

# Queer Love

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Queer theory has had something to say about sex, but until recently it has had almost nothing to say about love.<sup>1</sup> Love has seemed too intimately bound up with institutions and discourses of the “normal,” too deeply embedded in standard narratives of romance, to be available for “queering.” Whereas sex, as queers know very well, is easy to stigmatize (or to celebrate) as kinky, transgressive, or perverse, love is typically represented as lying at the heart of normal life, thoroughly at home in conventional social structures such as marriage and the nuclear family. Indeed, one of love’s most important social functions nowadays is to promote the acceptability of customary forms of personal life by endowing them with affective value and imbuing them with a look and feel of intrinsic normality.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Compare Lauren Berlant: “Queer theory has talked much about sexuality and desire, but when it comes to love, all sorts of havoc doesn’t break out” (Lauren Berlant, “Love, A Queer Feeling,” in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane [Chicago, 2001], p. 437; hereafter abbreviated “L”). Parts of the present essay draw on material created in collaboration with Damon R. Young for a coauthored book project on queer love, and I am grateful to him for permission to use that material; see Damon R. Young, “*The Living End*, or Love without a Future,” in *Queer Love in Film and Television: Critical Essays*, ed. Pamela Demory and Christopher Pullen (New York, 2013), pp. 13–22 (the opening paragraphs of Young’s essay expand on Berlant’s proposition in language that I have borrowed here) and “Queer Love,” in *Gender: Love*, ed. Jennifer C. Nash (New York, 2017), 197–210; see also “Queer Bonds,” a special issue of *GLQ* 17, nos. 2–3 (2011). Other recent contributors to the subject area include Elizabeth Povinelli, Michael Warner, and the many scholars working in the field of early modern and modern friendship studies.

2. Compare Berlant, once again:

Since it is the ligament of patriotism and the family, love defines governmentality in its atomic form, as a mechanism of internal monitoring through which the subject re-

Precisely because love has so often served to consecrate the kinds of social relations that are already approved and admired, it has posed a persistent problem for queers. Queers have not had access to love, either as a representation or as a form of life. Or, rather, they have had access to it only at the expense of their own queerness; love has offered an escape—often desired, sometimes despised—from the abnormality of being queer. Where the happy couple advances, deviance retreats. The recent emergence of same-sex marriage has merely compounded this situation. Marriage may seem to offer queers an entirely legitimate, ready-made vehicle for expressing and formalizing their love, but it does so by denying everything about their love that is queer, and its misplaced talk of “husbands” and “wives” actually highlights the degree to which existing social forms do not fit the specificities of lesbian and gay male love. (Love between men or between women may not be an abomination, but marriage between a wife and a wife or a husband and a husband certainly is, if those words retain any meaning.) Gay marriage makes queer love—love that is socially inapt, that threatens, rejects, ignores, or simply fails to correspond with established forms of social life—all the more marginal, perverse, elusive, and unrepresentable.

In this context, it may be useful to return to some literary works composed, or set, more than half a century ago when lesbian and gay male love was still irredeemably queer—when its identitarian definition as gay as well as its representability as love had yet to become unproblematically presumable. Not that I am nostalgic for the Bad Old Days of homophobia and the closet. Rather, I am interested in exploring the ethical and political work that queer love was once able to do and might be able to do again, if it could be rescued from the self-evidence, the normalizing despecification, of “love is love” and other such slogans of “marriage equality” (a seemingly bland, inoffensive notion with truly sinister, far-reaching implications). Queer love could then be restored to the status of what Arnold Davidson,

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plays desire as a plebiscite on the normal. . . . The installation of romantic love as the fundamental attachment of humans has been central to the normalization of heterosexuality and femininity in consumer culture; it has become a way of expressing desires for normal life . . . , defining the normativity of the modern self much more than “sexuality” as a category does. [“L,” pp. 437–40]

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following Michel Foucault, calls a “counter-conduct.”<sup>3</sup> Once we recover an aliveness, a sensitivity to the queerness of lesbian and gay male love, that is, we can come to see its expressions as forms of tactical resistance to the standardization of emotional life in contemporary society and to the agencies (political and ideological) that attempt to guide, shape, and routinize modern practices of love, intimacy, and personal association. Viewing queer love in this light, as an instance of counter-conduct, and thus as an inchoate ethical or political impulse, allows us to reopen some fundamental questions about the mutual compatibility of social and emotional forms and norms—to ask how well love and society actually go together.

That is the question—the question of the queerness of love—that lesbian and gay male love and friendship posed to Foucault. (By contrast, it is with male love, and with gay male love in particular, that I’ll be concerned throughout the remainder of this essay.) In a well-known 1981 interview, intended to be anonymous, with Jean Le Bitoux and a group of young gay men for *Gai Pied*, the first mass-market gay publication to be sold at newsstands in France, Foucault raised the issue of love and friendship, topics his interviewers had not themselves invited him to address:

As far back as I can remember, wanting boys meant wanting relations with boys. For me that has always been something important. Not necessarily in the form of the couple, but as a question of existence: how is it possible for men to be together? . . . One of the concessions one makes to others is to present homosexuality only in the form of an immediate pleasure, of two young boys meeting in the street, seducing each other with a glance, grabbing each other’s butts and getting off in a quarter of an hour. You have there a kind of tidy image of homosexuality, which loses all potential to upset people, for two reasons: it reflects a reassuring canon of beauty, and it eradicates ev-

3. See Arnold I. Davidson, “In Praise of Counter-Conduct,” *History of the Human Sciences* 24, no. 4 (2011): 25–41, esp. 33–34; hereafter abbreviated “I.” Davidson argues, “The appearance of a type of conduct within the conceptual space of the normal and the pathological often has the effect of weakening the ethical and political force of this conduct. A behavior considered abnormal no longer possesses either an ethical value nor a political efficacy” (p. 34). That is a powerful and important observation, but it benefits from being supplemented by Davidson’s earlier, more conventional point, borrowed from John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, that “uniformity of conduct weakens the possibility of resistance” (p. 32); that is, a behavior considered “normal” also forfeits ethical and political force as a mode of self-fashioning and a practice of freedom. See, further, Daniele Lorenzini, “From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude: Michel Foucault and the Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much,” *Foucault Studies* 21 (June 2016): 7–21.

everything that can be upsetting about affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, comradeship, companionship, which a somewhat sanitized society can't accommodate without fearing the formation of new alliances, the knotting together of unforeseen lines of force. I think that's what makes homosexuality "disturbing": the homosexual way of life, much more than the sexual act itself. Imagining a sexual act that doesn't accord with law or nature, that's not what upsets people. But that some individuals might start to love one another [*que des individus commencent à s'aimer*]*—there's the problem. . . . Institutional regulations can't approve these relations with their multiple intensities, variable colors, imperceptible movements, and changing forms—relations that produce a short circuit and introduce love [l'amour] where there should be law, rule, or habit.*<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the typical public manifestation of youthful gay sexuality—the punctual consummation of momentary desire between young men that is all too easy for straight folks to take in and to shrug off, or so Foucault claims—"what upsets people" is love between individuals of the same sex. Such love, in all its gradations and varieties, is too protean, too subtle, too elusive to be easily socialized; it gives rise to emotions and alliances that are messy, unsystematic, irregular, potentially subversive or disruptive, and in any case hard for our "somewhat sanitized society" to institutionalize and to integrate into its impoverished repertory of routine, accepted social relations.<sup>5</sup>

So far, this all sounds very 1960s. Though Foucault avoids the parlance and rejects the politics of the New Left, some of its ideology seems to have seeped into his general outlook: sex has been subject to repressive de-sublimation; it has been marketed by a late-capitalist economy; it has become the vehicle of a new consumerism, a callow materialism, a cheap escapism. Sex is the latest opiate of the masses. What our highly managed industrial society has no room for, and cannot tolerate, is passion, eroticism, love.

