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'Is it a queer book?': Re-reading the 1950s Homosexual Novel

Martin Dines

In Britain in the 1950s, writing and publishing fiction about male homosexuality was thought to be a risky business. And yet, no previous period had produced quite so many 'queer books'. According to one bibliography, nearly thirty titles had appeared by the decade's close (Gunn 2014), many of which ran to several editions. Evidently, the topic of homosexuality made for good business. In any case, everybody seemed to be talking about it, in the national press particularly, and the second half of the decade saw the first tentative steps taken toward legal reform. Nevertheless, even after the publication in 1957 of the Wolfenden Report, which recommended the partial decriminalization of sexual relations between men, many in the book trade were still jittery about the subject. That same year, for instance, Martyn Goff's editors at Putnam warned him that the release of his debut novel *The Plaster Fabric* 'would land them all in the Old Bailey' (*City Limits* 1983). It did nothing of the sort; possibly a prompt, sympathetic review in the *Telegraph* by John Betjeman helped head off any condemnation. Actually, there is little in the novel to frighten the horses. Indeed, one of the things that Betjeman applauds in his review is the convincing manner in which the novel's sensitive homosexual protagonist ultimately overcomes physical temptation (Betjeman 1957). Moreover, at the novel's climax, the protagonist's self-restraint helps save his friends' beleaguered heterosexual marriage. The suggestion that the repudiation of homosexual desire helps prevent social dislocation almost certainly made *The Plaster Fabric* palatable to more conservative readers; the novel apparently even received a glowing review penned by Goff's local vicar for a parish magazine from the depths of suburban Surrey (*City Limits* 1983).

The Plaster Fabric does however open in more dangerous – or promising – territory, with what is, unquestionably, a pick-up scene involving two men. On the fog-bound streets near Marble Arch, Laurie Kingston, a young bookseller,

runs into the impressive figure of guardsman Tom Beeson. Their early interaction follows a well-worn course: a request for a light leads to small talk and their retirement to a pub for drinks – paid for of course by Laurie – followed up by the bookseller's suggestion that he might like to paint the guardsman's portrait the next time they meet. If Laurie's eyes, which are excited by desire, give away his intentions before either man has a chance to speak, Beeson's are twice said to be 'calculating'. It is not clear whether he is anticipating sexual opportunity or material gain; for sure, more than any other figure, the guardsman had a long-standing reputation within queer circles for being easily bought, but also for proving to be less than a bargain (See Houlbrook 2003). Whether or not he has designs to 'tap' the young bookseller, one thing is clear: Beeson, who initiated the encounter, knows the score.

The Plaster Fabric's trajectory – beginning as it does with an erotic encounter rendered dangerous and disreputable by its public location and its transactional, cross-class dynamics, and ending with sexual restraint, heterosexual marriage and domesticity – would seem to confirm a common perception of the period in which it was written. 1950s Britain has long been associated in the popular imagination with social conformity and sexual repression, and the decade is often judged to have been an especially inauspicious time for homosexuals and other sexual dissidents. Typically, the 'dark ages' (Bedell 2007) of the 1950s are thought to compare unfavourably with the periods preceding and following it. The upheavals of the Second World War afforded homosexuals numerous opportunities. After being uprooted from provincial oblivion many encountered queer sex and society for the first time in the various homosocial environments engineered by the war effort (see Vickers 2013). And, as Quentin Crisp recalls, the dangers of the Blitz and the cover of the blackout caused Londoners to lose their sexual inhibitions: 'As soon as the bombs began to fall, the city became like a paved double bed. Voices whispered suggestively to you as you walked along; hands reached out if you stood still and in dimly lit trains people carried on as they had once behaved only in taxis.' (Crisp 1977, 154) The 1960s marked longer-lasting changes, from the relaxing of censorship following the *Lady Chatterley* trial in 1960 to the partial decriminalization of sexual relations between men in 1967. By contrast, during the 1950s a number of sensational tabloid exposés helped focus public attention on the particular 'problem' of homosexuality; such scrutiny was in part prompted by a surge in punitive actions by the police and courts. Increased visibility and vilification undoubtedly shaped the fictional representation of homosexuality. It is true that the 1950s saw a spate of novels published in Britain centring on sympathetic male homosexual protagonists

who, armed with newly available psychological models of sexual identity, typically refuse to apologize for their sexual orientation. But these 'homosexual novels' are otherwise cautious and circumscribed. Their protagonists typically conform to conventions of bourgeois respectability and masculine deportment, and repudiate the perceived moral dissolution of queer urban milieus for a restrained, private existence. By situating their homosexual protagonists firmly within middle-class domesticity, these novels reproduce a principal argument of liberal reformers: that the right to conduct sexual relations should be extended to homosexual men, so long as such affairs take place in private. In so doing, the 1950s homosexual novel implicitly sanctioned the homophobic interventions of the law and the media which mainly targeted the public urban spaces that men with fewer material resources relied upon to sustain affective and erotic relationships with other men.

In recent years, however, there has been a growing appreciation that these fictions, and the broader story we tell ourselves about sexuality in the 1950s, are partial accounts. Several historians have taken issue with the common view that the beginning of the 1960s marked a decisive break with the tedium and traditionalism of the 1950s, and thereby challenge 'progressivist' histories of sexuality that describe a relentless onward march toward a more liberal and tolerant present (see Thomas 2008; Mort 2010). Mark Donnelly contends that, in fact, 'many aspects of sixties change were fiercely contested at the time'; further, for a great number of British people, the swinging sixties was 'a party that was happening somewhere else' (Donnelly 2005, xii-xiii). Others have identified significant shifts in attitudes to sex that were taking place during or even before the 1950s. Several national surveys conducted in the immediate post-war years reveal decidedly mixed feelings across the population. For instance, the 1949 Mass Observation Study, nicknamed 'little Kinsey', found that, while a clear majority of respondents disapproved of homosexuality or extra-marital sex (although one in three admitted to having sex before or outside marriage), most approved of divorce, birth control and sex education (Kynaston 2008, 374–5). And though marriage and divorce rates would seem to confirm the popular notion that the decade was a 'golden age' for marriage, according to Claire Langhammer, the greater emphasis upon companionship and sexual intimacy in the post-war period actually 'made marital infidelity more, rather than less, likely as well as increasingly capable of dealing a fatal blow to the marriage itself' (2006, 110). A rise in standards of living, however, is the most frequently cited reason for changing sexual behaviour in the 1950s. Leslie Hall, for instance, speaks of a widespread sense that 'erotic energies nurtured by a buoyant economy and

Welfare State were threatening to break out' (2000, 166; see also Hennessey 2006). Consequently, Hall insists, the 1950s would be better understood as 'a period of instability rather than unthinking smug conventionality' (2000, 166). In their introduction to *Queer 1950s*, Heike Bauer and Matt Cook remark that, indeed, 'it is often the ideals and ideologies of the 1950s, rather than their fault lines, underlying uncertainties and confusions, which have taken the firmest hold in popular imaginings of the decade' (2012, 2). In fact, Bauer and Cook contend, the disruptions and trauma of war had exposed for many the contingency and the fragility of supposedly entrenched norms (3). Further, while the decade continues to be understood as a period of stasis, in many aspects it was characterized by transition and flux: 'movement, relocation and migration were defining features of the 1950s, as were the concomitant unsettling and reorientation of lives in new spaces and contexts' (2). Intense precariousness shaped the lives of many homosexuals in the 1950s, yet many also found opportunities within social structures and spaces that were being reordered, albeit in uneven ways.

