

## Same-Sex Friendships and the Rise of Modern Sexualities

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### The History of Sexuality and the Nineteenth-Century “Homosexual”

A man walks into a department store and is greeted by a handsome salesman. The customer, Al, tells the salesman he’s looking for a bed and mattress but can’t afford much because his rent is so high. The salesman, Josh, says he’s looking for a roommate and proposes that Al move in with him. No need for a bed, he adds, smiling; you can share mine. The two men do share a bed for the next several years and develop the deepest intimacy. When his family pressures Josh to marry, both men are anguished by the separation. Al writes to his beloved Josh nearly every day, telling Josh that if he can hide his aversion until after the wedding, perhaps one day he’ll be happy in his marriage. Al begs Josh and his new bride to settle near him, but they don’t and the relationship between the two men cools. Al eventually marries, unhappily, and fathers children, but he continues to share his bed with other men when his wife is out of town.

A pretty gay story, except that the scene takes place in the 1830s in Springfield, Illinois. “Al” would become the sixteenth president of the United States and emancipate the slaves while “Josh” would become a Southern plantation owner. The passionate, anguished, affectionate, beseeching letters from Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed read like love letters, and love letters they were. But was love between men in the 1830s the same thing it is – or is assumed to be – in the twenty-first century? Does love necessarily involve sex? Do intense passion, sensuality, and affection reveal sexuality? Was the passion between friends a usual stage of development for nineteenth-century American men and women who lived in a largely gender-segregated world that discouraged premarital interaction between the sexes? Was Abraham Lincoln physically attracted to men and if so was his subsequent marriage a sham, the product of internalized shame? On what evidence can we answer

these questions? What difference does it make if we *can't* answer them, if love, sex, romance, friendship – the relatively few names we have for the wide range of complex, ambivalent, intense, commonplace, erotic, chaste, short-lived, or long-term relationships we call intimacy – remain as opaque as a culture with an unknown language?

From a contemporary standpoint, quite a few nineteenth-century authors might appear gay or lesbian, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sarah Orne Jewett, Walt Whitman, Kate Chopin, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, William Dean Howells, and Henry James. Another group of lesser-known authors – Theodore Winthrop, Elizabeth Stoddard, Fitz Hugh Ludlow, Margaret Mussey Sweat, Hannah Crafts, Bayard Taylor, among others – seems downright queer. But what we are seeing when we think we see homosexuality in these writers is far from clear. As Michel Foucault famously asserted in *The History of Sexuality*, the category of the “homosexual” came into existence only at the end of the nineteenth century, long after the lives of most of these authors (“heterosexual” had to wait until the twentieth century to be invented). As homosexuality became a legal, medical, and psychological category, it came to characterize not individual acts (sodomy, for instance), but a type of *personality* – the homosexual – whose sexuality was innate, fundamental, and legible in every aspect of the homosexual’s life. This is not to say that people before the 1880s did not have same-sex intimacies – often intense and physical ones – or that people did not perform acts we might today consider “sex” with others of the same gender. It is to suggest, however, that the intensities, creativity, rituals, varieties, and rhetoric of nineteenth-century intimacy might prove quite different – perhaps queerer – than our options for intimacy today.

### Ralph Waldo Emerson, Masculinity, and Men’s Romantic Friendships

In her 1975 essay “The Female World of Love and Ritual,” historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg made available for study one such form of once-common intimacy that is rarely acknowledged today: women’s romantic friendships. Studying a range of same-sex female relationships from “the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women” in “a world in which men made but a shadowy appearance” (2), Smith-Rosenberg argues that women’s romantic friendships were “both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage” (8). Living almost entirely within “supportive networks [that] were

institutionalized in social conventions or rituals which accompanied virtually every important event in a woman's life," women developed same-sex relationships characterized by "emotional richness" and "devotion to and love of other women" (9). Often physical as well as emotional, "the female world of love and ritual" produced intimacies more flexible, emotional, sensual, and volatile than those usually possible after the "invention" of heterosexuality, when, despite stereotypes of women's natural emotionality, asexuality, and nurturance, such friendships might be perceived as manifestations of an abhorrent sexuality.