But what makes gay love so queer for Foucault is not only the problem it poses to mainstream society and its bureaucratic institutions. He goes on

4. Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," trans. John Johnston, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1997), pp. 136–37; trans. mod; hereafter abbreviated as "F." For an apt commentary on this passage, see "I," p. 33.

5. See Foucault, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," trans. Brendan Lemon, in *Ethics*, pp. 157–62, where he expands on this theme. See also Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," trans. James O'Higgins, in *Ethics*, pp. 141–56.

to speak of gay male love in that 1981 interview as if it were an unexampled, hitherto uncoded relation, which cannot be fully captured or embodied by existing ways of life and which no existing social institutions can adequately formalize or express. He seems convinced that neither the traditional institutions of kinship, such as marriage and the family, nor the conventional institutions of male homosociality, such as the military, can accommodate or encompass the range of relational possibilities opened up by the “historic occasion” of “homosexuality” (“F,” p. 138).<sup>6</sup> That occasion offers gay people the chance “to try to define and develop a [homosexual] way of life,” which can “give rise to relations of great intensity that do not resemble any of those already institutionalized” (“F,” p. 138; trans. mod.).<sup>7</sup>

Such intense, uncoded relations, along with the novel “homosexual way of life” capable of producing them, represent, as Davidson points out, cardinal examples of what Foucault, in one of his lectures, calls “counter-conduct.” Foucault defines counter-conduct as a “struggle against the procedures implemented [by various authorities] for conducting others” (quoted in “I,” p. 28).<sup>8</sup> Counter-conduct is an effort to resist an imposed uniformity; it is a resolve to govern one’s conduct according to one’s own lights so as to alter one’s relation to oneself and to others. Inasmuch as it is an alternate mode of subjectivation, gay counter-conduct “cannot be reduced to the juridical sphere” or be subsumed by the language of human rights (“I,” p. 33).<sup>9</sup> “The rights that derive from marital and family relations,” Da-

6. Friendship (*amitié*) is the social form that seems to offer Foucault the most capacious possibilities, perhaps because it is vague, unspecific, and undercoded; *friendship* is the word he chooses to categorize what he calls “a relation [between men of different ages] that is still without form” (“F,” p. 136; trans. mod.). See, also, Foucault, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” *Ethics*, pp. 170–71. Elsewhere, Foucault evokes the possibility of formalizing friendships, which had occurred in classical antiquity, and of making tactical use of adoption for giving provisory legal shape to gay partnerships; see Foucault, “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will,” p. 158. Note that in the long passage quoted in the text above, “friendship” is supplemented by a string of near-synonyms: *fidelity*, *camaraderie*, and *companionship* (*compagnonnage*). And even “friendship” does not wholly capture the full extent of these “love” relations, which Foucault can describe only through a string of metaphors: intensities, colors, movements, and changing forms.

7. See also Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” p. 153; the passage is quoted in note 10, below. On Foucault’s notion of “a homosexual way of life,” see Davidson, “Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought,” in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. Jan Goldstein (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), pp. 63–80, 266–71, esp. 71–73.

8. The lecture of Foucault’s in which the term *counter-conduct* appears is his Collège de France lecture of 1 March 1978; see Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, 2007), p. 201.

9. On counter-conduct as an alternate mode of subjectivation, see Lorenzini, “From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude,” pp. 16–19.

vidson explains, “are a way of stabilizing, rendering stationary, certain forms of conduct; as Foucault says, extending these rights to other persons is but a first step, since ‘if one asks people to reproduce marriage bonds in order for their personal relation to be recognized, the progress realized is slight’” (“I,” p. 33).<sup>10</sup> Queer life and queer love entail new modes of conduct; if they are required to replicate heterosexual styles of life in order to achieve some modicum of legitimacy, they cannot realize their full creative or practical potential, which is to respond in all specificity to Foucault’s “question of existence: how is it possible for men to be together?” There is nothing rhetorical or theoretical about that question. It is the product of a strenuous, hard-won naïveté, a radical skepticism about the availability to gay men of ready or routine relational formulas sufficient to guide their conduct. Foucault asks it because he genuinely wants to know the answer, and he makes no assumptions about what that answer will look like. He takes nothing for granted about the possible forms of male togetherness.

Foucault is interested in the practice, not just in the principle, of love.<sup>11</sup> And he is convinced that the emerging gay movement has confronted gay men with a new question of relationality that is not only fundamental and urgent but concrete and pragmatic; how in particular is it possible, he goes on to ask, altering and expanding his terms, “for men . . . to live together, to share their time, their meals, their living quarters, their leisure activities, their sorrows, their knowledge, their confidences? What is this thing, to be among men—‘stripped bare,’ outside of institutionalized social relations, family, profession, obligatory comradeship?” (“F,” p. 136; trans. mod.).

Taking this line of interrogation further, Foucault points out that there exist no readily available social forms that can serve to mediate differences between men in terms of age, class, profession, social status, and (we might

10. Here Davidson is quoting and emending Foucault, “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will,” p. 158. Davidson goes on to remark: “We have all heard the ‘progressive’ sentiments of those liberals who announce that they are not opposed to gay marriage as long ‘as they behave like married couples.’ It is precisely the threat of counter-conduct, and not the legal status, that is most disruptive and unsettling” (“I,” p. 34). Foucault also speaks of the “common fear that gays will develop relationships that are intense and satisfying even though they do not at all conform to the ideas of relationship held by others” (Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” p. 153).