The decade's homosexual novels reflect this instability through, for instance, their negotiation of different models of intimacy. Typically their protagonists strive for more egalitarian relationships even while older forms, based on difference in terms of age and class, and therefore power, remain deeply attractive. The proliferation of these novels also marked, and contributed to, a widening awareness of homosexuality, yet their success also helped consolidate a distinctly queer readership. Indeed, the homosexual novel represents a perhaps surprisingly self-aware mode of fiction: homosexual characters reading homosexual novels are a recurrent motif, as are vocalizations about how such literature constitutes a crucial cultural resource for sexual minorities. Meanwhile, the publication histories of these novels suggest divergent readerships: respectable-looking first editions were often followed by mass-market paperback versions, which sported more salacious covers and appeared, and were consumed, in less salubrious parts of the city (see Hornsey 2010, 189–200; Dines 2017). The homosexual novel also exhibits considerable diversity between in its covers. Some authors clearly refused to sustain the levels of seriousness that most readers and publishers considered appropriate, and some show indifference to or scepticism toward the frameworks that dominated discussion of homosexuality in the 1950s, namely, psychiatry and the 'social problem'.

This chapter explores these developments and contradictions through an examination of several 1950s homosexual novels. In the following section I discuss Goff's *The Plaster Fabric* in relation to the intensification of press and

police scrutiny of homosexual activity. I then proceed to consider novels by James Courage, Rodney Garland and Mary Renault as responses to the principal paradigm for appraising homosexuality in the post-war period, the social problem, itself in part a reaction to the homophobia of the popular press. In the chapter's final section I turn to the work of Angus Wilson and, more briefly, Michael Nelson and Brigid Brophy (who authored the only significant British lesbian novel of the decade). I explore how the investment in comedic modes by these authors help shape visions of homosexual life that differ from those emerging out of mainstream reformist agendas. I show how the decade's homosexual novels variously sustain, evade and problematize the prevailing liberal discourse on homosexuality; I contend that they cannot therefore be recruited straightforwardly to a progressivist history of sexuality.

But my chapter also constitutes a response to playwright Neil Bartlett's admission, made in an introduction to a 1996 edition of Rodney Garland's *The Heart in Exile*, that he has developed rather a taste for the neurotic (and, I would add, sanctimonious) protagonist of the 1950s homosexual novel. What then are the distinct pleasures that these works of fiction – several of which have recently been brought back into print – hold for the twenty-first-century reader? I argue that a principal pleasure to be derived from these novels does not lie in the recognition of and identification with particular forms of queer experience; such presentism may, after all, merely flatten out differences between social formations of particular historical junctures. (I acknowledge, however, Carolyn Dinshaw's influential argument that queer historians might productively invest in '*partial* connections, queer relations between incommensurate lives and phenomena . . . that unveil and contest normativity', 1999, 134, 138; my emphasis.) In any case, the pleasures I recognize are located not so much at the level of character than narrative: they emerge out of a kind of counter-reading that pursues the desires that these texts attempt to resist or deflect. The homosexual novel is, I will show, shaped – or, rather, deformed – by the persistent presence of disreputable and pleasurable intimacies, locations and narrative modes. My focus on pleasure then differs from those whose scrutiny of queer fictions from the past harnesses negative feelings. Heather Love for instance argues that 'dark texts', i.e. stories that articulate the suffering and confusion that comes from having to bear an 'unwanted being' (2007, 26), continue to be instructive: 'backward feelings serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show up the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress' (27). I am not contesting the importance Love attributes to negative feelings; however, I would assert that paying close attention

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to the imbrication of narrative and pleasure in (reading) the 1950s homosexual novel is potentially productive, not least because doing so helps bring into focus how works of fiction articulate the desirability of disavowed queer ways of being. In short, narrative pleasures interrupt narratives of progress. These novels may be oriented toward a normative future, yet they are distorted by their preoccupation with the very dangers and delights their protagonists steadfastly renounce. My re-reading of these fictions is thus an avowedly queer enterprise. Such a declaration, obviously, necessitates clarification about my use of the term 'queer' in this chapter. Principally, the word designates – as it frequently did in the 1950s – same-sex eroticism and various corresponding identifications, including homosexuality. Additionally – especially in relation to my own reading – the term signals, in the critical mode of much queer theory, a questioning of both the dominance and coherence of normative scripts and categories of gender and sexuality. Specifically, then, my queer reading constitutes an interrogation of the narrative bases for certain forms of homosexual identity. More precisely still, it is an operation that attends to, and takes pleasure in, a particular kind of narrative failure: a failure to contain and control pleasure.

Under surveillance: homosexuality, the media and the police

The Plaster Fabric was not exactly path-breaking. It appeared a few years after an earlier flurry of homosexual novels – most notably Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After* (1952), Rodney Garland's *The Heart in Exile* (1953) and Mary Renault's *The Charioteer* (1953) – and so could hardly be said to have matched these titles for impact. (It received some polite reviews, but did not make it into a second edition.) However, *The Plaster Fabric* is paradigmatic; its 'sensitive' depiction of queer experience – a quality often trumpeted by publishers – belies the tensions that defined the 1950s homosexual novel. For instance, while it strives to show how homosexual desire might be successfully managed and contained, Goff's novel readily describes – and therefore also contributes to – an ever-widening public awareness of the matter. Laurie is in fact frequently the last to learn that his needs and behaviour follow well-established patterns. An Italian teenager who picks him up on the sultry streets of Florence remarks 'knowingly' that many English authors visit the city (1957, 133). Even a priest comments that Laurie is just one of a long line of homosexual tourists intent on seducing the local boys (148). Partly to mortify his desires, Laurie abandons the more obvious – and 'sordid' – queer locales of London and Florence for rural Sussex.

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But even the simple life gets complicated. Laurie is obliged to share a bed with the comely teenager Martin, whom Laurie tantalizingly sees unclothed. The boy is wise beyond his years: incredibly, he warns Laurie to hold off his advances so as not to be overcome by shame the next morning.

Arguably the novel's depiction of such broad cognisance reflects a growing awareness of homosexuality in Britain. Indeed, an equivalent scene in Iris Murdoch's 1958 novel *The Bell* makes clear the principal source of this public knowledge. Eighteen-year-old Toby Gashe's disorientation after having been kissed by an older man is shown to stem from his limited exposure to homosexuality: 'as his education had included Latin and no Greek his acquaintance with the excesses of the ancients was fragmentary. [. . .] What he did know came mainly from popular newspapers.' (2004, 164) The post-war period saw more frequent and frank discussion in the British press of sexual matters generally, particularly following the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948. In the early 1950s, sensational headlines about male homosexuality peppered the popular press, and the leading titles devoted more and more column inches to the subject in their pursuit of higher circulation figures. Douglas Warth's notorious three-part 'Evil Men' series of articles for the *Sunday Pictorial* in 1952 set the tone by arguing that 'the veil of secrecy' that surrounded the subject had merely provided cover for homosexuals to spread their corruption to all levels of society and all regions of the country. This was a problem that could no longer be met with silence; justifying the intense journalistic scrutiny that was to come, Warth (1952, 6) declares that homosexuality 'must be faced if it is ever to be controlled'. Any further toleration would lead to Britain falling into decadence, just as France – where homosexuality was decriminalized – had suffered 'an alarming fall in the birthrate' (15). Its rival the *News of the World* – which in the early 1950s found its way into three-quarters of British households (Higgins 1996, 278) – was not to be outdone. While it had for several decades reported regularly on court cases involving all manner of sexual offences, in 1953 alone the paper covered more than 100 trials for homosexual offences. That same year, a number of cases involving prominent men – the actor Sir John Gielgud, the Labour MP William Field, the author Robert Cooke-Croft – caused a veritable frenzy across the British press. Most sensational of all were the Montagu trials of 1953 and 1954, which ended with the conviction and imprisonment of Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and his friends Michael Pitt Rivers and the diplomatic editor for the *Daily Mail* Peter Wildeblood. The details of the two cases – involving a peer of the realm embroiled with firstly boy scouts, and then airmen and several others in an orgiastic party – both made

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extraordinarily titillating copy and served to confirm ideas about the spread of homosexual corruption across the barriers of social class. Several titles, however, broke rank with popular press's stance on homosexuality by calling for greater tolerance and indeed legal reform, and many excoriated the press for peddling what Justin Bengry has described as 'a kind of respectable pornography' (2012, 168). Murdoch's novel is implicitly critical of the influence of the popular newspapers: she shows that homosexual encounters need not be merely shameful and damaging. Indeed, the young Toby's experience is revelatory: 'his whole conception of human existence was become in a moment immensely more complex' (2004, 177), and he is moved to imagine what it must be like to be the other man. Evidently, he has learnt far more in these brief moments than he ever did from reading the *News of the World*. Laurie's encounter with Martin in Goff's novel is rather less transformative. Moreover, while the scene supposedly demonstrates Laurie's capacity for restraint, thereby refuting a line of attack commonly made by journalists, he is still being judged by those who have learnt all about his tendencies from other sources. And, of course, his refusal to act on his desires is precisely the outcome most wished for by the like of Douglas Warth. Goff's novel therefore is tightly constrained by the very discourse it seeks to challenge.