For men, the changes wrought on patterns of romantic friendship by an emerging hetero-homosexual binary were arguably more drastic, as Axel Nissen has documented. Whereas men in the first half of the nineteenth century shared friendships every bit as effusively "romantic" as those studied by Smith-Rosenberg, by the end of the century regulated gender codes equated masculinity with competitive individualism and rational practicality, making the loving relationships between men – and the multiple models of manhood they enabled – nearly impossible to maintain. Anxiety over more rigid definitions of manhood led to more definite distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual men, the intimacies and rhetoric of "romantic friendship" becoming the exclusive property of the latter.

How different the case was in the first half of the nineteenth century becomes evident when the renowned philosopher of self-reliance turned his attention to same-sex friendship. In his 1841 essay "Friendship," Ralph Waldo Emerson asks, "What [is] so delicious as a just and firm encounter of two, in a thought, in a feeling?" (116). In a strikingly non-transcendental confession, Emerson reports that a friend is "a great event, and hinders me from sleep" (117), adding, "Everything that is his, – in his name, his form, his dress, books and instruments, – fancy embraces" (117). Given the emotional and imaginative richness friendship engenders, Emerson concluded that "every man passes his life in the search after friendship" (118), which, "like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed" (117).

Emerson's meditation makes visible three characteristics of many – though not all – nineteenth-century romantic friendships, traits that distinguish such friendships from modern sexuality. The first is Emerson's focus on *relationships*. Unlike modern sexuality, which is conventionally conceived as an individuating property of a body "oriented" toward other types of bodies, friendship was conceived as a social impulse uniting specific people. One can be "gay" or "lesbian" without other people, but it takes at least two to make a friendship. Second, as Smith-Rosenberg and Nissen note, romantic friendships

were marked by a rhetorical intensity, as when Emerson writes of “palpitation which the approach of a stranger causes” (115), of friendship’s “delicious torment” (118). Third and most important, there is a visionary cast to many romantic friendships, proclaiming possibilities for what Emerson calls “new worlds of our own creation” (116). Often taking the form of reverie, daydream, or fantasy, these visions show how same-sex friendships motivated writers like Emerson to yearn for new feelings, creativities, and social relationships.

### Emily Dickinson’s Love Letters and the Anguish of Friendship

Although romantic friendships often took on an idealistic cast, they could also be marked by anguish, loss, and disorientation. Idealism and disappointment, anticipation and apprehension, coexist, generating the emotional and rhetorical excesses that make romantic friendship – like other forms of love – hard to assess by outsiders. Such is the case in one of the best-known nineteenth-century romantic friendships, that between the poet Emily Dickinson and her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert. A letter written on June 11, 1852, from Dickinson to Gilbert is worth quoting at length for the way it typifies such vertiginous alternations in mood. Dickinson writes:

I have but one thought, Susie, this afternoon of June, and that of you, and I have one prayer, only; dear Susie, that is for you. That you and I in hand as we e’en do in heart, might ramble away as children, among the woods and fields, and forget these many years, and these sorrowing cares, and each become a child again – I would it were so, Susie, and when I look around me and find myself alone, I sigh for you again; little sigh, and vain sigh, which will not bring you home.

I need you more and more, and the great world grows wider, and dear ones fewer and fewer, every day that you stay away – I miss my biggest heart; my own goes wandering round, and calls for Susie – Friends are too dear to sunder, Oh they are far too few, and how soon they will go away where you and I cannot find them, don’t let us forget these things, for their remembrance now will save us many an anguish when it is too late to love them! Susie, forgive me Darling, for every word I say – my heart is full of you, none other than you is in my thoughts, yet when I seek to say to you something not for the world, words fail me. If you were here – and Oh that you were, my Susie, we need not talk at all, our eyes would whisper for us, and your hand fast in mine, we would not ask for language – I try to bring you nearer, I chase the weeks away till they are quite departed, and fancy you have come, and I am on my way through the green lane to meet you, and my heart goes scampering so, that I have much ado to bring it back again, and learn it to be patient, till that

dear Susie comes. Three weeks – they can't last always, for surely they must go with their little brothers and sisters to their long home in the west! (33)

Dickinson's letter shows how complicated romantic friendships could become when they were carried out in correspondence, as they often were. Dickinson asserts a sameness of sentiment between the two women, who share joys and "sorrowing cares." At the same time, there is an emotional and physical distance between the friends, evident in Dickinson's plea for Gilbert's forgiveness and her subtle encouragement that Gilbert not forget the value of friendship. Just as letters create the illusion of direct communication even as they respond to physical distance, so the insistence on shared sentiment is enabled by a friend's absence because the presence of another's unpredictable, often inscrutable, and possibly censorious reactions threaten romantic correspondence, in both senses of the term.