11. My language here anticipates—because Foucault himself anticipates—one of the themes of the first literary text I’ll go on to discuss: Neil Bartlett’s *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1990; New York, 2017), whose narrator, addressing his presumptively gay male audience, says, “You want to know what happens next to these two. You recognise that what really matters is what happens when two people try to hold things together. You do not believe that love is enough, and you think that what happens after love (if you see what I mean), the practice and not just the principle of love, that is what matters. That is what you want to know how to do” (p. 310).

add) race or religion or nationality. The mainstream social institutions of gender and heterosexuality, such as marriage, are designed to mediate disparities between men and women in terms of age, sex, and social power, creating separate but complementary roles for each (such as *husband* and *wife*) that provide conventional, tried-and-true ways for them to relate across axes of social difference. But men who belong to different social categories, says Foucault, cannot avail themselves of any existing “rule” or “code,” not even any “conventional phrases,” that would secure their ability to communicate, to understand, and to relate to each other; they don’t have “anything to stabilize the meaning of the movement which takes them one toward the other. They have to invent from A to Z a relation that is still without form” (“F,” p. 136; trans. mod.). That is one of the many reasons why gay men need to develop a homosexual “way of life,” according to Foucault: such a way of life can provide men of different backgrounds with a common practice, something they can share, and help give shape to a relation without model or precedent. In fact, the task facing gay men is nothing less than a kind of “homosexual asceticism,” as Foucault calls it, “that would get us to work on ourselves and invent (I don’t say discover [for there is no form of life already in existence that will serve the purpose]) a manner of being that is still improbable” (“F,” p. 137; trans. mod.).<sup>12</sup>

In an earlier, unedited conversation with Le Bitoux, recorded in 1978 but not published in its entirety until a dozen years after Foucault’s death, and translated into English only in 2011, Foucault similarly presents gay male love as an implicit experiment in counter-conduct.

Pleasures are tolerated. . . . But happiness? . . . I believe that two homosexuals, no, two boys who are seen leaving together to go sleep in the same bed are tolerated. But if they wake up the next morning with a smile on their faces, if they hold hands and kiss each other tenderly and thereby affirm their happiness, then no one will forgive them. What’s unbearable is not leaving in search of pleasure but waking up happy.<sup>13</sup>

It is not the idea of gay sex that challenges straight culture, Foucault insists once again, but what happens “the next morning”—what, if anything, fol-

12. See, further, Davidson, “Ethics as Ascetics,” pp. 72–73, and David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York, 1995), pp. 78–79.

13. Foucault, “The Gay Science,” trans. Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011): 393. On the circumstances surrounding the origins of this interview and its subsequent fate, see Halperin, “Michel Foucault, Jean Le Bitoux, and the Gay Science Lost and Found: An Introduction,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011): 371–80.

lows from sex.<sup>14</sup> What is hard to imagine, what is indeed “unbearable” for straight society to contemplate, is not two “boys” having sex or even spending the night together, but *le réveil heureux*. It is the possibility that gay sex might lead to a shared happiness, to an evident, demonstrable tenderness, to a public, visible queer togetherness, and perhaps to a new, hitherto unexampled form of social relation (call it friendship or affection or companionship or what you like); that is, a different mode of conduct.

It is for these reasons that Foucault is interested, across a series of interviews at the turn of the 1980s, in how gay men might construct new forms of existence—queer forms of existence—adequate to their relations. To give form to their love, they have to create something that begins to become imaginable at a certain historical moment but which doesn’t yet exist. As Foucault explains, “it is a matter—I don’t say of ‘rediscovering’—but rather of inventing other forms of pleasures, of relationships, coexistences, attachments, loves, intensities.”<sup>15</sup>

An eloquent testimony to the need and the difficulty of giving form to gay male love specifically, and of inventing unexampled modes of queer conduct and relationality that would be adequate to it, appears in the opening pages of Neil Bartlett’s *Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall*. That experimental piece of writing (it is actually misleading to label it a novel), composed between 1986 and 1990, is an effort to imagine a gay male equivalent of marriage. Like Foucault, Bartlett assumes from the outset that marriage—normal, ordinary, heterosexual marriage—could not possibly be an option for gay men, not only because it was not legally accessible when he was writing, but also because it did not constitute a gay social form, let

14. In a series of essays, Leo Bersani has argued strenuously against what he calls Foucault’s “desexualizing of homophobia” (Leo Bersani, “The Gay Daddy,” *Homos* [Cambridge, Mass., 1996], p. 77). Like Guy Hocquenghem before him, Bersani proposes that “homophobia may be the vicious expression of a more or less hidden fantasy of males participating, principally through anal sex, in what is presumed to be the terrifying phenomenon of female sexuality” (p. 78); to pretend otherwise is disingenuous and politically naïve. But if Foucault’s purpose was to downplay the sexual fantasmatics of homophobia in favor of a political analysis of gay counter-conduct—of the way that the new forms of relations pioneered by gay men posed an ethical and political challenge to the relational monopolies held by heterosexual society—that is not because he was oblivious to the scandal of nonnormative sex but because he was interested in something else, something more concrete and more opened: namely, what those two boys might do together the next morning when they woke up “in the same bed,” after (maybe) having sex of some kind or other, and the consequences of their ensuing conduct.

15. Foucault, “Power and Sex,” trans. David J. Parent, in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, trans. Parent et al., ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York, 1988), p. 116.



alone an institution endowed with the necessary formal resources to mediate relations “among men” and to enable “men to be together.” Since marriage nonetheless remained a horizon of gay male aspiration for coupled love—how could it not, since it is the dominant, canonical social form for institutionalizing romantic love in the society which gay men inhabit?—gay male culture needs to invent a queer equivalent to marriage, a queer social form that corresponds to marriage, and a homosexual way of life that conduces to the practice, not just the principle, of gay male love. Such a queer social form, Bartlett allows, might end up being materialized in such a way as to be almost unrecognizable as marriage. But unless it turned out to be so different from marriage—so queer—as to be almost unrecognizable, it would not likely constitute an adequate social form for expressing and institutionalizing something so different from heterosexual romance as gay male love.<sup>16</sup>

At the beginning of Bartlett’s narrative, which seems to be set sometime in the early 1980s, a character referred to only by the generic title of Boy is approaching the gay bar, called The Bar, where he will eventually meet the Older Man with whom he will be joined in love and life—by means of a collective social ritual corresponding in some metaphorical way to marriage. Before he reaches The Bar, Boy stops in front of a shop window displaying a variety of newspapers and magazines and finds his eye drawn to a single publication, the only one of its kind in the shop. The ensuing passage is worth quoting in full.