Heightened scrutiny of homosexuality in the media was certainly in large part a result of a dramatic intensification of police surveillance of queer venues: pubs, cruising grounds and, above all, urinals. According to Matt Houlbrook, during the late 1940s, the number of incidents involving homosexual activity that led to proceedings recorded by the Metropolitan Police was nearly three times higher than before the war; these levels of intervention were sustained through the 1950s. Houlbrook dismisses, however, the widely held belief that the British State orchestrated a 'witch hunt' against homosexuals in the post-war years; he argues that the increase in interventions by the police owed much less to the machinations of homophobic politicians and senior officials than it did to shifts in police operations at the divisional level. In the mid-1940s, district officers responded to the perception that homosexual activity had spiralled out of control in London's West End, largely thanks to the difficulty of policing it during the blackout, by bolstering 'vice squads' when the resources became available following the return to peacetime operations. Crucially, the effects of this increase in police activity were felt unevenly: particular venues and areas in the West End were heavily targeted; many other sites, private homes especially, were left relatively undisturbed. Younger, poorer men were more likely to come into the attentions of the police, since they were more reliant on these sites and

less able to access the safer, private domestic spaces that many older, wealthier men took for granted. (Houlbrook 2005, 31–7) It is hardly surprising therefore that many homosexual novels of the 1950s exhibit a retreat from these increasingly visible, dangerous locations and express enthusiasm for the safety and respectability of middle-class domesticity. Once again, then, the narrative trajectory of *The Plaster Fabric*, which begins with Laurie's electric but risky encounter in the West End and ends with his search for more reassuring settings and interactions at some remove from the capital, is typical. Yet even while Laurie appears to escape the dissolute and dangerous city for a more secure and respectable domestic setting, as his encounter with the teenaged Martin suggests, he never manages to free himself from either temptation or scrutiny.

The attempted shift away from obvious and dubious kinds of queer encounter has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. *The Plaster Fabric* evinces an awareness of a history of homosexuality, and articulates the need to break with older models of queer intimacy, in particular, those organized around pecuniary exchange and differentials in age and class (See Houlbrook 2005, 167–94). Although Goff's novel provides no illustration of an ideal homosexual relationship, Laurie's various objectionable and unrewarding affairs help outline its probable form. Like other homosexual novels from the period, *The Plaster Fabric* gestures toward a mode of companionship that is monogamous, domesticated and egalitarian, in other words, one which mirrors ideals of heterosexual marriage that were dominant in the mid-twentieth century (See Collins 2004; Kynaston 2009). And yet, troublingly, other kinds of encounter continue to prove attractive. Laurie attempts to sublimate such desires by way of art. Whereas initially he exploits his interest in painting as a sexual ruse, he goes on to try to elevate his baser passions through what he hopes is genuine artistic expression. Unfortunately, Laurie's paintings are all too accurate. A portrait of Beeson succeeds only in reproducing the guardsman's 'calculating look', thereby invoking the very kind of interaction from which Laurie is trying to distance himself. In a similar way, Goff's novel cannot fully manage the desires it steadfastly insists it can contain. The sheer physicality of Beeson impresses on the narrative throughout. The guardsman's powerful hands – rendered as great rough-hewn paws in John Minton's illustration on the cover of the first edition (see Fig. 1) – never leave Laurie's mind, in part because they so often leave their mark on his body: he is repeatedly grasped (or wishes that he were) and, finally, is groped 'unambiguously' (253) by Beeson. These various grapplings seem to have a much longer afterlife, to my mind at least, than their ultimate repudiation. The novel's title, then, can be seen to be unintentionally appropriate. While it

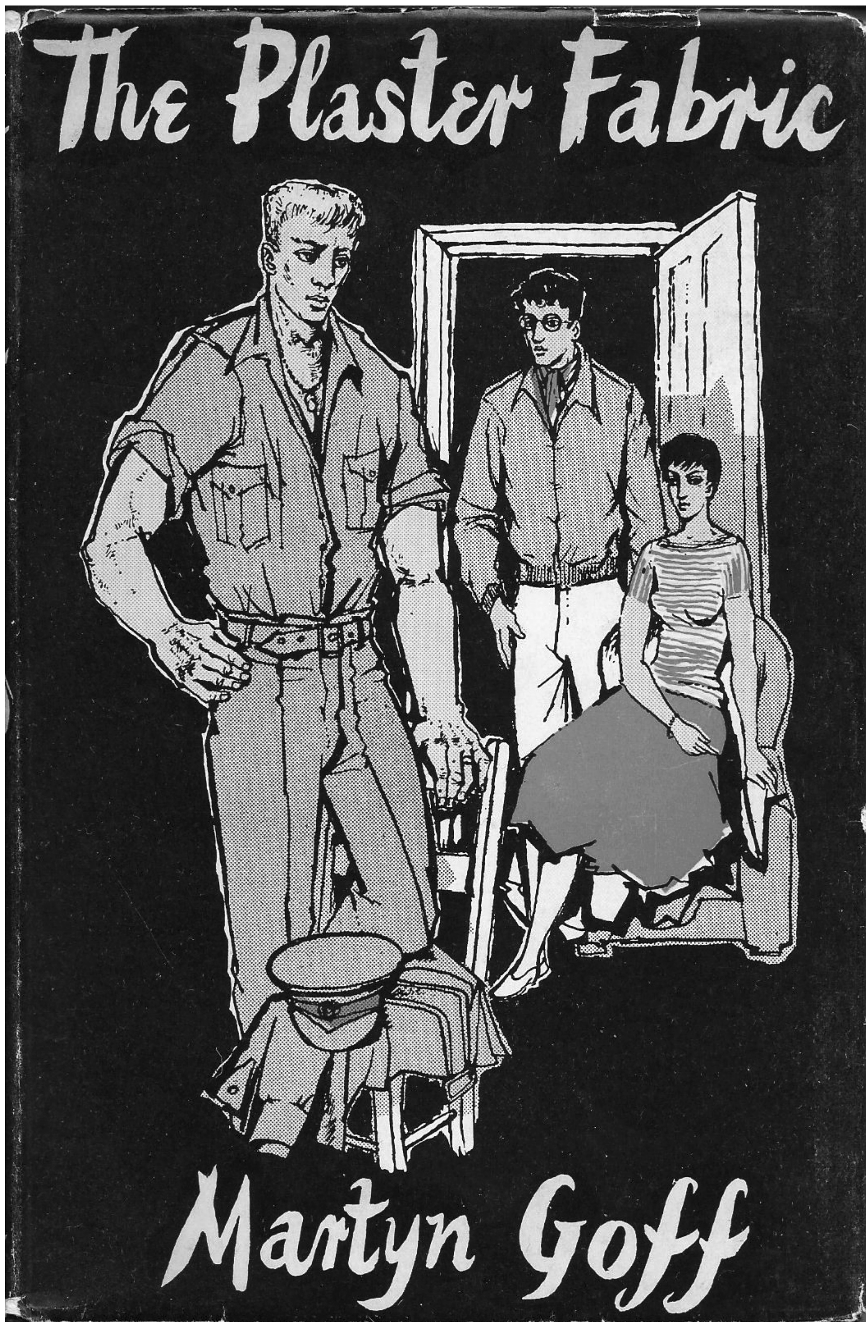

Figure 1 *The Plaster Fabric* by Martyn Goff. First edition

invokes the travails of being true to oneself – Laurie continually anguishes over the various dissimulations he must weave so as 'to ensure a smooth and comfortable life' (47) – the novel's 'moral' conclusion is itself little more than a flimsy fabrication plastered over more visceral desires. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the novel's final lines are suggestive of the 'backward glance' of a man cruising for sex – a glance that also looks back to an earlier time of easier pleasures. Immediately after Beeson's departure Laurie returns to the same streets in which he first met the guardsman, whereupon he is suffused with 'a mood of nostalgia for the past'. (255) Not atypically, Goff's novel looks both forward and back; its circuitous narrative evinces a desire to both abandon and return to outmoded, disavowed forms of queer interaction. Caught between his transgressive desires on the one hand and his ambitions for a normal life on the other, always on the move yet ultimately going nowhere, Laurie is the archetypal queer protagonist of 1950s fiction.

