse Square” by Adrian Stanford is a poem that spiritualizes and emulates the black drag queen. In the poem Stanford tells us: “black sarah ruled/and we of lesser divinity paid homage to her/with our pansy smiles./we breathed magnolia air, dreaming other visions/through the velvet of our mascara lashes” (Hemphill, Brother to Brother 84). As demimonde figure and symbol of an oppressed minority, “she” is the double-negative of society--two strikes against “her”--“she” is black and she is “female.” But it is precisely in this downtrodden role that her regenerative powers are seen.

The entire tradition of jazz and blues has played on the transfiguration of grief and oppression into art; despair, loss and rejection into fierce defiance, humor and lyricism. The legends and myths of African-American and Caribbean cultures which introduced the

idea of adodi from Yoruban mythology--figures which straddled both masculine and feminine identities and had mystical powers--entered into Stanford's imagination. The Caribbean image of priestess from voodoo cult lore becomes the initiator of a call for community and the consecration of blood bonds.

Unlike Frank O'Hara who makes reference to "Lady Day" as a cultural icon and phenomenon of pop fetish, Stanford is invested in black female divahood with much more than pop whimsy or cultural fascination. The transfiguration of Stanford's world by means of legend, spell, communal ritual, and initiation, sets it apart as well from Ginsberg's visionary world of despair.

Stanford's "Remembrance of Rittenhouse Square" is a poem of transfiguration, of vivid slang and performative strength. The setting of this poem is a park where men

blessed ourselves with water from the shallow pond,
and kissed each handsome boy as he passed by.
The low-hung moon brought expectation to our hearts.
we chattered endlessly: mingling within, without,
seeking happiness, finding nothing
but the sad green beauty of the trees. (Hemphill, Brother to Brother 84)

The setting is a cruising ground. The marginalization of gay black men is felt in the borderline worlds where they must seek their desire. They are pledged to nighttime in an outdoor park where anonymity in a violent, domineering and homophobic black heterosexual world is more possible. Sarah, the black drag queen in the poem, has died. She has "another temple now" (84), Stanford writes. Her end probably came violently. "Ah, good queen sarah, why did you never speak of reality?" (84) ends Stanford's poem. What is the reality not spoken? The irony seems to imply that reality resides in sarah's

own tragic end. The pastoral beauty of the park with its “magnolia air” cannot counter the knowledge of the rape and violent break of the “harpstrings” at its emotional center.

Such terms as “magnolia” and “harpstrings” suggest a racial iconography of the minstrel era and harken distantly to the black musical review of the twenties, “Green Pastures,” which was presented on Broadway with an all-black cast (starring, I believe, a young Ethel Waters). The show featured black actors with harpstrings and feathered wings, long white robes and antebellum magnolia backdrops, and exhibited a generally stereotypical view of black Christian religion as primitive and crude folklore.

Stanford not only sees black divahood and empowerment in the myth of the black drag queen but also in black singers and entertainers such as Lena Horne. Both Stanford’s “Psalm of the Visionary” and “Yeah Baby” make reference to Horne, the powerful black torch song and blues singer who “passed” and found a career in both the black and white film industries.

“Psalm of the Visionary” creates a highly spiritualized theme. Lena Horne becomes both diva and goddess, priestess and celebrant. “I turned and saw her [Lena Horne], ran to her, kissed her feet and called/her many sacred names—putting to her all the un-answered questions/I longed to know.” Horne is transformed into a mythic figure: “her face became a kaleidoscope of suffering.” She is heard to scream: “NEGRO! N E G R O! N E G R O!/then she began to fade./the temple shook. all grew black. something wet fell on me. it/had the odor of vomit and manure; I screamed and tried to run, but my feet would not move” (Smith, Black Men/White Men 96).

The black female entertainer, just as the black blues singer—Bessie Smith—

became representative to gay black writers of the debased and tragic situations black women and gay, black men frequently endured in relation to their erotic lives and their communities. Their abuse by black men or white men, their conflicting appeal to both white culture and black culture, their second-class status, and yet their unique gifts as artists, made them prominent figures in the black artistic imagination.

The idea of ritual and the drag queen's magical powers is enacted in the work of Haitian-American poet Assotto Saint. In a poem such as "Triple Trouble: An Exorcism," Saint relies on a mythic invocation of black and Caribbean legend to dispel a troubling and dangerous homophobic present. In incantory style the poem weaves a spell through repetition:

Staring straight at the sun
 Nile waited to hear the voice
 staring straight at the sun
 Nile waited to feel the beat
 staring straight at the sun
 Nile waited till his teeth clacked
 with a shriek so hot it set the heap on fire. Round
 and round the flames he ran, talking in tongues.
 Then, on the roof's edge, he perched in arabesque
 like an eagle ready for flight. High above his
 head, he lifted his arms. In his fluttering fingers,
 the sun shattered. The universe stood still while
 Nile smiled. An empowering mystery, the past
 passed on from generations, all the joy of life
 reflected. So slowly his body bent far forward.
 Long supple arms opened low
 to pay homage
 to surrender in prayer
 to offer himself
 a black queen dancing with shadows
 at high noon
 triple trouble that's brutal chasing America's evil
 spirits away. (Morse and Larkin 353)

The figure of the black drag queen again becomes a deity, fully embracing a new, inverted order of power.