Romantic correspondence between friends often proved temporally disorienting as well. Dickinson's letter moves precariously from past to future (and back), as in lines like "don't let us forget these things, for their remembrance now will save us many an anguish when it is too late to love them!" Picturing a future when the present is a remembered past, learning from past experiences (that are the current present) so as to prevent anguish in the future, which can be retroactively remedied through remembrance, romantic friends like Dickinson and Gilbert combine the past of memory with the future of anticipation in order to form a temporal bridge across spaces too far apart.

### Romantic Friendship's Racial Politics

Romantic same-sex friendships were often perceived as socially transformative, yet often they strained under the tension between reform and self-interested prejudice, especially when those friendships formed across the color line. Racial differences both intensify and undermine friendship's potential for liberatory social change. In his 1948 essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey," Leslie Fiedler catalogued the many homoerotic friendships in American literature between men of different races, from James Fennimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook to Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Jim. Those friendships end badly for the men of color (Chingachgook loses his only son and his tribal lands, while Jim repeatedly suffers on the Mississippi simply because Huck neglects to inform Jim of his manumission). Fiedler might have included the friendship in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* between the white slaveholder Augustine St. Clare and two slaves, Scipio (who nurses St. Clare through a deadly fever but dies himself)

and Tom (who prays for his master's salvation but dies because St. Clare's procrastination results in Tom's sale down river).

Other novels depict interracial romantic friendships that end no less disastrously, although not necessarily for the heroine of color. In Catharine Maria Sedgwick's 1827 *Hope Leslie*, for instance, the romantic friendship between the eponymous heroine and the Indian princess Magawisca terminates with the latter's return to the wilderness, but not before she narrates the wrongs done her people. In Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* – one of the few narratives of romantic same-sex friendships penned by an African American – Hannah flees slavery through her friendships with a series of white women who teach her to read, give her money, and enable her escape, and in those friendships the white women suffer (through banishment, lost property, shame, and death), while Hannah achieves freedom. By and large, however, novels featuring cross-racial romantic friendships, the few that exist, prove Foucault's insight that same-sex friendships have the potential to form unexpected alliances (see Foucault, "Friendship"), a potential that made them both a vehicle for reform and an occasion for social prejudice.

One of the most famous cross-racial romantic friendships in nineteenth-century literature also founders between reform and retrenchment. When Ishmael, the narrator of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, attempts to rent a room in the seaport of New Bedford, Massachusetts, he finds the inn full except for a bed he is invited to share with a harpooner, the heathenish and possibly cannibalistic South Pacific islander Queequeg. Ishmael's trepidation deepens when, already undressed and in bed, he sees Queequeg, large and exotically tattooed, enter the darkened room. After much panicked carrying on, Ishmael and Queequeg settle into bed together, the latter enfolding the former in "his bridegroom clasp" (33), leading Ishmael to observe, "you had almost thought I had been his wife" (32). Ishmael acknowledges the unusual occurrence of "hugging a fellow male in that matrimonial sort of style" (33–34), marveling at how quickly Queequeg "take[s] to me quite as naturally and unbiddenly as I to him" (53). But Ishmael resolves to "try a pagan friend," admitting, "I began to feel mysteriously drawn toward him" (53). By the end of their brief stay together at the inn, Queequeg proclaims that "henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends" (53) and, as Ishmael reports, "in our hearts' honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg – a cosy, loving pair" (54). The end of the episode reforms Ishmael's racial prejudices and his phobia against anonymous intimacy, yet Ishmael's sense of that reform as innocently exotic and his self-satisfaction at overcoming his repulsion disguise – for Ishmael at least – his self-interest (Ishmael gains not only a bed but

half Queequeg's savings and a protector aboard the whaling ship). Although the often cross-racial romantic friendships in Melville's fiction exemplify what Richard Chase identified as the "blissful, idyllic, erotic attachment to life and to one's comrades, which is the only promise of happiness" (107), such relationships are often haunted by disappointment, death, betrayal, and abandonment, suggesting friendship's difficulties in maintaining long-term resolutions between reform and convention.

### Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman: Friendship's Romantic Canon

Reform becomes the occasion for exploring the possibilities and limitations of friendships between men in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1852 *The Blithedale Romance*, a fictionalized account of the author's stay at the utopian commune Brook Farm. Hawthorne describes the tumultuous friendship between the foppish Miles Coverdale and the iron-willed reformer Hollingsworth. Despite his austere rectitude, Hollingsworth surprises Coverdale with occasional tenderness, episodes when "his dark, shaggy face looked really beautiful with its expression of thoughtful benevolence" (28). When, soon after his arrival at Blithedale, Coverdale becomes dangerously ill, Hollingsworth serves as his nurse. Although Coverdale contends that men "really have no tenderness," about his friend he finds "something of the woman moulded into the great stalwart frame of Hollingsworth, nor was he ashamed of it, as men often are of what is best in them" (39). As his illness reaches its crisis, Coverdale reports, "I besought Hollingsworth to let nobody else enter the room, but continually to make me sensible of his own presence by a grasp of the hand, a word, a prayer, if he thought good to utter it" (39).

Hawthorne's same-sex friendships generally turn out to be deadly betrayals (Dimmesdale and Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* or Hilda and Miriam in *The Marble Faun*) or tame irrelevancies (Kenyon and Donnatello in *The Marble Faun*). The intimacy between Coverdale and Hollingsworth is neither, although it, too, has no future. Coverdale can imagine his future with Hollingsworth only in death, admitting his regret "that I did not die then, when I had tolerably made up my mind to, for Hollingsworth would have gone with me to the hither verge of life, and have sent his friendly and hopeful accents far over on the other side" (39). Hollingsworth, not Coverdale, dies, however, at least in spirit. When Hollingsworth beseeches Coverdale to join him in his plans to reform prisoners, telling him "'there is not the man in this whole world whom I can love as I could you. Do not forsake me!'" (124), Coverdale refuses.

“Had I but touched his extended hand,” he acknowledges, “Hollingsworth’s magneticism would perhaps have penetrated me,” but instead, he confesses, “I stood aloof” (124). When Hollingsworth asks one last time if Coverdale will be his “friend of friends forever” (125), the consequences of Coverdale’s silence produce one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in all of Hawthorne’s fiction.

I never said the word – and certainly can never have it to say hereafter – that cost me a thousandth part so hard an effort as did that one syllable. The heart-pang was not merely figurative, but an absolute torture of the breast. I was gazing steadfastly at Hollingsworth. It seemed to me that it struck him, too, like a bullet. A ghastly paleness – always so terrific on a swarthy face – overspread his features. There was a convulsive movement of his throat, as if he were forcing down some words that struggled and fought for utterance. Whether words of anger, or words of grief, I cannot tell; though many and many a time I have vainly tormented myself with conjecturing which of the two they were. One other appeal to my friendship – such as once, already, Hollingsworth had made, – taking me in the revulsion that followed a strenuous exercise of opposing will, would completely have subdued me. But he left the matter there. “Well!” said he. (126)

In his depiction of the tragic friendship of Coverdale and Hollingsworth Hawthorne may have had in mind the end of his own brief but intense friendship with the equally shaggy and tender Melville. In one November 1851 letter to Hawthorne, Melville responds to Hawthorne’s praise for *Moby-Dick*, which Melville dedicated to him.

Your letter was handed me last night on the road going to Mr. Morewood’s, and I read it there. Had I been at home, I would have sat down at once and answered it. In me divine magnanimities are spontaneous and instantaneous – catch them while you can. The world goes round, and the other side comes up. So now I can’t write what I felt. But I felt pantheistic then – your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God’s. A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book. (Hawthorne 240)

Proclaiming his friendship “without licentious inclination,” Melville asks, “Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips – lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling” (240). The difficulty in maintaining such a fraternity, as I’ve already suggested, is that feelings rarely correlate across bodies in any but a metaphoric way. When Melville imagines



Hawthorne's presence – their lips joining on the highly allegorical flagon – the unity is imaginary and hence perfect. Real bodies, however, tend to frustrate such fraternal unions, because they are made by divergent and largely unknowable experiences (as suggested by Melville not knowing from whence Hawthorne came) and consequent divergences of desire, as the literature Melville produced after the end of his “romantic friendship” with Hawthorne shows.