Social problem, private affairs

Alan Sinfield and others have argued that the dominant discursive construction through which homosexuality was understood in the post-war years was the 'social problem'. Following Foucault, we have become used to the idea that homosexuality has, at different historical moments, been conceptualized through distinct discursive frameworks, which in turn have mobilized new regulatory regimes. The late nineteenth century saw the earliest medical taxonomies of abnormal sexual behaviour; whereas previously homosexual acts had been conceived of as sinful and/or criminal, the recognition of homosexuality as a clinical condition mandated the treatment rather than the punishment of those so afflicted. Supported by the rise of sociology and social work as a profession, the social problem provided consensus-era Britain its principal vehicle for apprehending social instability. Homosexuality and other forms of aberrant behaviour were increasingly understood to be the result of *social* failures, 'thereby necessitating the application of a unique battery of problem-solving techniques' (Waters 2013, 193). It was not so much that the conditions of post-war society produced more problems (though in the 1950s, they appeared to proliferate: single mothers, teenage delinquency, prostitution and the colour bar all jostled for attention alongside homosexuality; in contemporary kitchen sink dramas multiple issues became concatenated, as in Shelagh Delaney's 1958 play *A Taste of Honey*). Rather, the social problem provided the Welfare State the necessary

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conceptual and practical means to fulfil its primary functions which, broad agreement had it, were to 'ameliorate injustices, smooth over inequalities, and secure steady general progress'. (Sinfield 1999, 238) For Sinfield, the 1957 Wolfenden Report – officially, the *Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* – is the 'textbook instance' of the post-war social problem, in that it represents a juncture within a standard sequence that proceeds in the following way: 'a social problem is nominated and the State declares its readiness to respond to parliamentary and media concern; a committee of the wise and the good is set up, and further discussion is invited; the committee reports, more discussion follows, and the State passes laws to improve matters' (ibid.). Some have interpreted the decade-long period that Parliament took to act on the recommendations of the Wolfenden Report as indicative of how homosexuality proved an especially difficult problem for the British state to assimilate (see, for example, Higgins 1996, 123–48). Sinfield disagrees: it took roughly the same length of time to introduce commercial television (Sinfield 2014, 271).

The 'wise and the good' who served on or who were invited to contribute to the Wolfenden Committee, which began meeting in 1954, mostly comprised doctors, lawyers, police officers and churchmen. While the social problem constituted the principal formation through which homosexuality was regulated in the post-war years, the fields of medicine, law and religion all continued to provide competing explanations. In fact, as Chris Waters has shown, studies of homosexuality produced in the 1950s demonstrated a widespread slippage between the methodological registers of psychiatry and sociology, though by the end of the decade, the latter was most definitely in the ascendant (Waters 2013, 205). As I outlined in the previous section, reporting in the popular press from earlier in the decade was decidedly less nuanced, stressing the moral turpitude of homosexuals and the threat they posed to the wider public. As the 1950s progressed, however, what Richard Hornsey has described as a 'counterdiscursive project' (2010, 116) gained momentum. Key contributions alongside Wolfenden included Gordon Westwood's 1952 *Society and the Homosexual* (the first book-length study of homosexuality that addressed a non-expert readership), Peter Wildeblood's 1955 book *Against the Law*, a scathing account of his treatment by the British legal establishment published after completing the prison sentence he received for homosexual offences at the second Montagu trial the previous year (the book attracted a wide audience and was reissued as a Penguin paperback in 1957), as well as numerous broadsheet editorials. These interventions shared a reformist agenda, central to which was the articulation of an alternative aetiology

of homosexuality that drew on sexological and psychiatric literature produced in the first half of the century. Largely eschewing behavioural models that understood homosexuality as the repeated capitulation to temptation stemming from moral weakness or corruption, reformers presented homosexuality as a permanent psychological condition that had its origins in childhood or adolescence. Crucially, this alternative aetiology transferred culpability for the homosexual's condition onto the institutions of family and education. With the individual no longer to blame for his homosexuality, the principal question became how he managed his condition; as one of the protagonists in Renault's *The Charioteer* has it, 'it's not what one is, it's one does with it' (2003, 131). Westwood distinguishes the 'socially-conscious homosexual' – the otherwise well-adjusted, law-abiding individual – from the immoral agents of corruption familiar from tabloid reporting. The social opprobrium faced by homosexuals, Westwood argues, was not only unfair to the more conscientious members of that group, it was potentially damaging: homosexuals were left to feel they had no stake in society, which in turn encouraged them to adopt antisocial forms of behaviour. Westwood et al. did not suggest that widespread public hostility toward homosexuality could or even should be overturned, but they did insist that the conscientious homosexual deserved a place in a modern, diverse Britain. Antiquated laws lagged behind advances in scientific understandings of sexuality: as Westwood insists, 'the new medical and psychological discoveries of the last fifty years have changed our social needs, but the sex code has remained as before, producing a continual disparity between our lives and our rules' (Westwood 1952, 107). In this manner psychological models for homosexuality were being put to the service of legal reform in the 1950s; the psychiatrist and the sexologist joined the ranks of the experts mobilized by the State to the tackle the period's most pressing social problems.

Hornsey suggests that many of the decade's homosexual novels were aligned with this reformist agenda. One would therefore expect these stories to speak in concert with Wolfenden, by outlining how legal reform would repair the situation of many men whose lives had been distorted by being on the wrong side of the law, enabling otherwise honest and capable men to make a full and proper contribution to society. James Courage's 1959 novel *A Way of Love* seems fashioned in this manner; indeed, its very title echoes that of Peter Wildeblood's second book *A Way of Life*, published in 1956, which explored the experiences of homosexual men from different class backgrounds. At the end of Courage's novel, some queer friends are discussing the demise of the protagonist's two-year relationship with another man. One comments, 'how long would many an

ordinary so-called normal marriage last [. . .] if there were no legal ties and no children to hold the partners together?' (Courage 1959, 249) The implication is obvious: the institutions of marriage and family are what define 'ordinariness'; the lack of legal approbation renders queer relationships otherwise, and consequently less durable. Other novels, though, are equivocal. In Garland's *The Heart in Exile*, the protagonist Anthony Page – a psychiatrist – reckons a change in the law would do little to alter public disapproval, and therefore the lot of most homosexuals: 'the invert would still be in a minority, with a permanent guilt feeling, and hostile pressure of society would, to varying degrees, turn him into a neurotic' (2014, 79). In any case it would be difficult to institute a change to the law. Page has just been talking to a Member of Parliament who is gloomy about the prospects of reform. The problem is that queers are thought to be undeserving: they are an untrustworthy lot; indeed, many are Communists. Psychiatric treatment, the novel suggests, is a more propitious endeavour, as it will help individuals either to come to terms with their homosexuality, or to cure them of it. (See Houlbrook and Waters, 2006, for a trenchant analysis of the novel's investments in psychiatric models of homosexuality.) Goff's *The Plaster Fabric* takes the opposite tack. Laurie seems to be making the predictable move when he declares: 'The law is the thing. Once someone has to live outside it, his whole outlook becomes warped.' (65) But he is quickly persuaded by his interlocutor Norman, who will shortly become his lover, that this line of reasoning is just a way to 'escape moral responsibility' (66). Queers don't need the State, or psychiatrists for that matter, to show them how to be good. The problem for Laurie is that he has few signposts to show him the way, especially after the older Norman is revealed to have a defective moral compass. (Laurie is disgusted by his suggestion that they embark on an open relationship.) It is no wonder then that Laurie finds himself back at Marble Arch looking wistfully at guardsmen in the novel's final pages: by insisting that he look only to himself for direction, Laurie ends up following his most heartfelt desires.