Through ritual and performance, the drag queen could become the priestess and consciousness of her community. Again, Saint in his poem "The Queen's Etiquette" takes on the defiant persona of a drag queen (as he did in many of his poems and performances): "though I'm not gone yet/dissing queens dish dirt on me/it's all over town/k.s. inside that foul mouth/the bitch will have to shut up" (Wishing for Wings 31). In "Every Soul is a Circus," Saint begins: "again in a halloween parade life's a masquerade/she's gotta realize her fantasy & fantasize her reality/amidst the moving jungle of hunchbacked ghouls/there's a six-foot-four freak here but don't be scared/fierceness personified watch her strut her stuff" (Wishing for Wings 36).

Essex Hemphill writes in his poem, "The Tomb of Sorrow": "When I die,/my angels,/immaculate/Black diva/drag queens,/all of them/seuined/and seductive,/some of them/will come back/to haunt you,/I promise,/honey chil'" (Ceremonies 82). These mythic "divas" act as orishas, lesser gods or messengers (from Yoruban culture) who convey a new vision of transformation. Gay black poets such as Saint and Hemphill identify with female figures from African-American culture who represented resilience, creativity and a sense of eloquence in loss. Their poems incorporate "drag" and performance and the drag queen persona as a way of signifying their underlying feelings of outrage and indignance at what gay black men are subjected to in the dominant culture. Hemphill adds defiantly in the refrain for his poem "Heavy Breathing": "I am an oversexed/well-hung/Black Queen"

(Ceremonies 10).

This identification with drag and with the resilient female figure in African American culture as oracle, prophetess and priestess, is subconsciously hinted at by Roy Gonsalves in "Void" where he finds a connection to Billie Holiday:

There I sat with my last beer
Your sister's panties on
A torn T-shirt you gave me
Two red orchids in a goblet on ice
Billie Holiday Live. (49)

The female blues singers and the black drag queens not only became figures of emulation because of their imaginative and defiant transformation of loss and heartache, but for their lessons of empowerment. Young gay black poets of the American eighties were highly influenced by the writings and politics of the black lesbian movement. Finding in early black feminist thought a way of escaping traditional stereotypes of black masculinity and finding empowerment as well as political unity, early gay black writers were drawn to the work of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker. Gay black writers such as Essex Hemphill learned from Parker and Lorde that the oppression of blacks by whites can also lead to the oppression of blacks by blacks. Parker and Lorde began to explore the many psychological links among homophobia, a sense of the inferiority, gender, race and discrimination. They also drew from mythic sources to build a spiritual sense of community for African-Caribbean-Americans, one that took roots in tribalism and ritualism.

In his introduction to In the Life, Joseph Beam acknowledges his indebtedness to lesbian writers:

I called a personal moratorium on the writing
by white gay men, and read, exclusively, work
by lesbians and Black women . . . I was fed by Audre
Lorde's Zami, Barbara Smith's Home Girls, Cherrie
Moraga's Loving in the War Years, Barbara Deming's
We Cannot Live Without Our Lives, June Jordan's
Civil Wars, and Michelle Cliff's Claiming an Identity
I Was Taught to Despise. Their courage told me
that I, too, could be courageous. (13)

Lorde wrote in a style which was visionary, political, mythic and reflective of black traditions and culture. In a poem such as "Hard Love Rock II," Lorde announced "listen brother love you/love you love you love you/dig me/a different colored grave/we are both lying/side by side" (Undersong 140). The poem finishes with: "black is/not beautiful baby," and she warns that survival "is/not being screwed twice/at the same time/from on top as well as/from my side" (Undersong 140).

Parker's 1977 poem, "Movement in Black," is a poem meant to be performed and gains rhetorical power through repetition, percussive line phrasings, and rhythmic force. It presents a strong polemic: "I am the Black woman/& I have been all over/when the colonists/fought the British/I was there" (88). Such poems with their direct style of address take the strong position of the "I." These are declamatory poems.

After Parker and Lorde, Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl Clarke and Sapphire have continued this legacy of strong black lesbian poetry, poetry which has affected the styles of many male writers. Lesbian and feminist writings of a theoretical and critical nature have opened up discussions of gender and language and power relations in language. Lesbian writing has also empowered gay black men to look for newer constructs of community, ritualism and spirituality.