Whether or not their romantic friendship was on Hawthorne's mind as he wrote *Blithedale*, it almost certainly was on Melville's when he penned his epic 1876 poem, *Clarel*. When the American Clarel travels to the Holy Land in search of spiritual fulfillment, he finds instead a romantic friendship with Vine, who strikingly resembles Hawthorne. Upon their first encounter, the two “exchanged quick sympathies / Though but in glance,” creating an “excess of feeling” (91, 94). Clarel worries whether Vine, taciturn as Hawthorne, will enter “communion true / And close; let go each alien theme; / Give me thyself!” (95), but is ultimately disappointed, as Vine fails to understand Clarel's “thrill / Of personal longing” (226). Caught between his romantic expectations and Vine's responses, Clarel, like Hollingsworth, anguishes:

After confidings that should wed  
Our souls in one: – Ah, call me *brother!*  
So feminine his passionate mood  
Which, long as hungering unfed,  
All else rejected or withstood.  
Some inkling he let fall. But no: (226–27)

Melville comes close to assigning this failure of romantic friendship to sexual anxiety, as Clarel despairs over the impossibility of physical love between men.

But for thy fonder dream of love  
In man toward man – the soul's caress –  
The negatives of flesh should prove  
Analogies of non-cordialness  
In spirit. –E'en such conceits could cling  
To Clarel's dream of vain surmise  
And imputation full of sting. (227)

Other poets, however, were more sanguine about the possibilities of physical as well as emotional and spiritual intimacy between male friends. Throughout his poems Walt Whitman “celebrate[s] the need of comrades,” proclaiming his release from “the pleasures, profits, conformities, / Which too long I was

offering to feed my Soul” once he recognizes that “the Soul of the man I speak for, feeds, rejoices only in comrades” (“In Paths Untrodden”). Accompanied by “he whom I love,” the poet is “charged with untold and untellable wisdom – I am silent – I require nothing further” for, he reports, “I am satisfied, / He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me” (“O the Terrible Question of Appearances”). Although he takes no pleasure in hearing that his “name had been received with plaudits in the capitol,” Whitman writes in “When I Heard at the Close of Day” that:

when I thought how my dear friend, my lover, was on his way coming, O then I was happy;

O then each breath tasted sweeter – and all that day my food nourished me more – And the beautiful day passed well,

And the next came with equal joy – And with the next, at evening, came my friend;

And that night, while all was still, I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,

I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands, as directed to me, whispering, to congratulate me,

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,

In the stillness, in the autumn moonbeams, his face was inclined toward me, And his arm lay lightly around my breast – And that night I was happy.

### Popular Fiction’s Friendships: Margaret Mussey Sweat

The authors just discussed – Emerson, Dickinson, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman – show how central romantic friendship was to canonical nineteenth-century American literature. Romantic friendship took its most innovative, intense, and unpredictable forms, however, in popular fiction by authors now – perhaps not coincidentally – mostly unknown. “As with minor literatures,” Lauren Berlant observes, “minor intimacies have been forced to develop aesthetics of the extreme” (5–6). Unlike marriage and parenthood, the “minor intimacies” of romantic friendships populate the extreme aesthetics of the nineteenth century’s “minor” literature.

In Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat’s 1859 epistolary novel, *Ethel’s Love-Life*, for example, Ethel’s letters to her fiancé, Ernest, depict romantic friendships more erotic, sadomasochistic, secretive, and threatening than those described by Smith-Rosenberg. Ethel is initiated into “the female world of love and ritual” through intense passion and pain that allow her to criticize

romantic conventions and to articulate visions of a world tolerant of and conducive to women's intimate relationships. "Women often love each other with as much fervor and excitement as they do men," Ethel reports, and the "emotions awakened heave and swell through the whole being as the tides swell the ocean. Freed from all the grosser elements of passion, as it exists between the sexes," Ethel observes, "it retains its energy, its abandonment, its flush, its eagerness, its palpitations, and its rapture – but all so refined, so glorified, and made delicious and continuous by an ever-recurring giving and receiving from each to each" (82). Women's passionate friendships, Ethel reveals, "are of much more frequent occurrence than the world is aware of" because it "sees only the ordinary appearances of an intimate acquaintanceship, and satisfies itself with a few common-place comments thereon – but the joy and beauty of the tie remain in sweet concealment – silent and inexpressive when careless eyes are upon it, but leaping into the sunlight when free from cold and repelling influences" (83). Ethel knows that her friendships comprise "all its intensity of feeling and all its impetuosity of action" possible only "when the conscious and dissecting powers are in abeyance," leaving the passions to "declare to us their continued dominion" (68–69).