Where the decade's homosexual novels correspond more evenly with the mechanics of the social problem is in their articulation of domesticity as the proper locus of homosexuality. As is well known, Wolfenden recommended the partial decriminalization of sexual relations between men: the Report stipulated that only private acts involving two consenting adults – aged twenty-one or over – should be made lawful. The 1967 Sexual Offences Act followed these recommendations to the letter. (Further exclusions were added, including for the Armed Forces or Merchant Navy.) Thus the social problem of homosexuality was neutralized by being shunted into the private sphere, where

the State was (and generally still is) presumed to have only limited jurisdiction. The Report makes its understanding clear on this count: 'Unless a deliberate attempt is to be made by society, acting through the agency of law, to equate the sphere of crime with that of sin, there must be a realm of private morality and immorality which is, in brief and crude terms, not the law's business.' (Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution. 1957, 7, para. 1) Wolfenden's proposals were more likely to be considered satisfactory by individuals who took the resource of privacy for granted. Those who were more reliant on public space for homosexual encounters, though, were left in an even more precarious position. Indeed, one significant consequence of the legal codification of private and public sexual acts was a further sanctioning of punitive inventions against the latter. In the years immediately following the 1967 act, the number of men convicted for seeking or having sex with other men in public trebled. (See Higgins 1996: 145–6) The middle-class men who stood to benefit most from the partial decriminalization of homosexuality tended to take the liberal view: legal reform constituted a limited adjustment, a means by which a narrow set of vital freedoms might be extended to all. In fact, homosexual reform must be seen as part of a larger bourgeois project. As Hornsey argues, homosexual reformism had much in common with the post-war rhetoric of urban renewal: both were invested in a set of scientific discourses that originally emerged in the late nineteenth century, both relied heavily on the figure of the professional expert to promote their arguments, and both 'projected a consensual, happy, and peaceful postwar society in which latest modern science would finally dislodge the obsolescent remnants of the Victorian past, under the cover of which they covertly installed a hegemonic set of bourgeois assumptions about civic society, domestic respectability, and appropriate urban conduct' (2010, 118). The homosexual novel, evidently, is shaped by these same assumptions. Expert voices are commonplace. Audrey Erskine Lindop's *The Details of Jeremy Stretton*, published in 1955, even features a forward written by 'a Consultant in Psychiatry', who endorses the novel's realistic and responsible depiction of male homosexuality (1955, x–xi). Without exception these novels are focalized through middle-class homosexual protagonists who have either secured for themselves a comfortable home or look likely to inherit soon the rewards of bourgeois life. And, once again, these men recoil from the prospect of unruly queer urban milieus that were being excoriated in both the popular press and the reformist accounts of Westwood and Wildeblood. Moreover, the focus on domesticity in reformist narratives, fictional or otherwise, was cognate with the new and insistent emphasis on the homosexual's psychic interiority. Just as the

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State was thought to have no legitimate business in the private home, it was understood to hold no jurisdiction over psychological conditions; only acts of public indecency fell within its purview.

One problem for the authors of homosexual novels, however, is that they needed to show how their respectable, domesticated homosexual couples got to meet in the first place. While queer pubs and house parties were contemptible, they could not be left out of the story altogether, since they provided by far the most realistic scenario for homosexual introductions. In Renault's *The Charioteer*, for example, injured servicemen and former schoolmates Laurie Odell and Ralph Lanyon are reunited at a party held at the flat of Sandy Reid. Laurie does not warm to the effeminate, facetious host, whom he has met by chance in the street only a few hours earlier. The contingency of their meeting discomforts Laurie, but he endures the company of his new acquaintance in the tawdry surroundings of a queer pub, understanding that 'somewhere behind [Sandy] was the comforting solidarity of a group' (111). But once at the party Laurie insists he feels little connection with the other guests; observing them detachedly he realises that 'nine-tenths of the people [present] were specialists' who, unlike Laurie, 'had identified themselves with their limitations' and, even, 'were making a career of them' (132). Ralph's disdain is even blunter, and once he has teamed up with Laurie he sees no reason for the two of them to hang around. The evident need for even well-adjusted, capable individuals like Laurie and Ralph to attend such queer gatherings is thus downplayed; they are men apart. This is what they like to tell themselves at least: as the evening plays out, Laurie learns that Ralph is a familiar figure at Sandy's. Moreover, Laurie is horrified to discover that his own facility for bitchy comebacks is as well developed as any of the career homosexuals present. (137)

Garland's *The Heart in Exile* seems to get around the unpleasant business of meeting in queer venues in a rather ingenious way: at the end of the novel Anthony Page takes up with his male secretary Terry – who was living in his flat all along! But still Anthony can't keep out of the pubs. In order to solve the mystery of the suicide of a former lover he is obliged to revisit the city's queer sites, some of which he frequented in a more dissolute period of his life before the War. Deeply knowledgeable of but apparently aloof from these habitats and their denizens, Anthony makes for an ideal guide to London's queer 'underground'. Yet his encounters with this degraded realm disturb him profoundly, as they threaten to rekindle desires which have been repressed in the process of forging a mature, respectable identity organized around domesticity and professional responsibility. Like *The Charioteer*'s Laurie, Anthony feels himself detached, but

knows that he is not. These anxieties impel Anthony to retreat back to the private space of his well-ordered home. Fortunately, a life of solitude is not to be his destiny; indeed, in taking up with Terry at the novel's close, Garland indicates that homosexuality may indeed be successfully managed within a loving, monogamous and domestic configuration.

However, the very organization of the *The Heart in Exile* indicates how the homosexual novel is beset by more fundamental problems of representation. Garland et al. are motivated to depict the kind of homosexual relationship that would be protected by legal reform: an otherwise conventional companionate, domesticated union. Unfortunately, these sorts of relationships hardly make compelling story material, which explains why they are so often pushed to the edges or even beyond the limits of the narrative. Consequently, homosexual novels tend to be dominated, in terms of narrative space, by the very locales and modes of interaction they disavow. They are, moreover, acutely aware of their paradoxical nature. In *The Heart in Exile*, Terry declares that if he ever could write a novel, he would 'write about the majority [of homosexuals] for whom it isn't really tragic'. Anthony knows this would not amount to much: 'Happiness – normal or abnormal – is uninteresting' (142). Appropriately enough, Anthony feels that his exploration of London's seething queer underworld takes the form of a very different kind of fiction: a penny-dreadful. As an object the penny-dreadful is cheap, showy and disreputable; within its pages it contains the promise of the sensuous pleasures of the disorderly city. Anthony not only acknowledges the allure of this realm, he comprehends that the heightened sensuality of the penny-dreadful's fictional world renders it more real than real life: 'I didn't want to read a novel and I didn't want to write novels, I wanted to *live* novels. The fact that the novel I wanted to *live* at this particular moment was a penny-dreadful, mystery story, was significant, because I always felt the penny-dreadful was the *real* novel. As a species it was immortal.' (144; italics in original.) Only when he has solved the case of Julian's death does Anthony feel he is finally able to close this book. Enduring love and responsibility replace the desire for excitement; the story ends so that real life may begin. Of course, this amounts to an acknowledgement that any attempt to represent respectable homosexual lives cannot avoid – indeed, will inevitably be dominated by – more pleasurable, less reputable narrative forms. Anthony's sense of the penny-dreadful's immortality is, then, disturbingly apposite.