In the top right-hand corner of the window was a single magazine whose cover displayed a naked man instead of a naked woman or a smiling mother. Boy stood outside the window and imagined the things he might see inside the magazine, should he ever take it down off the high shelf and open it, perhaps in the privacy of his room or perhaps right there on the street at five o’clock. He imagined small, cheaply staged pictures of sexual tortures involving ropes and wires—the kind of things which Boy had not yet done. He imagined a full-page, black and white photo of two bare-chested men (their chests

16. Compare Foucault:

I think, of course, that to use the model of family life, or the institutions of the family, for this purpose and this kind of friendship would be quite contradictory. But it is quite true that since some of the relationships in society are protected forms of family life, an effect of this is that the variations which are not protected are, at the same time, often much richer, more interesting and creative than the others. But, of course, they are much more fragile and vulnerable. The question of what kinds of institutions we need to create is an important and crucial issue, but one that I cannot give an answer to. [Foucault, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” pp. 171–72]

shaved), photographed in daylight, walking down the street, gazing squarely at the camera, holding hands, one of them holding an Alsatian straining at a leather leash. He also imagined men photographed in colour, sprawled alone or holding each other, doing extraordinary things but in ordinary rooms, living rooms; doing things on sofas, on sheepskin rugs, stretched across a coffee table. He imagined the personal messages which appear in the back pages (usually on cheaper paper, and often coloured a dull pale yellow or pink) of such magazines, and he imagined writing replies to these messages, imagined exactly what he would say, even imagined meeting some of these men. And then (as he stood and stared through the window at the magazine) Boy imagined sleeping with these men, actually sleeping, sharing a bed with them for the night. And then Boy could imagine having a cup of coffee with them in the morning, but he couldn't imagine anything else after that.<sup>17</sup>

Boy, being a boy, is obviously inexperienced, but he is not unsophisticated, and he has a very active imagination. He can imagine the details of a sadomasochistic sexual scene that he has never engaged in himself, along with other "extraordinary" erotic possibilities. So it is not his lack of experience alone that prevents him from imagining what two men might do together "in the morning" after waking up in the same bed—besides having a cup of coffee. Like Foucault, Boy can imagine hooking up with a man; he can imagine going home with a man; he can imagine sharing a bed with a man and sleeping in it with a man throughout the night; he can even imagine waking up happy with a man; and he can imagine men who have slept together holding hands in public. But, also like Foucault, Boy cannot imagine the form that a relation to a man might take. He has no notion of what happens next—after sex, and after breakfast. The relation he is trying to imagine remains, as Foucault says, "a relation that is still without form."

The experimental aim of Bartlett's narrative is to imagine, and to give social and poetic form to, such a queer relation. It evokes, in abundant detail, and thereby attempts to constitute fictitiously, a specific instance of queer counter-conduct: the wildly divergent practice of gay male love and conjugality. Because the terms in which Bartlett couches this imaginative experiment are irreducibly concrete—the passage from the novel just quoted is a good example of his method—the text defies paraphrase or summary. It requires, rather, extensive quotation and commentary, of the kind I have just provided. I will have to reserve further detailed exegesis for another occasion.

17. Bartlett, *Ready To Catch Him Should He Fall*, p. 12.

Instead, I want to turn to two poems from the late 1950s and early 1960s by queer poets who also confront the problem of imagining and representing a love that seems to resist specification or description but who take a different approach to the problem of its unsayability. Rather than gesture to the unknowability of what two men might do together “in the morning,” after breakfast, they evoke the ineffability, the essential queerness, of love itself.<sup>18</sup> The challenge for both poets is not only how to communicate to a mainstream public their own experience of love, at a time when gay male love was irredeemably queer, and therefore barred from respectable representation, but also how to give expression to a love so uncategorizable that it exhibits no known form and assumes no available representational shape. Writing in a time period just before the “historic occasion” of “homosexuality,” neither poet can attempt the ambitious project that Foucault, Bartlett, and other gay men of that later era took up—namely, to “invent . . . a manner of being that is still improbable” and to construct “other forms of pleasures, of relationships, coexistences, attachments, loves, intensities.” But they both, in their different ways, try to prepare the ground for that positive construction by clearing it of existing encumbrances, a negative, apophatic procedure that consists in denying all correspondence between their loves and any existing social or emotional forms in the world of their own day.

Both poets rely on an elaborate narrative figure to convey feelings that, in addition to being inadmissible in polite society, seem to be elusive—to be indefinable by their very nature. By that means, the two poets are able to gesture to emotional and relational possibilities that they do not identify. Such a metaphorical stratagem might appear to be evasive, and it surely is, but it also turns out to be, in their hands, the most rigorously precise method for articulating the unnameable feelings they experience. Both of the poems, interestingly enough, are sonnets—or, rather, they are altered, queer versions of sonnets—as if their authors had tried to compensate, by displaying their mastery of the most traditional, demanding lyric form, for the formlessness and inexpressibility of the love that provides their subject matter.<sup>19</sup>

18. For a related demonstration of the queerness of love itself, see Halperin, “What Is Sex For?” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Autumn 2016): 1–31. What makes love itself queer, as I understand it, is something uncomfortably close to the feature of love that fails to establish its queerness for Berlant: “To my mind, love is queered not when we discover it to be resistant to or more than all its known forms, but when we see that there is no world that admits how it actually works as a principle of living” (“L,” p. 443).

19. Linda Gregerson, speaking of William Meredith (the second of the poets I consider here), observes that the sonnet, as he employs it, becomes “an instrument for testing . . . the ineffable against the longing-for-shapeliness we know as ‘argument,’” and she goes on to sur-

I begin with Robert Hayden's well-known and justly celebrated poem, "Those Winter Sundays," first published (in a slightly different version) in 1962.<sup>20</sup> Hayden was a married man, and a father, but he also acknowledged experiencing, much to his shame, desire for men.<sup>21</sup> He was raised by adoptive parents in Paradise Valley, an impoverished African American neighborhood of Detroit, and the following poem "comes directly out of my boyhood" in that city, as he once said before reading it aloud.<sup>22</sup> The understanding of love it distills, however, is the fruit of his maturity.

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

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vey his many different uses of the sonnet (Linda Gregerson, review of *Partial Accounts: New and Selected Poems* by William Meredith, *Poetry* 151 [Feb. 1988]: 423).

20. The original text of the poem had an additional line and therefore different line-breaks, along with a more regular meter:

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking,  
and smell the iron and velvet bloom of heat.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress, fearing

the chronic angers of that house, speaking  
indifferently to him, who'd driven out  
the cold and polished my  
good shoes as well. What did I know,  
what did I know of love's austere and lonely offices?

[Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays," *A Ballad of Remembrance* (London, 1962), p. 29]

21. See Pontheolla T. Williams, *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry* (Chicago, 1987), pp. 172–73, and James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930–1946* (New York, 1999), pp. 188, 249 n 13.

22. See Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays," audio recording, [www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/core-poems/detail/46461](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/core-poems/detail/46461)

Speaking indifferently to him,  
 who had driven out the cold  
 and polished my good shoes as well.  
 What did I know, what did I know  
 of love's austere and lonely offices?<sup>23</sup>

The one feature of this rich and much-commented text that I want to single out is, paradoxically, its association of love with poverty. Poverty here is at once theme and figure. Its literal denotations are clear enough: the poet's boyhood house has no central heating; his father is a manual laborer, whose hands are cracked and aching from strenuous physical work, outdoors, six days a week, starting at an early hour. The father is also poor in words; he has none with which to express his love in a language that his son could not mistake. To compensate for his linguistic poverty, he expresses his love through benevolent action and patient devotion. He is a forbidding figure and his love is poorly rewarded: the home is a place of domestic conflict and "chronic angers,"<sup>24</sup> and "no one ever thanked him" for his dutiful, unflinching, silent fulfillment of "love's . . . offices," his spousal and fatherly responsibilities. Nor does the poor man seek or expect recognition, return, or appreciation, even from his son, who benefits from his having "driven out the cold" by waiting until "the rooms were warm" to "rise and dress," yet speaks to his father "indifferently." Love's poverty in this poem is not only material, then, but also expressive, on all sides.