Such romantic friendships are erotic, if not downright kinky. Enjoying the "longing, burning look" (70) of her "stormy, fiery, tempestuous" (69) friend, the "haunting demon Leonora" (92), Ethel reports that Leonora "smothered me with hot kisses" (70) followed by "passionate outpourings of her long pent-up love" (71) before which, Ethel confesses, "I gave myself up with delirious joy" (71). Ethel's friendship with Claudia is just as steamy. Claudia's "serene loftiness" (85) vanishes once Ethel "bend[s] her iron will to my own," enjoying "the loving glance with which she gave her obedience" (88). During Claudia's absence, Ethel believes that "I visit her in the night hours as she visits me – that a wailing cry for the love she has lost sometimes escapes her – that there is an invisible bond which still unites each to the other" (91–92).

Unbreakable "bonds" notwithstanding, unlike the romantic friendships that, according to Smith-Rosenberg, were fully compatible with marriage, Ethel's same-sex passions overshadow and seem opposed to her marriage. Pledging to her fiancé, Ernest, that the "whole of our future shall be consecrated unto noblest uses" (232), Ethel acknowledges that such a future comes only through – and the pun is significant – "earnest labor" (116) because, she admits, the "harness of prescribed routine galls and wearies me" (200). Recognizing that "the natural affections of family and kindred were merely the result of monotonous habit, in which we acquiesced, partly from

indolence and partly from fear of finding nothing better if we gave it up” (135), Ethel can imagine “visions of impossible, super-human bliss” (230) in romantic friendships existing outside “a too slavish obedience to that routine developed into wearisome detail of days and hours” (200). For Ethel, who “scorn[s] what the rest of the world seemed to find well enough” (134), visions in which she lives “outside of the laws which governed those about me” (129) are respites from “weary conventionalism” (59), and if Ethel is “still and hushed” as she “brood[s]” over her love for Ernest, still she declares, “I love to wander hither and thither, wherever the whim takes me, in all the other aspects of my life” (199).

And wander she does. Ethel observes, “My twenty years of life must be spread fairly out before me as a chart for study; and the apparent incongruities and contradictions of feeling which marked it must be reconciled and explained to myself, or the future would have no guiding knowledge, no assured path” (113). But Ethel’s letters, “wandering away from the little narrative of my external life,” frustrate such explanations. Her narrative, “without arrangement and almost without dates” (121), meanders like her dreams and memories. As she warns Ernest, “for one like me, a steady and continuous narrative of incidents is quite out of the question, nor would such a one, however minute in external details, help you to full understanding of myself. I must be fragmentary and irregular in my story, for my life has been episodal and violently contrasted” (42).

The force that most distracts Ethel from the future is, of course, her past. Although she sometimes characterizes her “sad memories” (113) as a “fiend calling up the irrevocable past, with all hidden specters to appal my shrinking sight” (38) and at other moments claims that “all that I now call ‘the past’” at present “seems so far away, so mist-like and vague, compared to the sharp-cut and real emotions of the present” (97–98), Ethel, giving her letters over to reminiscence, recognizes, “my mind went backward without reluctance, and memory led me by the hand, a willing visitor, among the chambers of the past” (222). More than transparent recollections, however, Ethel’s memories of romantic friendship are, like her “long-continued day-dreams” (127), imaginative departures from proscriptive conventions. Ethel “lay wrapt for hours in dreams” or “aimless reveries” that seem “quite as real as any true and actual experience of the past” (73–74). In her dreams, Ethel reports, “my imagination subdued my reason, my fancy enchained my intellect” and she inhabits “a charmed atmosphere of romance” (18). Only a fanciful “extreme aesthetics” can convey the passion, release, and transport that characterize Sweat’s vision of romantic friendship.