In *The Charioteer*, Laurie and Ralph's union is similarly confirmed only in the closing pages. As in *The Heart in Exile*, some evidence of what their relationship will be like is provided, though much of this is coded through interior décor:

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austerely masculine interiors are suggestive of the kind of restraint necessary to sustain long-term relationships (see Dines 2017). And also like Garland's novel, *The Charioteer* is dominated by the kinds of queer interaction it tries to renounce. The chapter featuring Sandy's party occupies a central position within Renault's narrative; it is also, noticeably, the novel's longest. The sharply rendered camp chatter, the drunken dancing and Sandy's attempted suicide make the party sequence compelling reading; by comparison, the several chapters focusing on institutional life – Laurie's schooldays, his long convalescence in a military hospital – are pale prospects. There is a laughably awkward, almost metafictive moment at the party that registers the problematic nature of the narrative. Feeling isolated at the party, Laurie comforts himself with a copy of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* he has found in the bookshelf next to him. The lines Laurie falls into reading are soothingly escapist, but he suffers this interruption:

> A young man sat down beside him on the divan and, without any kind of preliminary, said, 'Is it a queer book?'
>
> 'No', said Laurie.
>
> 'Oh', said the young man, on a note of utter deflation. He got up and went away. (129)

This briefest of exchanges provokes another question that has troubled many a homosexual reader: what would it mean to be caught reading a novel like *The Charioteer*? For, inescapably, Renault's *is* a queer book. Were Laurie reading something similar – a book about someone like himself – it would have been harder to repel the unwanted attention and, therefore, to distinguish himself from the other partygoers. In other words, the exchange indicates that the queer party is, after all, a fitting location for a novel like *The Charioteer*. The numerous references to childhood across the chapter provide further confirmation that Laurie has more in common with this queer scene than he cares to admit. In addition, they draw attention to the novel's own narration and its identity as a queer book. Sandy's room is a former nursery: a converted toy cupboard and the protective bars on the windows (116, 128) seem to confirm the revellers' immaturity, their having 'turned away from all other reality' (132). But, of course, Laurie has shown the same tendencies by burying himself in the pages of *Treasure Island*. The nursery setting and the children's book also invoke Laurie's own early past. The novel's opening chapter has five-year-old Laurie emerging out of his bedroom to confront his absconding father, a traumatic experience that presumably will have important consequences for the boy's psychosexual development. And the book's physical condition – its 'friendly' 'schoolroom

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shabbiness' – connects with another formative scene, in which Ralph, who is about to be expelled from school for having had inappropriate relations with another boy, gives Laurie a copy of that most venerable of queer books, Plato's *Phaedrus*. Laurie comes to cherish most of all Plato's story of the charioteer, an allegory of the intellect's continual struggle with the more unruly passions and appetites. The passing of the book between these men marks out their shared commitment to a life of sexual restraint, and suggests a way homosexuals might come to know one another without all the unpleasantness of the 'scene'. Laurie nearly passes the battered, much-read book on to the younger Andrew, in whom he recognizes incipient homosexuality, as Ralph once did in him. (In fact the scene in which Andrew interrupts Laurie's reading prefigures the later scene at the party.) Ultimately, however, Laurie abandons Andrew, preferring the younger man to remain innocent and untainted by homosexuality. Alan Sinfield complains that the novel's queer heroism thus 'involves invalidating queerness' (1994, 144). I would assert, instead, that Laurie's withholding the *Phaedrus* from Andrew rather confirms the power of queer books – *The Charioteer* included – to inculcate and condition homosexuality. The narrative's belated attempt to 'invalidat[e] queerness' should be seen therefore as a nervous reaction to concerns about its own status and function, to the fact of its own queerness.

James Courage's *A Way of Love* is the decade's only novel to be fully centred on a homosexual affair (Goff's 1961 effort, *The Youngest Director*, does the same; see Dines 2013). Yet the domesticated relationship between architect Bruce Quantock and his younger lover Philip Dill produces a narrative conundrum. Bruce declares his motivation to write a first-person account that shows how queers are capable of conducting their love lives as well as anyone else, yet his own story ends in failure. Once again, successful, comfortable relationships rarely make for interesting stories; Bruce feels obliged to distil a period of contentment into a single banality: 'all went well' (124). But, further, Courage's novel indicates the ultimate impossibility of narrating stable queer domestic lives. Things start promisingly enough. Bruce and Philip first meet at a concert at the Royal Festival Hall, that jewel in the crown of London's post-war renewal. No building better represented modern, democratic Britain; it was, therefore, a most appropriate venue for the meeting of two model homosexual citizens. And in a suitably responsible fashion, the pair soon withdraws from public view; the affair is transferred to Bruce's small, neat house near Regent's Park. This arrangement is understood to be good and proper: Philip delights in the idea of 'us [living] together as though we were married' (124), and Bruce speaks of their 'relax[ing]

into the private persons we essentially desired to be' (137). But Bruce realizes that he cannot both pursue an affair and write about it, as either activity places exhaustive demands on his private life. As his friend Wallace puts it, a choice must be made between 'book or bed' (112). Failure, then, stands as the only available narrative option; the alternative is not to write at all. But in telling his story, Bruce comes perilously close to suggesting that there is, after all, something wrong with staying at home. And indeed, Bruce and Philip's relationship founders when the younger man comes to understand that they are aping normal family life; he feels trapped in a second father-son relationship. In any case, Philip cannot stomach Bruce's circle of friends. They stop socializing; Bruce worries whether their isolation is sustainable. In an especially frank aside he admits suffering 'a certain homesickness for the company of [. . .] members of what I may call without exaggeration our immense league – members who were scattered and for the most part strangers to one another, but who shared a common erotic compulsion [. . .] and who rejoiced in the anonymity of cities' (145). All too easily, then, Courage's novel shows that the homosexual's attachment to bourgeois decorum is weak; Bruce's 'homesickness' suggests an entirely different set of loyalties and habits. Thus the authors of homosexual novels are in a double bind. On the one hand they aim to show how being on the wrong side of the law has a distorting effect on the lives of homosexuals; on the other, they must present the sort of model relationship deserving of decriminalization. But queer domestic relationships cannot properly be made into a public matter; their respectability rests on their taking place behind closed doors. This tension precipitates a kind of narrative distortion, whereby the model relationship comes to be framed within, and ultimately sidelined by, more disreputable narrative modes and social alignments.

Comic turns: seriousness and the homosexual novel

The homosexual novel was not the period's only vehicle for examining queer desire and experience. Gregory Woods declares that the 1950s amounted to 'a virtual festival of queer expression' (1998, 289). Woods is responding to the 'variety and strength' of poetry, plays and novels emerging out of both the US and UK during 'this notorious period' (ibid.), but British fiction alone evinced considerable diversity. One prominent mode was the historical novel, which featured settings ranging from Athens in the time of Socrates (Renault's *The Last of the Wine*, 1956) through to the theatre world of Jacobean England (Bryher's

The Player's Boy, 1953). Usually, these novels focused on rulers whose intimate lives have been associated with homosexuality: the Roman emperor Heliogabalus, Theodosius II of Constantinople, and the English monarchs Richard I and Edward II (see Gunn 2014, 77–9). As such, these novels are, implicitly at least, preoccupied with the relationship between homosexuality and the law, in a manner not dissimilar to those novels with contemporary and less exotic settings. In addition familiar assertions of the blamelessness of sexual orientation recur: In *The Lute Player* (1951), for instance, author Nora Lofts has Richard I declare on his deathbed 'but God makes us, you know, and He did not make me – a lover of women – it was not my choice' (554). Other novels look back to more proximate times and places. Some tell of institutional life: of homosexual experience in the homosocial world of public school before the War (Michael Mayer's *The End of the Corridor*, 1951; G.F. Green's *In the Making*, 1952; Michael Scarrott's *Ambassador of Loss*, 1955) or in the military during and after it (Ernest Frost's *The Dark Peninsula*, 1949; Walter Baxter's *Look Down in Mercy*, 1951; Simon Raven's *The Feathers of Death*, 1959). Others continue a tradition of reflection on the particular legacies, opportunities and dangers afforded to Western homosexuals by Mediterranean locations (Robert Liddell's *Unreal City*, 1952; Francis King's novels *The Dark Glasses*, 1954; *The Firewalkers*, 1956, published under the pseudonym Frank Cauldwell; and *Man on the Rock*, 1957). (See Aldrich 1993)