Essex Hemphill, Assotto Saint, and David Frechette have taken similar positions in their poetry. Frechette's "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien," Hemphill's "American Wedding" and Saint's "Heart and Soul" all employ a strong collective political voice and posture. Saint writes of the rainbow flag of gay liberation and the tricolor flag of the African Liberation movement: "these flags are not crossbones on my life/I carry them as amulets/emblems of double brotherhood/they spellbound like stars/to stripe america" (Wishing for Wings 44-45).

In the choice of the title Ceremonies for his 1992 collection of poetry and prose, Hemphill emphasized ritual and the performative power found in African-American culture. In "The Tomb of Sorrow" Hemphill writes:

I rummage through
ancestral memories
in search of the
original tribes
that fathered us.
I want to remember
the exact practices
of civility
we agreed upon.
I want us to remember
the nobility of decency.
(Ceremonies 90)

Hemphill further explores ancestral legacies of the African-American tradition to arrive at an identity that is both black and gay. Hemphill defines the image of his black, gay community as tribe. In "In the Life," a poem about cruising, Hemphill writes:

Do not feel shame for how I live
I chose this tribe
of warriors and outlaws. (Ceremonies 172)

And later:

while I'm out walking,
I find freedom in this village.
If I can take it with my tribe
I'll bring you here. (Ceremonies 173)

He explores the African-American community and tradition to expose, celebrate and criticize its strengths and weaknesses.

In the poem "Heavy Breathing" he writes:

At the end of heavy breathing
I engage in arguments
with my ancestral memories.
I'm not content
with nationalist propaganda.
I'm not content
loving my Black life
without question.
The answers of Negritude
are not absolute. (Ceremonies 18)

"Heavy Breathing" speaks of the plight of black gays who are "victimized" by straight black "married" men, and the poem finds a point of identification in black women:

You promised
this would be a nigga fantasy
on the scale of Oz.
Instead, it's 'Birth of a Nation'
and the only difference
is the white men
are played in Blackface.
At the end of heavy breathing
as the piccaninny frenzy escalates,
the home crew is illin'
on freak drugs
and afflicted racial pride. (Ceremonies 16)

Hemphill's rage is directed at his own hypocritical community which, in its admiration of patriarchy and the church, subjects gay black men and black drag queens to

the debased social position slaves held under American slavery.

Hemphill's, Dixon's, and Saint's great social consciousness as poets influenced an entire generation of gay black writers who found in their highly political rhetoric a tone of voice and posture for confronting black and white homophobia and racism.

Conclusion

One great task for scholars of cultural studies in the next century will be to study the novelty of post-World War II gay and lesbian poetry and the forces, psychological and sociological, behind the tremendous moment when the homoerotic and the homosexual forged their way into the dominant discourse. Gay poetry had to be created in order to voice a language for homoerotic desire. This desire had been carefully suppressed in Judeo-Christian culture. From Constantine's fascist subjugation of the pagan and the papal removal of the phallus from classical statuary, the severing of homosexual desire from discourse was in effect for centuries.

The intergenerational intertextuality of gay writers and their richly imaginative and cultural resourcefulness have helped shape a sensibility and a tradition. Often with the use of encoded language, obtuse and ambiguous styles, distant and ironical allusion, or with a rebellious decadent spirit that embraced carnality, the pagan and the satanic and transformed this language into a bold physical language of eroticism, these poets survived and prevailed.

This American poetry of gender and sexuality which grappled with early feminist philosophy, issues of masculine and feminine authorial points of view, and erotic self-expressions of homosexuality, may have had its moment of attention in the history of American twentieth century poetry. The poets of gender ("gay," "lesbian," "feminist," "transgendered," "bisexual") may be seen as part of the transition from the paradigm of

patriarchy of one century to the decentered polymorphism of a post-post-modern world. Indeed, feminist theory and the women's movement along with the civil rights movement of the sixties could be identified as major forces for change behind this shift in the later twentieth century. These closing decades in America may be known for their attention to the politics of desire. The shift will not be achieved, however, without essential changes in the Judeo-Christian tradition, for by challenging procreation and the role of women in society, the movement for gender equality challenges basic tenets of the Western tradition. Perhaps the great debates over essentialism and social constructivism will be forgotten as the nineteenth century romantic views of Nature and Humanism fade in the face of artificial intelligence, advanced genetics, and cloning.

The reconstitution of the American individual at the end of the twentieth century with the removal of the anxiety surrounding one facet of human behavior--sex--and another facet--race--has created an ever-broadening poetic of the multicultural. This concept of the multicultural and the polymorphous has followed economic and political trends as the world has shifted toward a global capitalistic marketplace in which cultural identity may be tried on or discarded, bought or sold for a price.

We can look back at the anxiety and guilt historically surrounding homoeroticism and see in "gay poetry" a variety of strategies for the voicing of personal desire. Its style and form have reflected the various theoretical and aesthetic developments surrounding homosexuality itself and the creation of a separate "homosexual" identity by the scientific establishment.