Most important for our purposes, the childhood anecdote that takes up the bulk of the poem turns out to be a trope for the poet's own erotic destitution and incapacity, his mature experience of the lonely, thankless, and inexpressible nature of love, whether romantic or parental. That experience is left undescribed—like his father, Hayden has no words for it—and consigned to silence. We might say it remains strategically unspecified. In any case, Hayden withholds it from the reader, partly out of discretion, or modesty, or shame, or propriety, but partly also out of its apparent inaptitude for representation. The only way to convey it that the poet knows is figural and indirect: it is through an image, a metaphor, consisting of the nar-

23. Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays," *Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York, 2013), p. 41.

24. Additional details about Hayden's violent home life and abusive upbringing, sometimes at the hands of his adoptive mother, appear in other poems, such as "The Whipping" (which immediately precedes "Those Winter Sundays" in Hayden's 1962 collection *A Ballad of Remembrance*), and in his interviews; see, in particular, Hayden, "An Interview with Dennis Gendron," in Hayden et al., *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Laurence Goldstein and Robert Chrisman (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2001), pp. 15–29, esp. p. 27.

rative vignette that occupies the body of the poem and relates a memory of the distant past—a memory in which, tellingly, the poet himself does not appear as a subject of erotic desire. The vignette itself refuses allegory; it is not exemplary or paradigmatic but irreducibly specific and fully, immersively concrete—anchored in the material details of cracked hands, banked fires, splintering cold, warm rooms, and good shoes. It is the thing itself, an embodied lesson in love. Nonetheless, as a lesson from the past, which belatedly teaches the poet what love is, the anecdote functions as a metaphor, as a figure for love as the poet has come to know it in the present. By means of that device, Hayden keeps his own experience of love at one remove from the reader; he presents it to us as a secondary formation, as a replica or echo of his father's love. And even the ground of their similitude remains obscure, insofar as it consists of generalities—universal features of the human condition—named by a couple of abstract, almost impersonal adjectives (“austere,” “lonely”) and culminating in that fancy but sexless word “offices,” whose very stiffness and formality put it at a great distance from anything resembling passion.<sup>25</sup>

There is a triumphal air about that final word, that precious, Latinate, show-offy word, with its rich Ciceronian and ecclesiastical associations, both of which the poet draws on here (it is Sunday, his good shoes have been polished, his dutiful father will be taking the family to church). The word, at once resonant and precise, is proof of accomplishment; it indicates just how far the poet himself has come from the impoverished, inarticulate conditions of his childhood home, where mute actions did all the talking. At the same time, the very mastery of language that Hayden demonstrates contributes to the pathos of the poem, since the poet's hard-won eloquence avails him nothing, apparently, in his effort to express his own adult experience of love. It has certainly not made him happier in love than his father, whose aching, thankless labors went perpetually unrecognized and unappreciated, and with whom Hayden now shares the pangs of inarticulacy.

Despite its beauty and eloquence, and despite its success in offering a memorably concrete account of love as an embodied performance, the poem both evokes and enacts the failure of language. The clearest example is the

25. In his 1974 interview with Dennis Gendron, Hayden talks about his use of “fancy-pants big words” in “Witch Doctor,” a flamboyant poem about the flamboyant cult leader Prophet Jones—a lexical choice for which, he says, LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) once criticized him (*ibid.*, p. 21). “Witch Doctor” was originally published in 1962 in Hayden's *A Ballad of Remembrance*. On Prophet Jones, see Tim Retzlaff, “‘Seer or Queer?’ Postwar Fascination with Detroit's Prophet Jones,” *GLQ* 8, no. 3 (2002): 271–96.

rueful repetition of the concluding question. After asking, “What did I know?” a first time, it is as if the poet can find nothing further to say about the nature of love, as if he throws up his hands at his inability to add anything new or informative to what he has just said and can only repeat his question a second time—in wonderment, frustration, and defeat.

The whole point of the poem is to register the speaker’s belated appreciation of his father, to acknowledge—too late—that what his father silently offered him, sacrificially, on all those winter Sundays, those many, many winter Sundays throughout his childhood, was indeed love, what he now recognizes as love. But his appreciation extends beyond that acknowledgment to an admission of finding himself, in the end, at one with his father in the latter’s inability to express that love. His father, he now realizes, knew something about the impossibility of conveying his love to its haughty and indifferent object. Not only does the poet belatedly recognize in his father’s expressive defeat the truth that there is no such thing as an erotic relation—that love is something one does by oneself, that it is a practice so lonely and thankless as to merit the appellation *austere*—but he also unlearns his early sense of linguistic and cultural superiority to his father, with whom he shares, finally, the loneliness of the man who has no language adequate to convey to his love object or to his readers the love he feels in a literal, unmediated form that can succeed in achieving recognition and response. We know *that* the poet now knows rather a good deal about “love’s austere and lonely offices,” but beyond that we don’t know *what* he knows: what he has felt, for whom he has felt it, how exactly his feelings have been received. We just know he is unable to say more about it, to put his love into words, to express it *in propria persona*. He may be more articulate than his father but not enough to seek to tell his love. It remains beyond his power to give it voice. Perhaps it has no representational form. Perhaps it looks nothing like what we would recognize as love. In any case, he keeps it to himself.<sup>26</sup>

William Meredith’s “The Illiterate,” published four years earlier in 1958, offers a much less melancholy vision of queer love than “Those Winter Sundays.” But it is an even more radical celebration of the aesthetics of impoverishment.

26. Hayden uses a similar device of metaphorical indirection in the later and far more explicit poem of erotic shame and longing, “The Tattooed Man”: see Williams, *Robert Hayden*, pp. 172–74. For a complementary account of that poem, emphasizing its nonerotic dimensions, see Simon Gikandi, “Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 40 (Spring 2001): 318–50, esp. 319–21.

Touching your goodness, I am like a man  
 Who turns a letter over in his hand  
 And you might think this was because the hand  
 Was unfamiliar but, truth is, the man  
 Has never had a letter from anyone;  
 And now he is both afraid of what it means  
 And ashamed because he has no other means  
 To find out what it says than to ask someone.