Conspicuous by their absence from the 1950s publishing scene in Britain, however, are novels primarily focused on lesbian desire and experience. This partly stems from the prominence of queer men relative to women, lesbian or otherwise, in the literary establishment moving into the post-war period. But mostly it has to do with the fact that sexual relations between women were not illegal, meaning that lesbianism was not generally considered a social problem requiring same degree of scrutiny and intervention as male homosexuality. Alice Ferrebe suggests that only later – i.e. in the 1960s – did lesbianism became 'part of the discussion' (2012, 112), although Alison Oram qualifies this widely held presumption with a nuanced account of the ways the popular British press tackled female homosexuality during the 1950s. While the word 'lesbianism' would not appear in newspaper print until 1959 (in the *News of the World*), Oram finds that the press found other formulations for conceptualizing female homosexuality, located typically within the genres of crime and divorce case reporting. If such representations were much less prevalent and prominent than coverage of male homosexuality in the popular press, they also articulated a less 'discrete – boundaried – form of public identity' (2012, 42). An important

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corollary of this is that homosexuality could be conceived to range across female experience, allowing for the disturbing possibility that lesbianism 'might also be found in the heart of the apparently normative family' (41). A weak sense of female homosexuality as a distinct public identity then helps explain the lack of 'lesbian novels' in the 1950s. It is seemingly what shapes Brigid Brophy's *The King of a Rainy Country* (1956), whose female protagonist Susan, rather like Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway, is beset by a recurring epiphanic memory of a homoerotic encounter which cannot be acted upon or even adequately voiced. Patricia Juliana Smith suggests that the novel's 'stratagems [. . .] of silence and unspeakability' (1995, 133) are a reflection of the mores of the period. If lesbian desire and identity remains, as in Woolf's time, unnamed and unnameable, Brophy's response is metafictive. The novel harnesses a variety of narrative modes – the homoerotic girls' school narrative, the romantic quest, even stories taken from opera – and subverts, exhausts and discards them, in order to demonstrate 'their emptiness, purposelessness, and in the case of lesbian desire, perniciousness' (143). The novel concludes optimistically, with two women – the twenty-year-old Susan and the middle-aged Helena – appearing to discreetly acknowledge their covert sexuality to one another. Moreover, the young protagonist evades entrapment in heterosexual wedlock and seems determined to direct for herself her future life course – though noticeably the novel remains unable to represent such a life directly.

It was left to imported American material, such as the 'pulp' romances of Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor and others (some of which were reissued as mass-market paperbacks by British publishers), to render lesbian identity and subculture as a viable and sometimes even attractive possibility (see Murphy 2013). Otherwise lesbian characters made occasional cameo appearances in British middlebrow novels, such as Mary Stewart's *Wildfire at Midnight* (1956). Amy Tooth Murphy's case for the significance of this material is similar to the one Oram makes about lesbian desire in the popular press: 'Much post-war middlebrow fiction, Stewart's included, points to a growing cultural awareness of queerness as an identity position existing in the everyday world, but also reflects cultural anxieties and suspicions about this dangerous "other" that walks among us' (Murphy 2014). Frequently these representations flattered the urbane reader 'with an opportunity to feel part of a knowledgeable and worldly in-crowd' (ibid.). They were, to be sure, exploitative: such characters usually operated as mere plot devices, and rarely if ever were they not punished for or saved from their non-normative sexual relations. More appealing lesbian figures would appear only occasionally – for example, in the shape of Big Jill in Colin MacInnes's 1958 novel *Absolute*

Beginners. However, readers would have to wait till 1960 for the first British novel – in the shape of Shirley Verel's *The Dark Side of Venus* – which put its lesbian characters centre stage and whose fates neither entailed a violent death nor heterosexual marriage.

The Dark Side of Venus has in common with the male homosexual novel a seriousness of purpose. The humourlessness of this literature is a measure of the gravity of the 'problem' at hand; presumably it was understood to be the most effective way of advancing the position of homosexuals, serving, for instance, to counter associations between male homosexuality and frivolity. Publishers rarely missed the opportunity to emphasize the serious and honest manner in which their authors dealt with the subject of homosexuality, and reviewers by and large applauded such an approach. For example, in a review for the *Observer*, Marghanita Laski calls Garland's *The Heart in Exile* 'a sad, serious first novel' which 'cannot fairly be ignored'. She continues: 'its detached picture of barren tragic love and desire [. . .] can arouse no disgust but only a deep pity coupled with a new understanding' (cited in Polchin 2016). The publisher's introduction on the flyleaf of a 1958 reprint by W.H. Allen of *The Heart in Exile* echoes these sentiments: 'this is a serious and moving novel that has already won wide acclaim as an honest treatment of a subject that has excited increasing interest in recent years'. However, a few critics demurred. In his review of the same novel for the *New Statesman*, Walter Allen opines that 'the only possible satisfactory rendering of the subject [of homosexuality] – or of any other perversion – is in terms of comedy' (cited in Polchin 2016). For this reason he found Garland's novel lacking in appeal. Two novels published in the 1950s seem to fulfil Allen's requirement for the comic treatment of homosexuality. Brophy's *The King of a Rainy Country* draws on and manipulates narratives characterized by either a lack, or a humorous excess, of seriousness: the bohemian love affair, the picaresque, the operatic marriage plot. Michael Nelson's *A Room in Chelsea Square*, first published in 1958, lampoons the languid extravagance of a fabulously wealthy circle of queer men on the periphery of London's artistic and literary scene. That the book was initially published anonymously is less a measure of its tackling a controversial subject than of its scurrility: its lascivious protagonists are based, rather obviously, on figures involved with the literary magazine *Horizon*, Cyril Connolly and Peter Watson. Indeed, as Gregory Woods points out, the novel 'deliberately steps aside from the script about the homosexual in society' (Nelson 2014, x). The central characters' homosexuality is never referred to explicitly, even in pejorative terms; there are no pleas for tolerance and understanding. Indeed, the novel's lack of seriousness is precisely what enables

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its author to take homosexuality for granted: as Woods observes, 'there are more important things to worry about – a poorly cooked meal, an ill-chosen tie – than the trivial matter of being queer' (1998, vi). What both Brophy's and Nelson's novels suggest then is how a comedic mode militates against the explicit articulation of homosexuality. Allen's declaration that the only satisfactory way of dealing with homosexuality in literature is through comedy could well be understood to express a desire for silence on the subject. Alternatively, and more optimistically, an insistence on comedy might suggest a refusal to speak of homosexuality only through narrow, sanctioned channels, gesturing towards ways of organizing queerness beyond normative scripts and structures.

Of course, the absence of any explicit queer self-identification in Nelson's novel could be seen as simply a reflection of the complacency of the 'very, very rich' (2014, 3). In any case the novel is something of an anachronism: Nelson wrote the manuscript in the late 1940s and, unsurprisingly, struggled to find a publisher. But one author who wrote throughout the 1950s, Angus Wilson, repeatedly sets the concerns of the homosexual novel to comedic modes. Wilson's first novel, *Hemlock and After*, could well be said to have a serious, didactic import: it works to emphasize both the diversity and fluidity of, respectively, homosexual experience and desire. The novel's protagonist, the middle-aged novelist Bernard Sands, is said to have 'diverge[d] from sexual orthodoxy [...] comparatively recent[ly]'; by contrast, his former lover, the young stage designer Terence Lambert begins an affair with Bernard's daughter Elizabeth. Certainly, there seems little will to call on the deterministic models of psychiatry to rationalize and excuse homosexual desire and behaviour. Psychology is invoked – and then rather nebulously – only in relation to Bernard's wife Ella, who is suffering from the long-term effects of a nervous breakdown. Furthermore, the 'caricatured pansy manner' of the altogether malignant figure of Sherman Winter has nothing to with his psychic constitution, as is often the way with abjectly effeminate homosexual figures in other 1950s novels. Instead, Wilson suggests drolly, it is a mere convenience. Homosexuality, then, is understood less as the consequence of psychology than as a series of habits or, perhaps more, a network of cultural forms. As such it has the potential to influence other social domains; as Ferrebe observes, 'camp' styles of speech are spoken by not only all kinds of homosexual, but by heterosexuals as well, such as Elizabeth (2012, 122). Noticeably, these contrivances draw on other cultural styles; repeatedly, and across various social milieus, an affected Cockney accent seems almost sufficient to establish a speech act as camp. Camp styles, then, are as derivative as they are mobile.