## Same-Sex Friendship and Subculture: Theodore Winthrop

As an historical phenomenon, romantic friendship is as difficult to reconcile and explain as Ethel's life narrative. Characteristic features – emotional and rhetorical excess, diffuse sensuality, alternations of joy and despair, presumption of common experience, temporal and narrative disruption, speculative visions – extend to greater or lesser degrees across the range of friendships discussed earlier. Such features make it hard to discern where romantic friendships end and modern sexuality begins. And that is the point. Modern sexuality did not emerge fully formed at a certain historical date with the invention of certain terminologies. Rather, discourses that would eventually cohere into sexual taxonomies were composed, contested, and modified (or abandoned) over the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Romantic friendships were one such compositional site. Certain features – such as visionary intimacy – were cancelled out by the diagnostic *presence* of modern sexuality. But others survived and developed, and the network of romantic friendships became, over time, the same-sex subcultures inhabited by sexual minorities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The transformation of romantic friendships into same-sex subculture is central to the work of Theodore Winthrop, whose 1862 novel *Cecil Dreeme* begins with its narrator, Robert Byng, newly returned from Europe, occupying the apartment of Harry Stillfleet, a prototype of what by the late nineteenth century would be called an Aesthete, as personified by Oscar Wilde. Stillfleet's bachelor pad – affectionately named the Rubbish Palace – is crammed with incongruous artworks and relics organized by their owner's quirky aesthetic taste, or what Byng calls "a fine sense of order in the apparent disorder" (51), legible only to those "in the know." There are intimations of camp sensibility in this "theatrical" space that, filled with "uncertified and riotous color" (52), turns rubbish into taste. More important, the Rubbish Palace is "magic, phantasmagorical" (38), exerting a "dreamy influence" (39) that creates a "certain romantic feeling of expectation" (39).

The Rubbish Palace exists, furthermore, within Chrysalis College, described as "unreal and incongruous" (126). As its name suggests, Chrysalis protects and nourishes an inchoate network of unwieldy same-sex intimacies, beginning with Byng and the swarthy and hypnotic Densdeth. Whereas the proto-Aesthete collects and collates art so as to suggest his taste, Densdeth is a dandy who reveals his taste by becoming a living artwork. Possessing a "dark, handsome face" (62) and "a delicate lisp" (74), the "nomad bachelor" (77) is "a little

too carefully dressed” with “a conscious air” (29). Like other dandies, Densdeth evinces “perfect sensitiveness and perfect enjoyment” (63) and proclaims, “I love luxury for its own sake” (63). Byng admits of Densdeth, “When his eyes were upon me, I felt something stir in my heart” (65), awakening “devilish passions,” “slumbering lightly, and ready to stir whenever [they] knew a comrade was near” (330). Densdeth is just such a comrade, and Byng readily accepts his “proffered alliance” (66).

Byng’s other romantic friendship is with the artist Cecil Dreeme, who is, like Densdeth, “a man of another order, not easy to classify” (138). Like the dreams for which he is named, Cecil is “original, unexpected” (99). When Cecil turns out to be the disguised heiress Clara Denman, however, the dream becomes a nightmare for Byng, who considers his friendships with men “more precious than the love of women” (234–235). Although Clara assures him, “We shall not be friends the less” (337), Byng has his doubts, claiming of his friendship with Cecil, “This was love, – unforced, self-created, undoubting, complete. And now that the friend proved a woman, a great gulf opened between us. Thinking thus, I let fall Cecil’s hand, and drew apart a little” (347–48). Even after Clara’s revelation, the narrator continues to use the male pseudonym and the masculine pronoun, perpetuating the visionary friendship with Cecil “– for so I must call him” (338).

Just as important to Byng is preserving Cecil’s status as a Dreeme. Although the unwieldy excesses of romantic friendships in the novel appear to be contained through Densdeth’s death and Cecil’s return to Clara, social conventions are haunted in *Cecil Dreeme*, as in *Ethel’s Love-Life*, by persistent memory and desire, which disrupt and offer alternatives to the normative present. Same-sex romantic friendships in both novels transform social alienation into visions, the opening of imaginative spaces beyond present social imperatives, protected by an aura of imminence that inspires rather than prescribes.