His uncle could have left the farm to him,  
 Or his parents died before he sent them word,  
 Or the dark girl changed and want him for beloved.  
 Afraid and letter-proud, he keeps it with him.  
 What would you call his feeling for the words  
 That keep him rich and orphaned and beloved?<sup>27</sup>

Let's begin with what we, as readers, know about the erotic situation that provides the occasion for the poem. All our information about it comes from the first three words; the words that follow after them serve to launch the epic simile that takes up the remainder of the poem—and that attempts to convey what it is the speaker feels upon, as he says, “touching your goodness.” Those opening words, conjoining as they do an action and an abstraction, give rise to a deliberate unclarity; they force the reader to wonder about the nature of the contact between the speaker and the addressee and to speculate about what exactly it involves, even as they withhold the information necessary to clear up the mystery. The words denote, paradoxically, a sensual encounter with an immaterial quality; touch, after all, is one of the five senses, but goodness is a value, which is not immediately accessible to touch. The reader is left uncertain whether to solve the problem by dematerializing the word “touching,” turning it into a term of reference—so that the opening phrase now signifies “with respect to your goodness”—or by corporealizing “goodness,” such that it stands in for the beauty of the beloved's body or for his kind willingness to make himself physically available to the speaker, becoming something that can be touched. What does seem to be clear is that the poem emerges from the speaker's timid confrontation with the aura of marvelousness that the person he addresses radiates to him, from an experience of erotic ravishment produced by a tantalizing proximity to perfection.

27. William Meredith, “The Illiterate,” *The Open Sea and Other Poems* (New York, 1966), p. 10. The poem is reprinted without alteration in his later collections.



Much remains obscure, however. We don't know whether this touching takes place in the context of a long-term relationship between the speaker and (let us assume) the man who is addressed in the second person (and whose gender thus remains strategically unspecified) or whether it occurs simply in the course of a fleeting encounter. We don't know whether the love object's goodness is moral or physical. Although the speaker's comparison of himself in the following line to an illiterate man who manipulates "a letter . . . in his hand" would seem to guarantee a physical meaning for his own act of "touching," his failure to specify a physical object of his touch allows us to interpret his action metaphorically, as if he were merely *encountering* the impressive qualities of the addressee. This ambiguity spares the squeamish reader from having to picture the speaker's erotic be-dazzlement at the glories of the love object's body or the grotesque particularities of a sexual touching.

We can infer that the speaker's attitude is one of appreciation and admiration for what he judges to be the love object's positive qualities. We can also infer from his choice of words that the speaker does not possess the love object: his relation to that object is limited, for the moment, to merely touching its goodness—a tentative, exploratory relation. Nonetheless, the speaker has at least gained access to that goodness, a valuable privilege, and the remainder of the poem appears to register his gratitude for the opportunity and, no doubt, the permission to touch it. That permission, however, seems to be the extent of the love object's concession to the speaker's desire, for now; whether the speaker's exploration of the love object's goodness will go further or will be strictly limited to that one touch, we do not know. What we do know is that the speaker experiences a nearly indescribable amazement at the precious opportunity that he has been given.

The rest of the poem attempts to convey what "touching your goodness" feels like to the speaker by likening him to a poor illiterate straight man, unlucky in love and rejected by the "dark girl" he desires, who receives a letter he can't read from a sender he can't identify. Meredith is more allegorical than Hayden: his narrative metaphor aspires to the status of an exemplary, representative anecdote and, by fading into myth, loses some of the concreteness that so distinguishes Hayden's narrative. Like Hayden, however, Meredith treats poverty as both theme and figure. The illiterate is alone and erotically destitute. He comes from a world—a rural background apparently, or perhaps a more deprived one—in which people do not write or receive letters. At any rate, he "has never had a letter from anyone." No wonder he seems to have lost track of his parents; he doesn't know whether they are alive or dead. His dignity hangs by so slender a thread that the mere admission of illiteracy would be an intolerable affront to it. So he

refuses to ask anyone for help deciphering the letter, yet “keeps it with him” as an unexpected and unexampled windfall, a kind of private treasure.

His feeling for its words is unfathomable. Even the poet, who has likened himself to the illiterate man, cannot say exactly what that feeling is. He asks the addressee for help in naming it. He also outlines the conditions that any answer to his question must meet; it has to identify the feeling produced by the mingled sensation of being, all at once, “rich and orphaned and beloved.” Quite a challenge. Is there such a singular feeling? Does it have a name? What would you call it? That question—so generously, disarmingly posed, so open-ended and full of mystery—recalls the painful question with which Hayden similarly ends his sonnet; it is surely no accident that both poets choose to leave us with a conundrum of their own devising and to invite us to enter into it with them.

Like “Those Winter Sundays,” then, “The Illiterate” both evokes and stages the poverty of expression. The poem’s own language is pared down, stripped of all embellishment, and abjectly descriptive. The speaker’s explanations stick to plain matters of fact. His suave love object may not be able to imagine a world in which people cannot read: “you might think,” the speaker supposes, addressing him, that the illiterate keeps turning the letter over in his hand in utter perplexity for some other reason—say, the handwriting is unfamiliar. It is as if the speaker, aware of his love object’s privileged lack of exposure to a world so desperately poor in resources, anticipates his bafflement at the spectacle of illiteracy, his utter incomprehension of it, and, in a tentative effort to convey the basic realities to him, offers a meek corrective to his ignorance, couched in words so simple as to be within everyone’s reach: “truth is, the man has never had a letter from anyone.”

Although we know nothing about the speaker’s own social class, his identification with the poor illiterate rejected straight man expresses his sense of impoverishment and lack before the goodness of his love object. He conveys his disempowerment not only through the pathetic matter-of-factness of his language and the humility with which he ventures to put forward his explanations to his love object but also through the formal device of the poem’s rhyme scheme, its use of *rimes riches*, which forsakes any claim to linguistic competence so ambitious as to rise to the mastery of English rhyme that the poem’s Petrarchan sonnet form requires; the poet settles instead for repeating the same end words, as if Meredith does not know what could possibly rhyme with “man” or “hand.” As the poet and critic Linda Gregerson says, in a fine appreciation of this poem on which I rely for my understanding of it, “identical rhyme, especially in English, is generally looked down upon as a species of impoverishment, as though

the poet were confessing, 'I couldn't come up with anything else, so I've used the same word over again.'"<sup>28</sup>

Meredith's confession of linguistic failure is of course doubled and undercut by his technical prowess. As Gregerson points out, the tradition of *rime riche* privileges "the form of sonic-repetition-with-semantic-difference" in which identical end words turn out, on closer inspection, to be not the same words but mere homonyms with different meanings ("R," p. 175). Thus, in "The Illiterate" the first "hand" refers to a part of the human anatomy, the second to a distinctive script; the first "means" is a verb that is a synonym for *signify*, whereas the second is a noun that is a synonym for *method* or *device*. Meredith is careful, however, not to insist on his cleverness; the poem's other end words are flatly repetitive. Identical rhyme allows Meredith to vouch for his own linguistic skill without resorting to elaborate diction; he can demonstrate his superior literary accomplishment without deploying such fancy vocabulary as Hayden's "offices." By means of such lexical abstinence, he performs as well as promotes an aesthetics of impoverishment.