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Thus *Hemlock and After* indicates that comedy – or, at least, a lack of seriousness – derives from cultural cross currents, from the interactions between diverse elements of society. Indeed, Bernard is a figure who repeatedly seeks to 'bridge' different groups. For instance, his frivolity in the company of the young is said to be a consequence of a 'paederastic desire to bridge the years' (54); at a party Bernard is conscious that he 'bridges the gap' between his own ageing 1920s set, on the one hand, and a group of 'golden spivs' on the other, whose occupation of a 'homosexual borderland' so fascinates the writer (102); he also forms a precarious 'alliance' with Eric's brother, a schools inspector, to stave off their mother's oppressive influence over Bernard's lover (83). Bernard understands these interactions to be necessary but difficult, fraught with the potential for social embarrassment – 'payment', he thinks to himself, 'for living in a transition period' (57–8). This is key: *Hemlock and After* is first and foremost a novel about negotiating relationships of patronage – artistic, political and sexual – in the new post-war landscape. Bernard has secured support from the state for a writers' colony to be housed in Vardon Hall, which – pointedly – was formerly the seat of an aristocratic family. The sponsorship, Bernard hopes, will be free from influence – he aims to run it on his own 'liberal anarchistic' principles; what will be provided is the kind of leisure time that had been taken for granted by a pre-war literary culture dominated by the upper classes. Bernard's sexual relationships are noticeably organized along similar lines: he seeks to install his lover Eric in a flat in London so that the young man might enjoy greater autonomy, from both Bernard and Eric's mother. After vacillating, Eric seems to appreciate Bernard's apparently high-minded generosity; by contrast, techniques of seduction deriving from 'a very old-fashioned world' – those which invoke the robust homosocial utopias of Edward Carpenter and the Shropshire Lad, or which make flattering references to high culture – merely bring Eric to tears of laughter. And then there is the matter of homosexuality and the law. As might be expected of a narrative which argues the importance of spaces to facilitate self-direction and freedom of expression, the case for decriminalization is virtually taken as read, and is pronounced almost offhandedly by Elizabeth: 'I'm not medieval [. . .] I'd abolish all those ridiculous laws any day' (57).

Bernard, however, remains doubtful about the ability of both the State and himself to remain neutral in their role as patrons. He is right to be. In a pivotal scene halfway through the novel Bernard witnesses in Leicester Square a man being arrested for importuning. To his horror, watching the arrest stirs in Bernard a feeling of 'sadistic excitement', a 'hunter's thrill'; he comes to realize that a

high-minded liberal humanist such as himself is after all quite 'at home with the wielders of the knout and the rubber truncheon' (109). The consequences are catastrophic: Bernard suffers a heart attack and an evaporation of self-belief. He proves quite incapable of giving an even moderately effective speech during the opening ceremony of Vardon Hall, one which might, crucially, keep on board the disparate, mutually suspicious parties present. Instead his address is an embarrassment of obscurities, portentous references to motive, and slips, including the alarming double entendre 'one can pay too dearly for what one picks up in the Charing Cross Road' (153). The audience erupts into chaos; the project's future, ever contingent on the State's continued good will, is thrown into doubt. This, then, is Bernard's hemlock-taking moment: once the novelist gadfly who prided himself on exposing moral and intellectual complacency, he publically accepts judgement that he is unable to 'exercise proper authority', a refrain he is tormented by for the rest of his days. And again like Socrates, who was additionally found guilty of corrupting the youth of Athens, he understands he cannot be trusted not to exercise a malign influence over the young poets at Vardon Hall, or for that matter, his lover Eric. The 'After' of the novel's title relates to Bernard's painful decline towards death, and the ensuing consequences for those to whom he had responsibilities. Fortunately – thanks largely to the interventions of the newly recovered Ella – a compromise is struck which secures the future of a slightly diminished version of the Vardon Hall project. Provision is also guaranteed for Eric's accommodation – who, like *The King of Rainy Country*'s Susan, seems at the novel's close ready to take advantage of new opportunities, and to have broken free from the more limiting formations of earlier times.

Alan Sinfield argues that Wilson means the scene in Leicester Square to show that there is little scope in the post-war situation for well-meaning but unreliable liberal humanists like Bernard Sands; by implication, 'an impersonal State might be a more secure source of value and fairness' (2000, 86–7). Thus, according to Sinfield, Wilson demonstrates his commitment to a central ideological plank of the post-war settlement, the belief that a series of liberal-democratic reforms could usher in a fairer, more inclusive society overseen by a benign State. Bernard, meanwhile, should not be seen as entirely culpable for his moral failing. Rather, this is a deformation caused by an iniquitous law, whose reform would enable homosexuals to participate productively in public life. Sinfield admits he prefers to regard the Leicester Square incident 'less as a crisis in Bernard's moral conscience than as a still familiar mode of police harassment' (88); I would say, further, that I find it difficult to square Bernard's beholding of State violence with

such an optimistic vision of post-war society. Indeed, scepticism about the State's benign influence pervades the novel. Charles, the civil servant set to take over the running of Vardon Hall, is so overworked that he has little time for the arts (106); Ella and Bernard ensure the imprisonment of the malevolent Mrs Curry, a procuress for paedophiles who had planned to turn Vardon Hall into a roadhouse, but it seems the State will not see fit to keep her away for long; and Eric's new life owes nothing to legal reform and everything to the ministrations of private individuals. Wilson would go on to be a founding member of the Homosexual Law Reform Society in 1958; his first novel, however, suggests his considerable ambivalence about the State's involvement in queer life. Margaret Drabble asserts that Wilson understood himself to occupy 'a moral arena where codes were not fixed. Homosexuals, living outside the law, had to create their own rules.' (1995, 182) For this reason Wilson's preference was for the insouciant Eric over the hypocritical Bernard, whose passing suggests the dawning of a new era. 'It is a liberating book', Drabble declares; 'There is Life after Hemlock' (183). On the other hand, the ascendency of the golden spivs would appear to provide one reason to be cautious as the world shudders on into uncharted moral territory.

It is fitting to conclude this chapter with an ambivalent vision of the future from a novel published early in the decade, just as I began with a text published towards the decade's end which looks back anxiously, and longingly, to queer habits from the past. For it makes little sense to try to coordinate the 1950s homosexual novel with a progressivist history of sexuality. It is true that by the end of the decade a number of queer-themed works of fiction showed a noticeable reorientation away from bourgeois domesticity and toward an urban scene that had been dynamized by Black immigration and the commercial revival of London's West End: consider for instance Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959), Kenneth Martin's *Waiting for the Sky to Fall* (1959) and Andrew Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960). The homosexual novel, then, operated within a narrow historical window; it is a distinctly 1950s formation. For sure, it would not be unreasonable to claim that the homosexual novel was shaped by its time. But its shape is a strange one, conditioned by the shifting and contradictory ways in which homosexuality was conceived. Indeed, what is most remarkable about these narratives is not their common dissidence so much as their internal dissonance. The principal aim of these fictions is to present a model of honourable homosexuality, but this is always overtaken by a fraught search for an appropriate narrative vehicle with which to do so. In this latter respect the homosexual novel always ends in failure, since it relies on, and is

overtaken by, improper narratives. In its quest, though, it takes its readers to some extremely alluring times and places. The 1950s homosexual novel then is indeed a 'queer book': twisted, misshapen – echoing the etymology of the word 'queer' – by its inability to close off multiple disreputable pleasures.

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