The extreme pressure to dislocate and sublimate homosexual desire has ended up defining a poetry which tried early on (in the words of the great gay diva, Madonna) to “express” itself. The Romantic poet who voiced the personal fears of another era in the face of greater urbanization, industrialization, and crowding (becoming the speaker of contemplation and recollection) parallels the role assumed by the gay poet who has tried to give voice to private feelings and wishes forbidden in the face of a society greatly anxious over issues of gender, race and desire.

The surprise, inventiveness and originality of this verse is there to be appreciated and understood. In the twentieth century the “homosexual” became the great symbol of alienation--the alienated individual, the “monster” of a psycho-scientific discourse, stigmatized by illness, representative of decadence, of satanic mystery, effete mandarin and trickster of high and low culture, as well as holy man.

In the end, American poetics of the twentieth century has been shaped by modernism, post-modernism and multiculturalism. At late century, American poetry is again changing, finding newer influences, influences made by a culture that is diverse, globally capitalistic and shifting across complex constructions of gender identity, ethnicity, and family. “Gay” and “queer” poetry may become a cultural artifact in this shifting age, as newer and more inclusive social, political and cultural theories and constructions take root; but its historical significance seems assured as it preserves the dynamics of the closet and the sensibility and aesthetics of gay men across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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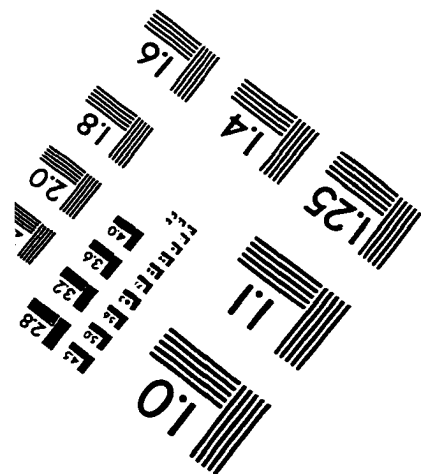
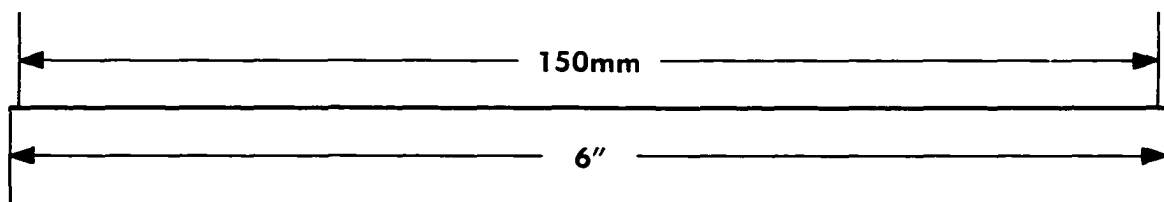
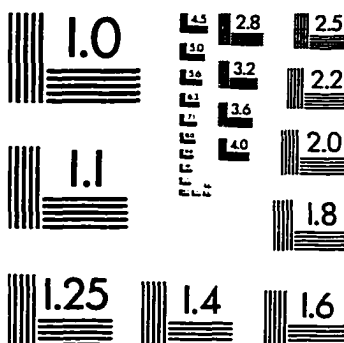
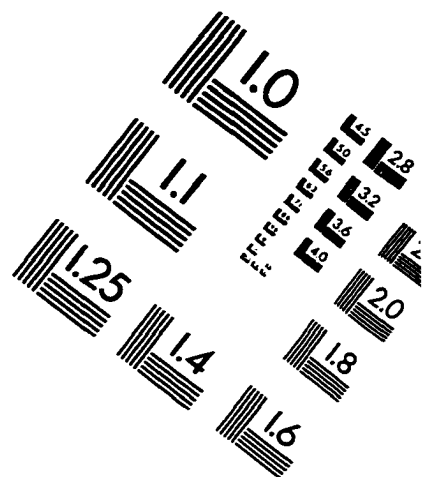
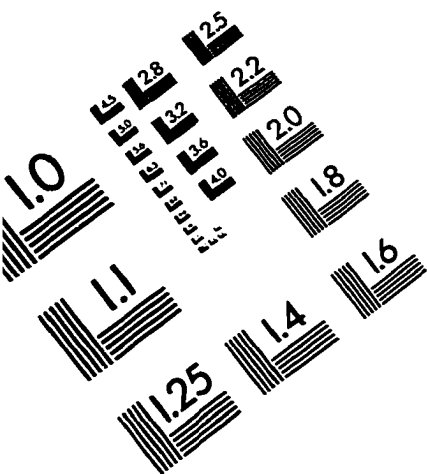
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IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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