The visionary friendships in *Cecil Dreeme* become inchoate subculture in another of Winthrop’s novels, *John Brent*, in which the narrator, Richard Wade, asserts, “there is a small but ancient fraternity in the world, known as the Order of Gentlemen” (101). The men of this Order, although of different classes, nationalities, professions, and religions, share social alienation and a consequent sympathy with other outsiders, forming a subculture – an “Order” – whose members recognize each other without explicit tokens of institutional association. “The formulas of the order are not edited,” Wade claims,

its passwords are not syllabled; its uniform was never pictured in a fashion-plate, or so described that a snob could go to his tailor, and say, “Make me the

habit of a gentleman.” But the brothers know each other unerringly wherever they meet be they of the inner shrine, gentlemen heart and life; be they of the outer court, gentlemen in feeling and demeanor.

No disguise delays this recognition. No strangeness of place and circumstances prevents it. The men meet. The magnetism passes between them. All is said without words. Gentlemen know gentlemen by what we name instinct. But observe that this thing, instinct, is character in its finest, keenest, largest, and most concentrated action. It is the spirit’s touch. (102–03)

In *John Brent*, Winthrop turns romantic friendships between “brothers and friends” (103) into an incipient subculture that relies not on permanence, written codes, uniforms, mutual disclosure, social reproduction, or abstracted agency, but rather on taste, fruitless effort, improvisation, contingency, and especially romantic same-sex friendships.

Above all, the subcultures emerging in novels like *Cecil Dreeme* and *John Brent* are places of unprecedented and transformative visions that honor the insights gained through suffering rather than promising its eradication. Winthrop’s eponymous hero is Wade’s “model comrade” (53), described as “delicate, beautiful, dreamy” (41). Brent’s painful early life “went near to crush all the innocence, faith, hope, and religion out of my friend’s life,” Wade reports, yet Brent’s heart “was made of stuff that does not know how to break” (41). “Steady disappointment, by and by, informs a man that he is in the wrong place” (9), and Brent’s suffering indeed drives him “out of the common paths, to make him a seer instead of a doer” (43). Brent’s “very vague” visions are unclear to the reader, but Wade asserts that the seer “must see to the end before he begins to say what he sees,” until which time philistines dismiss him as “a purposeless dreamer” (43). Wade himself knows visions are “an innovation, a revolution” (313), an imaginative magnetism that binds survivors into subcultures that honor and inspire in turn more visions, the metaphysical yield of romantic friendship.

Such visions may have disappeared in the splitting of romantic friendship into modern conventions in which the romantic dyadic couple is privileged over a network of friends. As the broad world of same-sex friendships narrowed to what Henry James in his 1886 novel *The Bostonians* called “Boston marriages” or what he might have called “bachelor households” – in which two people of the same gender co-inhabit in long-term relationships tolerated as “open secrets” only as long as they remained private and de-eroticized – the creative possibilities for same-sex sociality beyond the couple did not simply disappear but, as Martha Vicinus shows, continued as romantic relationships that translated friendship into the erotic, economic, and representational ways

of life that in the twentieth century became known as “Sapphic” or “lesbian.” Moreover, as Winthrop’s novels show, romantic friendships gave way to subcultures that took friendship’s capacity for forming unpredictable and potentially transformative alliances and opened it into the broad network often loosely referred to as “community.” Varieties of gay and lesbian communities retained many of the possibilities for extremely imaginative redefinitions of intimacy, camaraderie, romance, and collective agency that, for Winthrop and Sweat, were intrinsic to same-sex friendship. In the twentieth century, such subcultures became as well key mediums for protection, economic vitality, circulation of information, and proliferations of pleasure. In “coming out” into a more identity-restricted social complex, same-sex friendships might have lost their status as visionary, but they did not necessarily lose their power to inspire imaginings of what “the social” might mean. For as Emerson reminds us, “Friends, such as we desire, are dreams and fables. But a sublime hope cheers ever the faithful heart, that elsewhere, in other regions of the universal power, souls are now acting, enduring and daring, which can love us, and which we can love” (125). The archive of nineteenth-century same-sex friendship reminds us of how fascinating, unwieldy, innovative, and unnerving – how *romantic* – friendships can be.

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