As Meredith's homosexuality, once deeply "underground" (as he put it in 1983), became more public, as "The Illiterate"—reprinted in his later collections—became a prominent example of his art, and as the poem got taken up by gay readers and interpreted in terms of the poet's gay identity, it came to represent an expression of the shame and fear of homosexual desire, especially on the part of gay men in the United States in the Bad Old Days of the 1950s.<sup>29</sup> Illiteracy, so this reading goes, functions in the poem as an allegory for homosexuality, of which the speaker's imaginary stand-in is "both afraid . . . And ashamed," and which he seeks to hide from everyone, even at the cost of forfeiting his only chance to decipher the meaning of the letter. He is so panicked at the thought of admitting his illiteracy that he renounces all hope of acceding to the message he has been sent. In other words, the poem is a cautionary lesson in the psychological damage inflicted by the closet; it dramatizes the costs of secrecy, which prevents the speaker from receiving a vital communication from another and requires him to

28. Gregerson, "Rhetorical Contract in the Lyric Poem," *Kenyon Review* 28 (Spring 2006): 176; hereafter abbreviated "R." Gregerson adds, "these selfsame iterations insist upon the material, the iconic status of words, the status words must occupy for one [that is, the illiterate, like the poet] to whom they do not habitually yield . . . [or] disappear into easy instrumentality" but rather retain their "aura . . . [and] gather into themselves a remarkable conjunction of powers and possibilities" (p. 176).

29. Meredith, "William Meredith, The Art of Poetry, No. 34," interview with Edward Hirsch, *The Paris Review* 95 (Spring 1985): 56. The interview took place in 1983.

withhold any overt expression or acknowledgment of his romantic feelings, for fear of revealing his identity to others or even to himself. It is a classic instance of the avoidance of love—*Brokeback Mountain* all over again.<sup>30</sup>

While allowing that “‘The Illiterate’ takes cover in obliquity,” inasmuch as it was “written in an era that was not so frank about homoerotic address,” Gregerson proposes an interpretation that frees the poem from such a narrowly identitarian and allegorical reading (“R,” p. 175).

The last lines of the poem are spoken in the form of a question. When we speak in casual conversation about a “rhetorical question,” we too often mean a dead question, a place holder, one whose answer is self-evident and whose purpose is at best to extract agreement from a silenced opposition. But that is to forget the full social contract that “rhetoric” always represents, the subtle play of power and consent, suggestion and reciprocity. I and successive generations of my students have spent many hours considering what the answer to the poet’s question at the close of “The Illiterate” might be, and the only satisfactory answer we have ever been able to imagine is also the simplest: I call that feeling *love*. And see with what exquisite tact the poet has performed the ceremony of reciprocal declaration: speaking/not speaking the word himself, he has caused it to be spoken (if only silently) by the other, by the *you*, by the partner in feeling and discourse, by the one whose goodness has prompted the poem in the first place and now, in the act of reading, confirms it. [“R,” pp. 176–77]<sup>31</sup>

In short, “The Illiterate” is a delicate, tactful, indirect, appropriately cautious and guarded declaration of “I love you,” whose actual speaking is farmed out to the love object on the condition that he recognize as love, instead of repulsing as sickness, what the speaker feels for him.

30. See, for example, redfemmegrll, “Illiteracy and Intimacy: A Review of William Meredith’s ‘The Illiterate,’” redfemmegrll.wordpress.com/2012/06/21/illiteracy-and-intimacy-a-review-of-william-merediths-the-illiterate/. A more nuanced account of the poem’s gay thematics is provided by Stephen Burt and David Mikics, *The Art of the Sonnet* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), p. 300, who see illiteracy as a figure for a closeted gay man’s uncertain ability to read the signs of interest, reciprocity, or love being shown to him by the man he desires—signs which the desired man may be giving out or that the man who desires him may merely be imagining. On the difference between knowing and acknowledging, see generally Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*” (1969), in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York, 2002), pp. 267–353. My reference to *Brokeback Mountain* alludes to Ang Lee’s 2005 film, which is a psychological parable of the closet, not to Annie Proulx’s 1997 short story of the same title, which is a study in social terror.

31. Compare and contrast: “The rhetorical question at the end is more for Meredith than the reader; he might feel confused about his sexuality, but he knows the word he is referring to is ‘gay’” (Jackie White, “The Illiterate,” Prezi, prezi.com/sxuhvmdolm6z/the-illiterate/).

Gregerson's admirable reading is subtle, appealing, tactful in its turn, and moving as well as compelling. Nonetheless, in offering an answer to the speaker's question—which he addresses, she reminds us, not to the reader but to the love object—and in identifying the illiterate man's "feeling for the words," his relation to writing, as love, as what we already know and recognize as love, she provides a solution to the final enigma of the poem that is both more specific and more ordinary, more generic, than the poem itself seems to invite.<sup>32</sup> Though her reading makes sense, and makes wonderful sense of the poem, we might wonder whether it is possible to exclude a multitude of other answers to the speaker's final question that present themselves.

Might the illiterate's feeling for the words not encompass, for example, a sense of awe, humility, abashment, loss, fear, desire, distance, meekness, amazement, and powerlessness? Are those things integral parts of love, whatever we mean by love, or do they combine to constitute a different, unexampled kind of love—one for which there is no name, no word, *a love that makes illiterates of us all*? Can we actually pin down, with any greater specificity than the entire, elaborate narrative figure provided by the simile would allow, the feeling that the speaker experiences upon touching the goodness of his love object? Isn't the speaker's feeling more queer than what we routinely call love—more elusive, more ineffable, more unidentifiable and undefinable? Perhaps it is not love, after all, but something else—some sort of counter-love.

It must be a very queer feeling indeed if its effect is to orphan the speaker, to exile him from his family and his culture of origin, dissolving his social bonds and removing him from the established world of literacy, education, kinship, and the home, even as it enriches him and rewards him by making him beloved. Recall how Hayden similarly invokes traditional familial and social structures—paternity, the home, the workplace, the church, and their weekly rhythms—only to displace them as mere images of an unrepresented and unspeakable love. Both poets, in fact, bring out the queerness of love against the background of conventional social forms and institutions—labor, family, domesticity, religion, education, culture, money, the economy,

32. To be fair, Gregerson insists on the kaleidoscopic range of the speaker's feelings:

Having left the letter sealed, the illiterate has preserved all its possibilities; they have not narrowed down to one. As a figure for the lover, the man clings to the ignorant beginning of love, orphaned, yes, cut loose from all prior experience that might ground or protect him, and yet protected by his very ignorance, by the still-sealed letter, from the treacheries and diminutions that love may hold. As a figure for the poet, the man is rich in reverence, orphaned or unsponsored by the common, disregardful pragmatism of language use, and beloved as only the last believer shall be beloved. ["R," p. 176]

and standard modes of reproduction, inheritance, and transmission—thereby marking love’s distance from those familiar elements of social organization.

It seems to me that by insisting on the inexpressibility of Meredith’s feeling and on the nonrepresentability (except by means of that epic simile) of his love, we may come closer to the intuition of many gay men in the era before gay marriage—namely, that there were no terms by which gay love could be given a local habitation and a name. Or, as W. H. Auden (Hayden’s teacher and Meredith’s inspiration) put it in 1953, “That love, or truth in any serious sense, / Like orthodoxy, is a reticence.”<sup>33</sup>

Having criticized readings of “The Illiterate” that turn the poem into an allegory of the vicissitudes of the closet and similar clichés of gay identity politics, I can’t easily escape the charge of “outing” these two sonnets in my turn and proffering my own identitarian readings of them. Such readings, by insisting on the queer specificity of what these poems leave unspecified, seem to go against the grain of both poems. After all, by their very reticence, “Those Winter Sundays” and “The Illiterate” alike lay claim to generality. They aspire to represent love itself, all love, love that transcends identity.

That very obliteration of identity—and, sometimes, of even the lover’s separate individuality—is a persistent feature of the tradition of romantic love (just think of *Wuthering Heights* or *Tristan und Isolde*). And, indeed, what could be more conventionally romantic than a love that does not readily lend itself to language, conceptualization, or institutionalization, that forever escapes formulation? Is not such resistance to expression what typically characterizes romantic love? Is anything more normal, in fact, than the traditional queerness of romantic love?<sup>34</sup>

I have wanted to find in the silences of these two poems a queer content more specific than the traditional generic queerness of romance or than romantic love’s generalized suspension of specificity—something more erotically and historically and biographically concrete but not necessarily gay. I think there is a possible distinction to be drawn between the standard queerness of romantic love (“no one understands what we feel”), with its

33. W. H. Auden, “The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning,” *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York, 1991), p. 621. See also Jonathan D. Katz, “John Cage’s Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse,” *GLQ* 5, no. 2 (1999): 231–52.

34. See Michael Warner, “Beyond Gay Marriage,” *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), pp. 81–147, esp. 100–104, on the normal antinomianism of romantic love, one of romantic love’s standard, defining features; further, Halperin, *How To Be Gay* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), p. 287.

erasure of identity (Cathy's "I *am* Heathcliff"), and queer love, with its very specific refusal of specificity—its categorical "illiteracy" and illegibility. That is why I have tried to highlight the enigma of the unsaid at the heart of all these queer texts alongside their flagrant, programmatic, pointed display of its unsayability, while also trying to recover the specificity of their silences from the dissipating effects that any broader generalization would produce. At the same time, I have abstained from indulging the diagnostic impulse to overspecification and determination that drives what we now call outing.

I have been guided in this proceeding by queer theory's definition of queerness as an anti-identitarian identity, an identity distinguished—specifically—by its lack of specific content (whether that content is understood in terms of sex, sexuality, or gender). Unlike gay identity, queer identity has no necessary, specific referent; it refers to no social or sexual transgression in particular. Rather, it emerges only in oppositional relation to specific, local norms or sets of norms. Queer identity, far from being identitarian, constitutes a resistance to identity.<sup>35</sup> It can therefore be used to name Hayden's and Meredith's refusals to bring their loves within the fold of the familiar without imputing to their poems either a homosexual specificity on the one hand or a romantic evasion of specification on the other.

The principal claim I want to make, however, is not that conventional, doctrinaire one, now axiomatic in queer theory. What interests me about Hayden's and Meredith's sonnets is the way their elaborate exercises in nonspecification manage to wrench love away from the describable, the expressible, the known—away even from the already codified resistance to expression typical of grand romance—so as to empty love of its conventional content, of its normal, taken-for-granted meaning, and to make it newly available for the purposes of queer erotic self-constitution.

It is not, in other words, the queer identity of Hayden's and Meredith's loves that has so magnetized my attention. It is rather the faint outline one can discern in their poems of an uncatalogued erotic feeling, an outline that later gay thinkers and writers like Foucault and Bartlett will start to fill in as part of a larger, collective effort to free homosexuality from its fatality as an already defined and fixed identity, as a singular truth of the self grounded in a specifiable kind of desire or sexuality, and to reimagine it as a horizon of possibility, a concrete and changing practice, a way of life that is constantly evolving under the unpredictable pressures of politics and history and that can hold out to its adepts a means of resistance to the standardization of love and intimacy.

35. For this definition of queer identity, see Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, pp. 61–62.

In sum, the major accomplishment of the literature I have been reviewing is not to portray a queer variety of love but to use the unfixity of gay male relations to bring out the queerness of love itself. That queerness extends beyond the normal queerness of romance to the radical incommensurability of love with established social forms—with standard romantic narratives, family structures, relational modes, erotic vocabularies, sexual identities, even linguistic denotation. (The one exception, in the case of the two poems I have been considering, is the sonnet form, an untimely intruder in the postwar world of free verse, whose very archaism makes it an appropriate vehicle for these poems' struggles against the ordinary and the self-evident, though only on the condition that the sonnet form itself undergo a series of revisions at the hands of the two poets.) It is not just the extrainstitutional situation of gay male love that makes it queer; all love, after all, insofar as it is a personal experience, exists outside social institutions to some degree, even if it is shaped by them—whence the easy claim of romantic love to be rebellious, antisocial, and resistant to capture by conventional social structures or canonical forms of expression. Rather, the exteriority of gay male love to social forms points to the potential queerness of love itself, its overall lack of fit with the organizing principles or categories of personal and social life. Love's queerness has to do with those features of love that seem to resist sociality, that defy the form of the couple and other kinds of social bonds—such as love's random vagaries, its weird or unexpected intensities, its obscure objects, uncertain aims, unsystematic pleasures, and nonsensical desires.

To insist on the potential queerness of love itself is to reclaim it as a conduct that is not so much antisocial as asocial—a conduct counter even to the established tradition of counter-conduct that goes by the name of romantic love and that champions love as the glory of what is in fact the most spectacularly conventional and conformist antisocial ethos that the world has ever known. Queer love, by contrast, is not insurgent but simply inapposite: what's queer about love is its social inaptitude, its sheer irrelevance to social forms. The queerness of love removes it from psychological analysis and repositions it as something that belongs neither within the canon of norms nor within the canon of perversions, something that remains unassimilable to the standard romantic plot and the social institution of marriage even while proving irreducible to sexuality. By bringing out the queerness of love, the texts I have been considering invoke and reactivate an older tradition of erotic theory and representation, reaching back to classical antiquity—a tradition, established well before modernity undertook to make love one of the foundations of an ordered society, that had no interest in vouching for love as a normal institution or practice.